

**Cosmic Representations and Aterritorial
Communities in Southeast Asia:
Implications for Sustainable Livelihoods**

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COSMIC REPRESENTATIONS AND ATERRITORIAL COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

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INTRODUCTION

While public environmental concerns have been with us for the last three decades, the current concerns with climate change and global warming has highlighted in a dramatic, realistic and immediate sense the impact of environmental issues not only on sustainable development but the future of human life and the sustainability of Planet Earth's ecosystems. Indeed the 21st century has now become for some commentators and scholars the critical century for the survival of human civilisation and the human species (Martin, 2007; Stern, 2007; Rees, 2003). While the global community tries to find ways to address the question of containing carbon dioxide increases and global warming (Flannery, 2006; Lomborg, 2008; Lovelock, 2007; Nordhaus, 2008; Stern, 2007; McGuire, 2008; Friedman, 2008), historians, geographers and social scientists have pondered on the impact of climate over the centuries and its impacts on civilizations (Fagan, 2008; Lieberman, 2003; Ponting, 2007; Whyte, 2008; Linden 2007). Anthropologists, philosophers and environmentalists continually wonder whether ethnic communities and indigenous knowledges have important lessons and answers to the way we culturally adapt and mitigate the environmental challenges (Orr, 2004; Merchant, 2005; Diamond, 2006). Inevitably while the global community must come to terms with breaking their stranglehold nationalistic self interests, their myopic territorial thinking and their state political ecological designs, there are lessons which indigenous communities can offer in the way they express a common-pool resource response to the utilization and understanding of their ecosystems which provide better an understanding of sustaining livelihoods. The Indonesian government in recognizing the importance of indigenous knowledge has created a Presidential award, the *Kalpataru* or 'Tree of Knowledge' for villagers who through their own local ideas, knowledge and resources can help to protect and conserve the natural environment.

This paper is an attempt to underscore how indigenous societies in the Southeast Asian region developed a long standing sustainable relationship with their varied ecosystems. It looks at both the ideational cosmic worldview of communities and the behavioural translation of their indigenous knowledge through the observance of aterritorial and aspatial relationships with their landscape and ecosystems. This paper asserts that many Southeast Asian prehistoric communities and historic societies were essentially aterritorial in their activities and relationships. This is because communities in the region follow cosmic representations and vertical relationships (upperworld and underworld) than horizontal spatial relationships. Specifically, I argue that many societies in the region chose to be 'placeless' and non-territorial because there were significant economic, social and political advantages in being mobile and unattached to places. I define territory here as "a portion of geographic space which is claimed or occupied by a person or a group of persons or by an institution" (Storey, 2001). While much attention geographically has been placed on understanding the cultural, political, economic and social significance of territory (Sack, 1986; Storey, 2001), the moot question that needs greater attention is the mechanisms and processes underpinning territorialization. This enquiry in turn will reveal why territories and territoriality might be less important for indigenous Southeast Asian societies because human-nature relationships, common-pool resource requirements, spiritual communication and endorsements, and cosmic knowledge provide a better worldview and survival mechanism. The world for indigenous Southeast Asians has been better operationalised through the relationships with animate and inanimate nature, the spirit and ancestral worlds and the diverse communities in the region. Indeed both the physical and human diversity of the region underscored the Southeast Asian need for a *relational* perspective to all aspects of the geography, spirit world and cosmos around them.

A QUESTION OF SPATIAL COMMUNITIES

One of the current enduring associations with geography is the whole question of spatial issues conceptualized variously as spatial analysis, spatial organization, spatial networks, spatiality, territory and borderlands and spatial relationships (Johnston, et. al, 2000:767-782). Human geography seems to be increasingly defined by our single-minded concern with spatial issues that the whole environment-society and human-land relationships seems almost neglected in current debates and deliberations especially in

human geography. Spatial relationships have indeed become the defining conceptual framework in human geographical discussions. As the dictionary of geography states “the production of geographical knowledge has always involved claims to know ‘space’ in particular ways” (Johnston, et al, 2000:767).

While this is not the venue for debating the scope and limitation of spatial analysis in geography or its implications for human society, I would like to challenge the assumption that all societies traditionally are concerned with spatial issues especially their consciousness about territory, property and place demarcations and attachments. Specifically, I question whether all human societies do in fact have Tuan’s (1974) ‘topophilic’ underpinnings or a great ‘sense of place’. In my view, the topophilic expressions seem to be products of civilization and societies with high cultural development. Are indeed human societies by nature spatially inclined and do human beings have an in-built sense of spatial affiliation as often depicted in their sense of territoriality and political manifestation in territories? The nation-state is not only governed by national identity of its citizens it is also very much a territorial entity, bounded, bordered, spatially defined and cartographically framed. Certainly, the concerns with territory and territoriality have become central concerns in political geography that have reverberated strongly because of the current global nature of Westphalian endorsed nation-states (Storey, 2001; Taylor & Flint, 2000; Sack, 1986; Gottman, 1973). Yet before the advent of the colonial state and then ‘nation-state’ in the region, were Southeast Asians cognizant of their spatial identities, their territorial interests, their territorial behavior and their loyalties to places.

To understand the mechanisms involved in aspatial and aterritorial relationships provides one a better understanding of how communities and societies adjust to environmental, economic, cultural and social realities. Space and territory carries both material aspects of societies as well as their social and cultural constructions. Territories are products essentially of subsistent land-based societies. Boundaries are demarcated in a horizontal plain. But mobile societies and water based communities have less concern with spatial definitions and delineations. In such highly mobile communities, it is difficult to comprehend why these communities need to enact and perform in space, to turn space into property and make it “active” (Redclift, 2006:163). The conceptualization of space and the operational enactment of space is thus to me not a given for any

community. Individuals and communities engage actively in defining space when there are clear adaptive advantages, be they political, economic, social, environmental or cultural.

In Southeast Asian societies space is not translated materially into economic goods and values. Traditional Southeast Asian societies had no idea of property or land rights. Conceptually, the communities also never politicized space in territorial terms. Space demarcations were never used as differentiating communities between 'us' and 'them'. Defending territories was generally alien to Southeast Asian kingdoms. Indigenous Southeast Asian communities viewed space in community terms more as social capital rather than as individual rights. If at all, kingdoms in the region viewed their world in cosmic proportions defining their kingdoms according to cardinal directions and vertical relationships rather than territorial and horizontal boundaries.

Instead of using territorial concepts to encapsulate an understanding the socio-cultural and political-economic relationships of Southeast Asian communities, we might replace these spatial terminologies with earth, nature, milieu, environment, ecosystem and cosmos. It was the specific elements of a given environment and ecosystem which engaged communities that helped to make sense of their world rather than an abstract notion of operating in space. While I don't want to sound like a historical determinist, an understanding of Southeast Asia's prehistory and history is pertinent to an understanding of its current social, cultural, political and economic way of life. As the French historian Fernand Braudel (1988, v.1:31) reiterated "landscapes and panoramas are not simple realities of the present but also, in large measure, survivals of the past". Like Braudel's (1988, 1990) analysis of French history, an understanding of Southeast Asian culture and history cannot be comprehended without insights into the prehistory of a region. Indeed one might argue that much of Southeast Asia culture today is very much a product of the region's strong and rich prehistoric culture.

PREHISTORIC MOBILITY AND MIGRATION: SURVIVAL MECHANISMS

If one is to accept the Out-Of-Africa thesis of human evolution, then one needs to accept a common ancestry for all human beings today (see Stringer & McKie, 1996; Oppenheimer, 2004). Of the *Homo sapiens* (the wise man or smart ape) that left Africa some 80,000 to 100,000 years ago, one major route of the migration is the coastal area

along the Asian landmass. The early prehistoric migrants finally arrived in the region along the Arakan coast (Burma) sometime around or before 60,000 years BP though Stephen Oppenheimer (2004:166-168) believes these “beachcombers” arrived in the region just before the cataclysmic eruption of Lake Toba (Sumatra) some 74,000 years BP. The African migrants came into the Southeast Asian region and continued their coastal moorings in insular Southeast Asia finally reaching Australia around 55,000 years BP. Fabrice Demeter (2006:113) gives two advantages for why the early prehistoric migrants Out-Of-Africa lived near the coast: i) movement may have been facilitated by the coast; and ii) the marine subsistence focus led to a southern coastal direction in search of warmer conditions. These echo David Sopher’s (1979:21) views that the sea offered ‘primitive man’ in the region a route and a source of food and desirable materials.

Unfortunately the earliest *Homo sapien* records in the region (Niah caves, Sarawak: c.40,000 BP; Moh Khiew cave, Krabi: c.25,800 BP; Tambon, Palawan: 16,500 BP) place the earliest human beings in the region around 40,000 years BP (Matsumura, 2006:35-39; Bellwood, 1979, 1985). But the early fossil evidence in Australia around 55,000 years BP suggests that *Homo sapiens* from Africa must have been in the region at least 60,000 years BP. There might have been earlier *Homo sapiens* in the region, but evidence is difficult to come by since a vast area of the Sunda platform has been drowned out due to the rise in sea levels. Given that the early migrants into the Southeast Asian region hugged the coastal areas, it is unlikely to find human bone fossils in such areas due to either the drowning out of these coastal zones or the decomposition of such bone fossils in these wet, muddy and swampy areas.

By geography, prehistoric *Homo sapiens* in the region either by volition or compunction had a tremendous propensity to being mobile and migratory. With their entry into the largest archipelago in the world, the early prehistoric migrants began an island-hopping expedition. The mere island world must have posed an alluring invitation to explore new fishing grounds and new coastal resources. Even before the Out-Of-Africa *Homo sapiens* entered the region some 40,000 or 50,000 years BP, the region was already host to a long history of *Homo erectus* species (Java Man, Solo Man, Ngandong Man) who despite their low capacity brain size were obviously able to move around by sea craft from one island to another. The recent find of the oldest sea craft in Flores, dated

some 800,000 years demonstrates that the Southeast Asian *Homo erectus* was certainly adept at sea crossings. The recent fossil finds in Flores demonstrate that *Homo erectus* species were roaming the area up to 18,000 years ago BP -- which means they were around when *Homo sapiens* became the dominant species in the region.

Given the overlap between the presence of *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens* in the region, one wonders whether there was interaction between them and the transfer of marine technologies and techniques. The prehistoric coastal beachcombers moved around the seas, bays, islets and gulfs in search of food, shelter from storms and rough seas, and sailing routes to catch the winds and waves. This long familiarization with the island world and its marine and coastal resources created a whole way of life captured in the lives of sea gypsies and sea nomads (Sopher, 1977). The prehistoric evidence demonstrates that the earliest *Homo sapiens* in the region were sea-faring, coastal peoples. Buckminster Fuller referred to region's "fluid geography" to underscore the complex directions and sequence of human dispersal from Southeast Asia which he notes represented "one major pool of civilization" (Jumsai, 1997:5-6). Given the vast island world, communities traveled in the region in boats for centuries. As Oliver Wolters (1999:179-180) notes, the boat in insular Southeast Asia was the metaphor of the "ordered social group", the model for the household and small scale political systems. The boat metaphor is thus at once an "ocean-going society" but a "disciplined" and "hierarchical" social system that was necessary for "safety and great mobility" (Wolters, 1999:180).

With the vast marine area, the diverse island world and the land masses of Australia and mainland/continental Southeast Asia, the early inhabitants of Southeast Asia had a large habitat at their disposal to explore, live and settle down. Alluding to Braudel's work on the Mediterranean, Wolters (1999:44) perceived Southeast Asia's archipelago not as an enclosed sea but as "the single ocean", an expanse of water stretching from eastern Africa to western Asia including the coastline of the Indian subcontinent and on to China. This single ocean he felt was a "significant fact of Southeast Asian historical geography" that permitted "continuous and lively commercial exchanges" and "encouraged cultural communications" (Wolters, 1999:46). The prehistoric evidence shows that early *Homo sapiens* were restless and always on the move. The bioarchaeological evidence (human skeleton, dental, bone specimens) of fossils in the region (Niah, Tabon, Ban Chiang)

reflect a complex movement and migratory pattern of Neolithic peoples in the region stretching from Northeast Asia (Chinese, Japanese and Koreans) to Australia and the Pacific Islands (see Matsumura, 2006; Pietrusewsky, 2006; Oxenham & Tayles, 2006). Prehistoric Southeast Asia according to Donn Bayard was largely based on “small cultural groups” resembling the distribution of modern hill tribes (Wolters, 1999:16). The idea of spatial security did not seem to bother them. They were wandering communities not fixated by place attachments and concerns about spatial territories. Space was not a premium given the traditionally small populations that inhabited these vast seas and coastal zones.

The region became very much a transition zone of peoples moving between East and West (between the Pacific and Indian Oceans; South Asia and East Asia) and North (East Asia) and South (Australasia). Hence in this superhighway of migration routes, the Y chromosome markers of Homo sapiens in the region are generally diverse. Hence in Southeast Asia one finds Y chromosome markers besides Y 168 (common to all Homo sapiens) like M52, M 175 and M130 (Nayan, 2007:13-17). Linguistically speaking, this movement and crisscrossing of peoples have thrown up interesting pockets of diverse languages in migration corridors like Peninsula Malaya: Mon-Khmer, Aslian (Northern, Central and Southern), Austro-Asiatic and Austronesian (Benjamin, 2002; Howell, 1989:5-10). In mainland Southeast Asia, the mountainous terrains and varied ecosystems has led to the splintering of the linguistic Tai ethnic group into numerous sub-groups (Shan, Lao, Tai Lai, Tai Lam, Tai Leng) over a wide area: southwestern China, Hainan, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Assam in northeastern India) (Sai, 2009:3-30). Indeed in opposition to Heine-Geldern’s eight wave migration theory of Chinese populating the Southeast Asian region, Sai Aung Tun (2009:4) notes that the Tai ethnic group (Tai state of Ngu and Wu at the mouth of the Yangtze River) migrated into China before the Chinese themselves and hence are called “elder brothers of the Chinese”.

The outcome of mobility and *in-situ* survival in a dynamic changing environment gave the region’s societies a pragmatic culture of survival: cognatic kinship, an indifference to lineage descent and a preoccupation with the present which formed the early cultural feature of the region (Wolters, 1999:21). Prehistoric hunters and gatherers like the Penans of Borneo today tended to view the past and future as “insignificant extensions

of the ever-changing present” (Sellato & Sercombe, 2007:43). Just as spatial markers are not important so the idea of the past and historical markers seem less relevant to people constantly on the move. Penan (collective term of nomadic groups in Borneo) hunting and gathering groups according to Sellato and Sercombe (2007:43) have a general “lack of interest in history and the past” because there is a “certain notion of timelessness in nomad’s lives”. This pragmatic philosophy of the timeless present must have been a long prehistoric tradition in the region that is best encapsulated in the Australian Aboriginal idea of the ‘Dreaming’, defined as “not merely a period in the past or in the beginning; it is also present and future” (Elkin, 1968:193). The Dreaming is not “limited by the exigencies of space and time”, it is the “eternal here and now” which through symbols, chants and acts expresses sacramentally the “ensuring life to man and nature” (Elkin, 1968:194). Yet, why was mobility a way of life? I would like to suggest three main reasons why early communities in the region were on the move, perpetually in migration mode.

A. Food variety but spatially diverse

While the tropical areas, both land and marine have a diversity of fish and living organisms (shrimps, squids, shellfish, crabs), this does not necessarily equate with an abundance of food resources. Certain coastal waters (Sunda Shelf, shallow waters, coral reefs) had abundant fish and seas organisms (Butcher, 2004:14) while other deep seas areas were relative marine deserts. The variations of sea depths such as the Banda Sea (7,000 metres deep) and the eastern Philippine trench (over 10,000 metres deep) make fishing difficult without proper fishing techniques and gear. Tidal patterns also influence marine movements of the early sea nomads and beachcombers. The strand environment with its mangrove areas is not suitable for habitation and hence sparsely populated (Sopher, 1977:41). Furthermore early foragers in the region had to contend the prevailing monsoon seasons which provide “the principal ecological driving force” of Southeast Asia (Butcher, 2004:7). The alternative monsoons in the region (northeast and southwest monsoons) with their high winds, heavy rains and rough seas delimit travel and fishing and determine migratory movements of early sea nomads in Southeast Asia (Sopher, 1977:25-33). In addition the influence of El-Nino-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) every 2 to 7 years brings into Southeast Asia drier air resulting in warmer surface waters and drought (Butcher, 2004:18). Such warm waters cause the

coral to 'bleach' and thereby affect different species of fish (Butcher, 2004:18). Finally, the archipelago has seen over the last several thousand years some dramatic changes in sea-levels (see Oppenheimer, 1998). The whole Sunda shelf has been drowned out and it is likely that coastal peoples were forced to take to a nomadic sea life to survive.

The early settlers of the region must have gone through a very long gestation and experimental period of trying out different kinds of flora and fauna, as well as sea and coastal organisms before a composite picture of safe foods was determined. The small islands and islets in the vast archipelago had a variety of seafood and are spatially diffused. Given the mobility of fish, it requires good fishing techniques to catch them. Depletion of food resources and the mobility of fish must have been one reason why the early beachcombing hunters and gatherers keep moving on to tap new sources of food.

Secondly, while the tropical forest might be teeming with great ecological diversity, there is no abundance of any particular type of food (i.e. a species of vegetable, tuber, fruit or animal). Hence any hunting and gathering band in order to survive will require tapping a diversity of food at any location. And because there is no abundance of foods in any one site, early hunters and gatherers were forced to move on a very frequent basis to other sites in search of food. Mobility is thus a necessity to respond to localized resource shortages and places of transient food resources. Indeed, the early settlers in the South Pacific islands tapped such a diversity of birds as food resources that they led to the extinction of 2,000 bird species through hunting, egg collecting and habitat disturbance (Stringer & McKie, 1996:240). Mobility was indeed essential in the sustainability of any group in the tropical forests. The tropical forest might appear as a vault of vegetative goods and storehouse of foods but in reality it is barren. The life of the forest lies in the canopy of trees hence hunters and gatherers in the region devised the blowpipe as an adaptive means to tap the rich food source living in the tree canopies (Jett, 1970).

Geoffrey Benjamin (2002) has argued repeatedly that the hunting and gathering group, the Semang of Peninsular Malaya though the centuries have developed a cultural system *in situ* based on the need for mobility and place transience. According to Benjamin (2002:34) the Semang cultural system is based on three components: the maintenance of a widespread low-density population; a minimalist social organization that allows them to break up into conjugal-family groups at a moment's notice and;

avoidance of a long-term commitment to sedentism. Such mobility was further enhanced during the colonial period when avaricious traders and entrepreneurs were engaged in the slave trade and forcibly capturing hunters and gatherers and selling them as slaves. The only defense these helpless people had was to hide and remain mobile in the forest away from their possible capturers. The culture of nomadic life is expressed in many ways by different hunters and gatherers in the region. In the case of the Penans and Punans of Borneo there is an apparent lack of interests in raising and keeping domestic animals and a reluctance to eat domestic animals (chickens, pigs, buffaloes) (Seitz, 2007). The main reasons are to prevent psychological-emotional attachments to the animals, to avoid being bogged down with feeding animals with food they could consume and to preserve their hunting tradition (Seitz, 2007:187-190).

B. The avoidance of malaria-prone areas

One of the great scourges of the tropical areas is the susceptibility of *Homo sapiens* to a range of diseases, the most ubiquitous and deadly being malaria. For centuries, early *Homo sapiens* from tropical Africa to Asia have had to combat the ravages of malaria without much success. In the region, Oxenham and Tayles' (2006) edited book on the *Bioarchaeology of Southeast Asia*, pays attention to the quality of life of prehistoric peoples as they relate to their exposure to diseases. Hallie Buckley (2006) in particular draws attention to malaria, which has "caused more human suffering and death than any other infectious disease" in the tropics. Even the European colonialists paid a heavy price in their explorations and colonizing missions (see Savage, 1984). It is likely that since many of the early inhabitants in the region were beachcombers they were probably faced with the most conducive malaria-prone environments and probably many died. Many of the coastal areas in the region are swamp areas (either salt or freshwater marshes) which are important breeding grounds for malaria-bearing mosquitoes. Is it any wonder that as bands hugged the coastlines in search of sustainability livelihoods they were forced to move in the hope of avoiding malaria-prone places.

There were only two ways early *Homo sapiens* could have become less susceptible to malaria. Firstly, human beings could have developed a genetic resistance to malaria. Here we find examples of this in the coastal areas of New Guinea. The coastal inhabitants of New Guinea have all a high incidence of thalassaemia, an inherited

genetic disorder of the red blood cells which provides a “genetic protection of the malarial parasite” (Oppenheimer, 2004:359). Given this widespread genetic blood disorder amongst the native population, one can see why the coastal peoples of New Guinea can survive in such malaria-prone areas.

Secondly, for most other inhabitants of tropical Southeast Asia, there were cultural and social responses to combating malaria-prone areas. Essentially, early inhabitants in the region made it a conscious attempt to avoid malaria-prone areas by keeping their groups mobile instead of sedentary or finding areas that were non-malaria prone. One adaptive response must have been the move inland to higher mountainous areas in the region given that regions above 1,300 metres are entirely free of malaria since mosquitoes cannot survive in colder temperatures (Buckley, 2006:315).

The great movements of settlers from the region towards the Pacific islands and Madagascar (now Malagasy) are certainly examples of other measures for malaria avoidance. We can draw some inferences from myths that underscore this reality. The Imerina tribe of Malagasy has a myth which recalls that their ancestors left their homeland westwards in search of a “land where there was no death” (Linton, 1959:181). Ralph Linton (1959:181) suggest that if you replace the romantic phrase “land where there was no death” with a more prosaic one “region where there was no malaria”, the onward movements of Southeast Asian settlers to the Malagasy plateau which are fever-free becomes more meaningful. Likewise one can note that the onward migration of explorers and settlers from Southeast Asia to the Pacific Islands might have been also motivated partly by the search for malaria-free environments. Indeed the early Pacific explorers did find such an environment in the Polynesian Islands and finally in New Zealand. Buckley (2006:312) argues that malaria epidemics of existing populations were “a probable consequence of the arrival of Lapita peoples in Near Oceania” around 3,500 and 3,400 years BP. Having arrived at a “disease-free environment” in Polynesia, Buckley (2006:325) draws several conclusions on its impact on societies: lack of food taboos, high rates of population growth, and development of hierarchical social systems.

C. Environmental changes

In the region as elsewhere globally, the broad migration and mobility patterns were shaped by growing trading relationships, arable areas and agriculturally attractive sites, religious pilgrimages and natural resource interests (see Nayan, 2007). Another reason for mobility amongst peoples in the region is the adaptation to the changing environmental and ecological situations in some parts of the region. One good example is the numerous peoples and villages that border the Tonle Sap (Cambodia) and who are dependent on the lake's fish for their food and protein diet. The Tonle Sap is unique in the region because it expands and contracts its water flow every year based on flood seasons arising from the Mekong River. During the flooding season (August to November) the lake increases its size from 2,600 sq km to 10,500 sq km. and the water coverage in lowland areas adds another 30,000 sq km making it the biggest fishery source in Southeast Asia. The lake is also a reservoir containing 80,000 million cubic meters of water for domestic use of its 1.2 million inhabitants.

Given these changing water levels and water areas, villages and communities along the lake, move in tandem with the expansion and contraction of the lake's borders. Hence the majority of the Tonle Sap population remains mobile and migratory. Of its 1.2 million lake dwellers, 25% of population live in 'floating villages' (Sithirith, 2007:66). These villages comprise of houses built on rafts floating over the lake's waters. When the lake's waters rise, the village houses are moved further inland. Mak Sithirith (2007:67) notes how the floating village of Anlong Raing (population of 431 persons from 93 families) follows an annual cycle of settlement: March to June: village floats on water but villagers settle on island of Koh Ruy; July to August, village moves to the Peam Trapeang Kchach area as waters rise; in September, village moves to Ponlich Sdey area; in October it locates at the highest point of the stream at Prek Lokyay; by November and December the village returns to Ponlich Sdey and remains there till later February. Besides these mobile houses, part of the population of Tonle Sap also is found in house boats. Many of the house boats involve Vietnamese peoples who have moved up the Mekong and Tonle Sap River from South Vietnam into Cambodia.

For centuries the people of Tonle Sap lived a mobile and autonomous life by tapping the abundant fish resources of the lake. While the village fishermen of Anlong Raing cannot claim any legal territorial rights or benefit from state welfare, they had greater freedoms to pursue their economic livelihoods. As fishermen in Tonle Sap, the lake had provided

them traditionally almost uninterrupted access to the lake's fishing resources. Their intimate knowledge of the lake's ecosystem has given the fishermen mobility to tap the best fishing areas at various times of the year.

Given that for centuries prehistoric Southeast Asians lived in a water world or at the margins of water bodies (seas, rivers, lakes) their conceptions of space, territory and place were very different. Sumet Jumsai (1997) in his superb rendition of the cultural origins of the Thais demonstrates the aquatic behaviour and varied water symbolisms in Thai culture, architecture and religious beliefs. He asserts that Thailand's aquatic culture has been "suppressed with the supremacy of the predominantly land-based Western culture" and the current rise of "Asian supercities". My contention is that the prehistoric water culture based communities in the region were suppressed even before western colonialism in the region. It was overwhelmed and contained by the land based civilizations of India and China (Viet Nam). Indianization and Sinization changed an aquatic tradition to a land-based tradition where the aquatic demons and deities (the Naga) become replaced by soil and land deities (nandi the bull, Siva's lingam) and spirits of the mountains (Mount Meru). Note how the 13th (1296-1297) century Chinese ambassador Zhou Daguan (Chou Ta-Kuan) to Angkor Thom relates the way Khmers worship the blocks of stones (the lingam) as being analogous to the Chinese earth God altars (Murray, 1996:77).

The alternating mountain/land and seas/oceans conceptions in Hindu-Buddhist geography allowed the land-based Indianized kingdoms of Southeast Asia to include its own prehistoric aquatic culture in the cosmic city plans and the palace and temples architecture (Jumsai, 1997). Even in the Sultan's Palace in Jogjakarta, Hindu-Muslim religious conceptions of sacred space are tied to a pre-Indianized respect for an aquatic goddess. In the confines of the palace, the Sultan of Jogjakarta shares his royal living space with a water castle honoring the sea goddess, *Ratu Kidul*. In the Tran court of Viet Nam, the court and village landscape were said to be protected by a guardian genii amongst which are "aquatic animals", "emblems of fertility and potency" identified with the king (Lieberman, 2003:367). The curious mix of the respect for the deities of the land and sea finds expression at the highest spatial order of the royal city.

In an aquatic cultural tradition, communities in the region had less conceptions of space, less concerns with territory and less definitive ideas of defining borders and boundaries. The huge expanse of seas did not invite people to think in territorial ways. There were few advantages or practical issues for sea nomads identifying spatially their marine areas and dividing them up into territorial zones. There were no seamarks for navigation only landmarks defined by coastlines of islands and mainland. Traditionally the communities navigated the seas and oceans not by technical devices but by the vast cosmic map in the sky. It was the sky, its moon and constellation of stars which represented a practical guide for sea dwellers as well as its cosmic representations. Hence even the thalassic kingdoms of the region (Srivijaya, Brunei and Sulu Sultanates) had less spatial interests in the waters around them. The waters were free highways of trade, travel and communication. What mattered more to the Maharajas and Sultans was the *mandala* networks of ties between the various trading ports and vassalage coastal towns. No thalassic power had the manpower to police the seas. Safety and security of the high seas had to be maintained through strong relationships between overlords and vassalages. When such aquatic peoples went inland, they continued to see their world in marine rather than landed terms. Water spirits, cosmic conceptions, central power nodes and cardinal bearings of north-south, east and west dominate their worldview.

SWIDDEN SOCIETIES: MOBILITY AND SUSTAINING LIVELIHOODS

I would argue that the swidden agricultural system by 'integral' tribal swiddeners (Spencer, 1966) allowed small tribal groups to tap the highland ecosystems on a transient basis through a mix system of swidden agriculture, hunting and gathering, trading and woodlot conservation and exploitation. Some of the more sustainable groups in these highland areas in the region are the Ifugao (Conklin, 1980), Meratus Dayaks (Tsing, 1993), Senois (Temiars and upland Semais) (Benjamin, 2002) and Ahka (Sturgeon, 2005). Swidden groups in the region reveal a well tested and enduring system of sustainability livelihoods. And while they may be viewed in pejorative terms as "marginal", "frontier", "peripheral" and "border" communities to the lowland kingdoms, civilized cities and state governments (Tsing, 1993; Sturgeon, 2005) or the Thai peasant references to hillpeoples as *chao khao* (problematic hillpeoples) or *khon pa* (wild people), swidden 'tribal' groups have demonstrated an economic system of sustainable productivity that has lasted several thousand years.

Swidden groups have increasingly become the 'aboriginal peripheral' (Ong, 1999) societies because the institution of the 'state' over the centuries (e.g. Indianized kingdoms, colonial state, independent states) has tended to culturally marginalize these groups, to view them as 'others', and to characterize them as hill uncivilized peoples. In Thailand, the civilized and uncivilized dichotomy is captured in the distinction between *muang* (civilized city or political entity, lowland dwellers) and *kha* (uncivilized, upland tribal groups, wild, forest-dwellers) (Sturgeon, 2005:48-49). Even the Thai word for forest, *paa* carries the derogatory connotations of 'untamed' and 'uncivilized' (Sturgeon, 2005:48).

By nature of their mobility and transient attachment to specific locales and places, swidden groups carry their culture in their heads. The Akha tribal groups are another case in point. One Akha village entrepreneur in Mae Salong (near Chiang Rai, Thailand) proudly recited to me the names of his ancestors over 50 generations. He had less recollections of any place-specific area of his past ancestors. Place attachment thus does not feature very much in Akha community recollections. They do not accumulate much material culture and even if they do there is less sentimental attachment to such artifacts except for certain artifacts of tribal or family value. Benjamin (2002:10) notes that the Senoi of Malaya do maintain a "high degree of autonomy" and are characterized by an egalitarian, medium-size population, and a prohibition on marriage with traceable consanguines (i.e. same lineage). The issue of autonomy is pertinent to many tribal groups given the shifting power struggles and political tensions in the region between many lowland kingdoms and power-brokers. Swidden 'culture' like many tribal groups in the region is not so much based on the past but rather on the more pragmatic now and the functional present or the immediate future. As non-literate societies, their concerns are keeping alive orally myths, customs and traditions which lend identity to the group, ensure a functional relationship with cosmic powers, ancestors and supernatural beings, and provide the broad ground rules to ensure good health, harmonious social relationships, rites of passage and a sustainable productive system. The Meratus dayaks thus live by *adat* (or *hadat*) or customary law which governs the communities ritual conventions, marriage rules, and norms and ideals of the community (Tsing, 1993: 29).

The transient, mobile nature of swiddeners living in generally peripheral and borderland areas gives such groups certain political and economic advantages. In the case of the Akha in Thailand and China, Janet Sturgeon (2005:25) argues that they use “landscape plasticity” as sites of agency, negotiation and conflict to maneuver between “border-as-margin and border-as-connecting-line” in engaging the state. The practice of landscape plasticity by the Akha is a mere “adaptation to changing conditions” allowing them to engage in trade and paying tribute to premodern princes (Sturgeon, 2005:40). For centuries, these tribal groups have lived in complex environments and hence by keeping their landscapes plastic and flexible, the Akha have been able to survive by engaging proactively to new policies, markets and enterprises and defensively to predatory rulers and exploitative economic conditions (Sturgeon, 2005:40).

In each swidden group in the region, a different cultural system is used to maximize their chances of survival and to ride the wave of new economic opportunities or adapt to changing political policies. In Edmund Leach’s (1964) study of the Kachin in the Burma-China border, the communities don’t create landscape plasticity of their living environments but rather adopt a flexible cultural identity. Kachins essentially switch between three different cultural modes that are not place specific: they can become Shan and live under a very ordered social system in rice-productive lowlands; they can be *gumlao* (anarchic republicanism) as well as *gumsa* (large-scale feudal state) as hill side swidden cultivators (Leach, 1964:50-61). The cultural flexibility allows them a wider range of environments and physical sites to live in from lowland sedentary farming, swidden agriculture and trading.

In her classic study of the Meratus dayaks in South Kalimantan (Borneo), Anna Tsing (1993) argues this marginalized minority of swidden cultivators in Indonesia sees their mobility as an advantage rather than a disadvantage in their livelihoods. Mobility increases their “access to external power and knowledge” rather than isolating themselves from the state apparatus (Tsing, 1993:41). Despite being isolated in their mountain forest enclave, the Meratus have been actively engaged in trade since the eighteenth century. Through Banjar-middlemen, the Meratus have traded their forest products with the Banjar kingdom and Dutch East India Company (Tsing, 1993:43). Even currently, the Meratus are still known for their extensive travels -- yet there nomadism is not unfocused in an undifferentiated landscape. Meratus accept the

unevenness of their social landscape when they travel to particular places. Indeed most Meratus have lived in very different local areas and hence cultivate “eclectic cultural resources as they form personal histories of mobility across the landscape” (Tsing, 1993:61). But shamans and political leaders are able to forge links with less familiar places of power and knowledge to overcome the dangers of travel (Tsing, 1993:46).

Like all swidden communities, the Meratus have no land tenure laws, no sense of territorial jurisdiction or ideas of land ownerships. Their relationships are with trees and crops, and through this they have a loose connection with other users past and present (Tsing, 1993:62). It is not the domesticated village landscape that forged social identities but rather the associations were with the “forest landscape as a fabric of diverse social and natural resources” (Tsing, 1993:62). Amongst the Kachins, there are only usufruct rights to land; they “eat it” (sha) (Leach, 1964:155). Like the Kachin’s ‘culture switching’, the very name of the Meratus (from *ratus* meaning hundreds) evokes a diversity of peoples rather than one ethnic label (Tsing, 1993:52).

COSMIC IDEAS AND A POTABLE WORLD

Stanley Tambiah (1985:3) defines cosmologies as “frameworks of concepts and relations which treat the universe or cosmos as an ordered system, describing it in terms of space, time, matter and motion, and peopling it with gods, humans, animals, spirits, demons, and the like”. Cosmology is defined by Thomas Aylward (2007:5) as “a system of knowledge that describes the order of the universe in terms of its major constituent physical objects and temporal processes. It attempts to describe how the universe originated. How it is structured, and how it functions”. Both these definitions on cosmology emphasize different aspects of what cosmology is all about. In the case of Tambiah there is the practical, real life relevance in cosmology while Aylward’s definition is more about the science of the cosmos, its origins, structure and functions. Wessing (1978:22) however notes that cosmology is tied to religion. I use the term religion in our modern context even though many indigenous communities have no word for ‘religion’. Like the Ngaju (Dyaks) in central Borneo, there is no distinction between the supernatural and human worlds because the supernatural beings are welcomed equally in their ritual feasts (Schiller, 1997:20). Religions use cosmology to delineate ideas and beliefs about the structure of the universe as the basis for the values and truths it proclaims. Hence for Wessing (1978), all cosmologies are embedded in religion and thus

have elements of supernatural power, sacred ideas and the origins of the earth and human beings. In Southeast Asia, cosmologies underscore the importance of human-nature relationships, natural resource appraisals, and connections with the spirit and ancestor worlds. The underlying ideology and purpose of the cosmic paradigm according to Ruth McVey (1999:5) is ‘to main the proper connections between people, the natural world, and the world of the spirits/ancestors, on which equilibrium the well-being of community and cosmos depends’.

The above ideas of the cosmos and variations of it have been conceptually transmitted through each culture’s myths, legends, indigenous knowledge and folk culture. In an oral tradition, the origins and significant development of the culture group are carried in the heads of its members as potable culture. For Edmund Leach, myth and ritual is essentially the same thing: myth is ideological and ritual is the representation in reality (Hugh-Jones & Laidlaw, 2000:18). The cosmic framework has thus similarly two components which underscore in all communities ideology and manifestation: i) an ideational framework of the cosmos and its genesis and ii) the place of the community within the framework in relation to its ancestors, spirit world and nature. The cosmologies of cultures are in a way the blueprint of explanations for the individual tribal person about the universe, deities and spirits, and the origins of human beings and nature. In the words of Leslie White (1959:9) “cosmologies give him answers to all fundamental questions, of life and death and the nature of all things”. The indigenous cosmic paradigms provided several important blanket cultural anchors for various groups in the region.

Firstly, communities in the region all have variations of a three-tiered paradigm of the cosmos: the world above as in the stars and sky, the place of gods, deities and spirits; the world of human existence and the world below, the abode of demons, spirits, ogres and what Leach (2000:88) localized or secondary deities or *devatas*. In the middle world, the world of human beings, there are also gods, demons, spirits of all kinds that come from both the worlds above and below and might take up residence in some place or physical geographical feature. It is this very three tiered cosmos that ironically separates human beings from god’s world, where the ‘other’ world of Gods has perpetual life and ‘perfection’ of life (Leach, 2000:31). This three-tiered conceptual cosmos, provided communities a vertical rather than horizontal spatial conceptualization. Many ethnic

groups took much notice of the sky and celestial world above them hence the widespread references to sky, thunder, rain and lightning gods. The symbolic features of this vertical space always had to do with tall structures that formed the intermediary forms of communication and links between the different worlds. Mountains were always seen as structures that linked the human world with the world of gods, ancestors and deities above. Tall and large trees were similarly important abodes of major spirits that tribal communities always tended to preserve. Such vertical structures served Eliade's (1959) conceptions of the *axis mundi* and Edmund Leach's (2000) 'liminal' zones where the links and avenues of communication between the three worlds were facilitated. The vertical links underscore what Leach (2000:31) sees as the human world's longing "to re-establish some kind of bridge between Man and God", a link between the human world and the 'other' spiritual world of perfection and permanence. Even in the human-made cultural structures erected, the three-tiered cosmos is symbolically accepted and recognized. Local houses in the region are thus divided into the three-tiered cosmos: the attic, the place of family heirlooms is said to be the abode of gods and deities; the living space of the house is the world of human beings; and the world of demons is found under the house.

Secondly, given the large ensemble of gods, deities, spirits, demons, ogres and others, there was a general social stratification system endemic in the supernatural world. In the animistic world, cultures had a stratification of deities, gods, demons and spirits that were ranked in terms of their importance, prowess, power and efficacy. This spiritual system provided the ideas for rank, social hierarchies, social status and stratification of communities. The traditional hierarchical notions laid the ground work for the later introduction of Hindu and Buddhist structured cosmologies in the region. Hinduism with its many gods and deities, male and female, as well as sacred animals, vehicles and lesser demons and spirits complemented the indigenous plethora of animistic gods, demons and spirits.

Like the indigenous stratification of spirits, Hinduism also had a strict hierarchy of spirits which provided a template for the social organization of the various royal kingdoms in Funan, Angkor and Majapahit. Even amongst the Ngaju (Dyaks) of Central Borneo their Hindu Kaharingan religion reflects the influence of cosmology on their social order and organization. What Hinduism did in the region is that it created another layer of

deification. Apart from ancestor worship, the ruler, the king and 'big man' in Wolters' (1999) terminology, now became transformed through Hinduism as a godly person. Among the Angkorian kings, the idea of *devaraja*, god-king and living God was instituted. Such Indian religious-based cosmic ideas were also indigenized as in the case of the AD 1345 *Traibhumi (Traibhumi) Phra Ruang* composed supposedly by Lithai (Jackson, 1993:69). Peter Jackson (1993:72) notes that the *Traiphuum* provided the socio-political template for the Thai kingdoms of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Thonburi that was modeled on the Buddhist cosmos especially its hierarchical, merit-determined order (31 realms of the three Buddhist worlds) that was reproduced at the level of the "human social and political organization". At the apex of this social hierarchical system, the *Traiphuum* uplifts the statue of the universal monarch or *mahacakkavattiraja* to the level of Buddha and by doing so Lithai attempted to "lend religious authority and legitimacy to his rule" (Jackson, 1993:71). Indeed this relationship between the universal monarch and Buddha seemed somewhat similar to the Hindu-based kingdoms and the idea of *devaraja* or god-kings.

This religious stratification of Gods, deities and spirits, has made especially more complex tribal communities and certainly peasant societies accept the human ranking and social stratification of their own communities. In his book, *Negara*, Clifford Geertz (1980) notes how the elaborate rituals, ceremonies, religious processions, and court activities all helped to endorse this social ranking of society, the inequality of wealth and power. As he succinctly puts it: "The state drew its force, which was real enough, from its imaginative energies, its semiotic capacity to make inequality enchant" (Geertz, 1980:123).

The first establishment of the peasant kingdoms of the region came with the diffusion of Indianisation: through Hindu and Buddhist cosmic and sacred geographical ideas the region saw the birth of cosmic cities and *mandala* states (Heine-Gelden, 1942; Wolters, 1999; Coedes, 1963). The glaring difference between western and cosmic cities as the French historian George Coedes (1963) notes in his study of Angkor is that in the former the city is defined by residential homes, markets, and the seat of government while the cosmic city is modeled on the city of Brahma on the cosmic mountain of Mount Meru in the centre of the universe. Cosmic cities were by definition sacred places, where religious rituals and ceremonies were the order of the day. The cosmic city was a

horizontal manifestation of the vertical separation between God's world and the human world: the city in short was the spatial link and luminal zone and its *devaraja* encased and embodied the integration and merger of both the human and spiritual worlds.

Thirdly, Southeast Asian societies believe that the cosmos is suffused with power which is embedded in all objects and every aspect of the landscape. Power is thus unevenly spread in the cosmos; concentrated in some items, vehicles, flora, fauna and landscape places and diffused thinly in other places, objects and artifacts. Hence the cosmos is a perpetual arena of power struggles. For the Javanese rice is said to be a product of a power struggle between the sky and underworld and a continual struggle between the forces of order and chaos (Wessing, 1978:47). For the Sundanese rice was created from a surplus of cosmic power and hence the concrete manifestation of power in an earthly sense (Wessing, 1978:49). It is this constant flow of power that the Javanese and Sundanese believe keeps the cosmos operating (Wessing, 1978:49). Power in short is being continually redistributed within the cosmos. The relationships of power in the cosmos are viewed in two different ways: firstly, several academics have noted the parallelisms between the macrocosmos and microcosmos, between the universe and the world of human beings (Heine-Geldern, 1942; Quaritch-Wales, 1961). The whole development of cosmic cities and galactic states in the region under Indianization was based on this underlying principle. Secondly, based on a rather ecological principle, power relationships have their best outcomes when they are in harmony and in equilibrium. Too much or too little power always presents bad and negative outcomes. These varied power outcomes are found at all levels; in one's body (health), homes (good and bad outcomes for residents), and in kratons and kingdoms.

Fourthly, if we are to accept Clifford Geertz's (1973) definition of cultural symbols in society, then one can see that the cultural symbols of communities in Southeast Asian communities served dual roles as "models of" and "models for" behavior. One of the areas of symbolic 'models' came from ideas and notions of religious cosmologies. Hence the rituals, religious rites, ceremonies, and public festivals served as "graspable" aspects of the linkages between cosmologies and our social worlds. As Anne Schiller (1997: 19-20) argues, the Ngaju death rituals of *Tiwah* suggest the "possibility of parallels between social organization and popular cosmology" in which the social and cosmological orders are a "reciprocal process". In a way, the overt manifestations of cultural displays, which

are sociologically endorsed underscore the 'mental models' of cosmologies and spiritual relationships of communities. The question is to what extent were the parallels of the macro and micro cosmos as an ideological template relevant to the quotidian social, political and environmental challenges that communities faced. The fate in macrocosmic forces and fatalistic predictions provide many communities in the region an easy resignation when things go wrong; blame is thus never on the individual's lack of abilities or the communities' inability to plan forward. It takes pressure of human failure but that means learning through mistakes becomes a paradigm that is difficult to understand.

Fifthly, there is a spatial and temporal dimension of the cosmos. The spatial ideas revolve around the notions of the 'centre'. This 'centre' is often symbolized as the 'navel' the origin of life. In cosmic cities and even contemporary cities, the navel (pusat in Malay) is attached to all major or central offices and cities in the Malay world (e.g. Pusat Bandar, Pusat Pejabat Pos). The temporal aspects of the cosmos are also symbolized and revealed in human, agriculture and cosmic cycles. The temporal dimension deals with notions of personal history, clan experience and *cosmic origins*. Personal history is embedded in ideas of the rites de passage of each individual: birth, adulthood, marriage and death. For example, the hunting and gathering Ilongat of Northern Luzon, Philippines see life cycle as a "continuous process of movement" divided in four phases: childhood, youth, adulthood and old age (Rosaldo, 1980: 136-137). Among the Ilongat, time is not a calendar date but representations of past events: person arrested, a deer killed, a father was buried (Rosaldo, 1980: 47-48). Clan and community sense of history is based on shared moments that have affected everyone. Hence for the Ilongat, place names also become reminders of the communities past history for "an event placed in space is also intelligibly located in time" (Rosaldo, 1980:48).

AGRICULTURE AND PEASANTS: PROPERTY AND LAND TENURE

Despite the fact that the region has been one of the earliest centres of agricultural origins and domestication of plants and animals in the world (c.6000BP) (Sauer, 1952; Bellwood, 1979; Higham & Thosarat, 1998), until the colonial era in the nineteenth century the native populations and agricultural communities in Southeast Asia did not have any notion of property rights or ownership of land. Sedentary agriculture has been in existence in the region for over 2000 years BP, but peasants in the region never

developed a land tenure system that made land ownership a permanent or individual enterprise.

Southeast Asian land tenure systems for sedentary farmers followed very much the same system as swidden agriculturalists. While swiddeners use mobile farm land, sedentary sawah farmers used land as transient land occupiers. Land ownership was never instituted in the *adat* or customary laws of native societies. Indeed amongst the lowland, sedentary, Malay peasants land is dichotomized into two types: *tanah mati* or dead lands, which is land vacant and not being used by anyone; and *tanah hidup* or living lands or land alive, which refer to lands currently in usage (Hill, 1977:45-46). Hooker (1978:67) translates these Malay terms as “occupied” (*tanah hidup*) and “unoccupied” (*tanah mati*) lands. The usufruct lands are defined variously as *tanah padi* (rice lands), *tanah dusun* (fruit lands), *tanah kampong* (village land) and later *kebun getah* (rubber stands) (Bailey, 1983:24-25). Essentially, the Malays had only a land tenure system based on usufruct rights of land. Those that used land had ownership of the land and once a family vacated the land he tilled and cultivated, the land essentially went back to God or back to nature (Hill, 1977:45). This lack of ownership of land demonstrates that land was never seen as ‘valuable’ or integral to someone’s status, wealth or class within the community. Land was merely viewed in functional terms as a space that was being utilized for food production or for living. It had very little social or cultural attributes. In Lucien Hanks (1972:44-45) terms, the *sawah* plots (wet rice) were like “holdings” which reflect the “active work by men to transform, maintain and thus to utilize the natural environment”.

This absence of linking land to ownership, property rights and wealth accumulation provided a sense of landscape fluidity for many Southeast Asians. The land was not family binding. It meant that one could be mobile if one wanted to. There was thus little sentimental attachment to land and by extension to territory and territoriality. Even amongst a sedentary society like the Minangkabaus of Sumatra, one sees a curious mix of sedentism and mobility as part of its cultural vocabulary. Given its matrilineal social system and its land tenure based on female lines of descent has freed the males from land ties and hence encouraged them to travel – what is referred to as *merantau*. This practice of *merantau* (to travel and see the world for social status) amongst male Minangkabaus has created one of the major cultural engines of migration in the

community. Resulting from *merantau*, the Minangkabaus have major communities in Peninsular Malaya (Negri Sembilan), Sulawesi and Java.

In the region, while land area and territory was abstract in conceptualization, it was soils that were valued, embodied in community sentiments and had strong spiritual significance. In Southeast Asia the soil is the “crucial part of human genesis and civilization” (Winichakul, 1994:133). Soils provide the “primordial sentiments” of societies in the region because “the soil has been an identification of commonality, the geo-body has been given the concrete magnitude of the soil while it makes itself an identification of commonality” (Winichakul, 1994:133).

Why were spatial and territorial ideas insignificant in the region? The traditional explanation for this unique phenomenon in the region stems from two interlocking reasons. Firstly, unlike the circumscribed arable lands in China and India, Southeast Asia had relatively abundant lands. Land or for that matter good agricultural lands was not scarce and as such not given premium status amongst communities in the region. After all in both mainland and island Southeast Asia, nature provided a natural rejuvenation of soils by the annual overflowing of rivers or by volcanic lava spilling over. Ask any farmer in Java, Bali, Sulawesi, Sumatra or Luzon and one will see that soil infertility is one of their least concerns. The rice bowls of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and south Viet Nam provide similar testimonies to the richness of their alluvial soils.

Secondly, for centuries the population densities and growth have been low. Not until the era of high colonialism in the nineteenth century in the region, the demography of the region remained somewhat sparse. Self imposed population controls and high child fatalities keep population controlled and relatively low. Unlike China and India with their relatively large populations, Southeast Asia had quite a different demographic make-up. This meant that Southeast Asian societies had less compunction to develop social and cultural structures and controls based on human-land relationships. Embree (1950) thus talked about the “loosely structured” Thai society, Benjamin (2002) and others refer to the unilineal and bilateral social systems, Joyce White (1995) speaks on the unique heterarchic social systems and Wolters (1999) alludes to Southeast Asia’s fluid and flexible social systems. The prehistoric heterarchic social system, suggest an egalitarian system without status that gave each individual decision-making powers and an ability to

evaluate risk for oneself. This system gives small bands much more individual and independent flexibility in hunting and gathering. In contrast, the Chinese rigid patrilineal system and the Indian caste system demonstrate strict and well ordered social systems. Such social systems translate to larger community systems where decisions are top down and made in strict accordance with social norms and customs. Food shortages and famines were less likely to take place. Ironically they became major issues under nineteenth and early twentieth century colonialism in Java, Burma and Viet Nam (see Scott, 1979; Geertz, 1963; Popkin, 1979).

The native village town and towns arising from agrarian society never gained local spatial identity in the region. The nucleated settlements were not perceived as spatial entities. In Thailand, despite the notions of governed spatial units, the terms *muang* and *banmuang* (or literally town and village-town) despite their “connotation of space” was “not spatially defined” (Winichakul, 1994:134). Towns and village towns were viewed more in terms of their community linkages and social relationships rather than as locational bearings within an agrarian landscape.

COLONIALISM AND SPATIAL SOCIETIES

Colonialism brought two important aspects of the spatial revolution in the region. Firstly, space became politicized and hence the imbining of power in spatial terms created in colonies a new concern with territories and territorialization. The idea of the centre became replaced by a concern with boundaries and frontiers and ensuring such boundaries were clearly defined, demarcated and defended. The mapping of colonies especially its frontiers and borders defined the extent of political authority and jurisdiction of the colonial state and in turn helped the colonial governments manage the resources of their colonies.

Like all colonial territories, colonialism in the region embedded values in space in two ways. Firstly, it politicized space by territorializing space. The colony was no more defined by its capital (colonial city) alone but by the spatial expanse of its territory. Borders and boundaries of the state were now the definitive spatial demarcations of the existence of the state. Throughout the nineteenth century, the western colonialist (European and American) were busy defining and demarcating the spatial extent of their

territories in Southeast Asia. Only the state of Thailand in the region remained free from colonial rule and jurisdiction. Suddenly the local kingdoms realized that their capitals were now under colonial rule and that the idea of territory defined state power and jurisdiction. Thongchai Winichakul (1994) argues the whole issue of spatial awareness and territory in Thailand came with western economic interests, the cartographic interventions and colonialism in the region.

Secondly, colonialism embedded economic value to space within each European colony. Space was turned into land and property enforced by a European land tenure system. In the west, the idea of land and property as legal and philosophical traditions goes all the way back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle (Redclift, 2006:28). Michael Redclift (2006:29) argues that the western tradition of enforced property traditions “often challenged and transformed traditional rights to resources” and the development of “modernity implied increasing control over the land by centralized states, usually employing military means”. Hence nineteenth century colonialism brought property rights under western laws to the region with distinctive economic interests where the control and management of land was now a symbol and criteria of economic power, prowess and wealth. These ideas of land ownership and property rights were alien to local societies in the region where land was governed by *adat* or oral customary law and ownership was communal and community-based rather than individual.

REFLECTIONS

This paper attempts to show that while spatial concerns might be evident today in property issues, land tenure laws, state territorial definitions and cartographic representations they were never a fundamental concern and cultural imperative of communities and states in Southeast Asia. The prehistorical and historical landscapes of the region were defined by communities and societies than had rather a territorial concerns and a cosmic worldview. Space and territorial issues were not part of the region’s cultural baggage. Certainly the ideas of individual rights to land, the economic value of land and notions about property were alien to Southeast Asian communities until the advance of western colonialism in the region. Land was always views by communities as free and non-territorial and when it was valued it became part of the social capital of a village or community. In the region, space and territory were generally

passive entities. What were more important were the relationships to all aspects of nature, flora and fauna, inanimate and animate, land and sea; upperworld, earth and underworld; and the spiritual, ancestral and human worlds. Space and territory were abstract concepts but nature, spirits and ancestors were for Southeast Asian communities, realities, substance and functional aspects of their quotidian existential landscape. Hence the communities in the region were concerned with a relational view of nature: appeasing, communicating and rewarding the spirits, ancestral and vital forces around them. Unlike Henri Lefebvre's constructions of space as social space read and decoded, as active and transitive processes linked to the development of societies (Redclift, 2006:41-47), in the Southeast Asian region, space and territory never found deep political, economic or social expressions. Indigenous societies were tied symbolically, mythically and religiously to specific components of the cosmology and ecosystem: rain, thunder, lightning, sky, winds, fruits trees, rivers, mountains, birds, trees, seas, and water (Howell, 1989; Atkinson, 1992). This passive relationship to spatial and territorial expression forms yet another cultural identity of the Southeast Asian region.

This was a region where mobility and place transience was very much a cultural necessity for many communities since prehistoric times. Southeast Asians lived a life of mobility and as migrants. Much of the cultural baggage of hunters and gatherers and swiddeners has been based on a non-sedentary life-style. Even in sedentary communities, land was never valued for its own sake. It was always seen as a commodity of temporary usage. Sedentary farmers over the centuries never developed a land tenure system based on individual and permanent property rights. Hence the attachment to land was never a value in itself. The homeland was thus something always vague amongst many communities though the ethnic and descent links of people were kept in living memories. It is no wonder in the region that even in sedentary communities, mobility and migration are encouraged and valued. The Dyaks, Bugis and Minangkabaus are some groups where travel and migration are embedded in the culture of the community. Culture was thus defined by historical relationships and continuity rather than by place attachments which was in keeping with the mobility of peoples. Yet even the historical links as identified in myths and legends were very much grounded with providing culturally adaptive mechanisms for present living and survival

mechanisms. Essentially, Southeast Asians were very much concerned with the present and current situations and less with nostalgic attachments to places and past events.

The mobility and transient occupation of places was very much in keeping with the ecosystems that communities needed to rely on. Two features of the ecosystem need to be borne in mind: firstly that ecosystems in Southeast Asia are extremely diverse despite the seeming homogeneity of landscapes of mountains, forests and plains, river valleys, deltas, mangrove swamps, seas and coastal areas. And secondly, despite the western depictions of the cornucopia and plenitude of nature in western traveler accounts (Savage, 1984), tropical landscapes in the region were essentially fragile, natural resources were diverse and not abundant, and food resources required selective ecologically knowledge and environmental expertise to exploit and utilise. Hence this environmental and landscape diversity and the ecological fragility necessitated varied cultural responses from communities in the region to exploit their ecosystems for their sustainable livelihoods.

If Southeast Asia's current cultural and societal diversity seem an unfathomable and unsolvable political dilemma (Sree & Siddique, 2008), on the positive side this myriad of ethnic minorities remains a ringing endorsement of how communities found varied ways to pursue sustainable livelihoods. Indeed the region provides an interesting laboratory of a whole range of communities that have successively adapted as well as maladapted to the environmental challenges and diverse ecosystems. Clearly the long history of ethnic minorities in the region (Karens, Chins, Kachins, Lahu, Akha, Mung, Temiar, Ibans, Ifugao, Bataks), despite the smug references to their "primitive" lifestyles demonstrate their intimate knowledge and understanding of their environments and their successful ability to adapt to environmental and social stresses. One could argue that the external political, economic and social influences and changes (Indianisation, Colonialism, Islamization, nationalism and statehood processes, capitalism, globalisation) impeding on indigenous communities has been the destabilizing factor for the region's diverse ethnic minorities: increasing population, destabilizing ecosystems, degrading environments, creating out of sync population-natural resource ratios, capitalizing nature, territorializing landscapes, establishing property and tenure rights and eradicating common-pool resources. So when current governments, politicians, entrepreneurs and international financial funding institutions state that ethnic minorities

lead unsustainable and unproductive livelihoods, we need to assess the validity of such statements within a broader historical and cultural contextualisation.

While Southeast Asian societies had definitive ideas of a cosmic worldview, their notion of territory and specific ideas of place attachment were rather vague and ambiguous. Southeast Asian Indianized states implemented specific spatial urban plans according to Hindu and Buddhist geography, embodied architecture and tributary interrelationships based on a spatially defined *mandala* format and adhered to notions of land tenure based on usufruct rights. But in general the idea of property, land ownership, royal territorial rights, state's borders and territory and a sense of place for communities were never major cultural, social and political issues amongst people in the region. For Wolters (1999:221) the lessons that one can learn from the *mandala* political culture of the region based on the "multicentred and boundary-less" system is the "flexible" culture of "accommodating religious, political, or economic power". If on the other hand we accept Prescott's definition of territory as the "extent of land and/or water under jurisdiction, actual or perceived, of a sovereign state" (Forbes, 2003:53), then the region has a poor record in history of legitimizing state territories and demarcating its borders. Historically states in the region were rather ephemeral political entities and rarely lasted long enough to define permanently their territorial jurisdiction. Given the nature of such space bound societies, the maintenance of the centre (capital city, cosmic city, royal palace) took precedence over any spatial definition of the state.

Despite the lack of the everyday, practical ideas of territorial concerns, communities in the region had large world views: they identified a three-tier cosmic system (heaven, earth and hell); they spatially adopted a cardinaly defined system (four cardinal directions) for buildings (temples, palaces) and town planning; attachments to places were based on specific aspects of the natural environment (mountains, rivers, hills, large stones, big trees, caves, lakes) which were defined by the spatial habitations of the spirit world (*nats*, *phis*, ghosts, demons) rather than culturally appraised properties of nature; and they valued the idea of the centre, conceptualized as the navel or *pusat*, the origins of all life, and the *axis mundi* of the three worlds. If at all, these large world views and concerns with the present and practical as well as their cultural adaptive propensities should augur well for societies in the region coping with the forces of globalization and information technology. For Wolters (1999) the long history of *mandala* politics (of

centers and satellite powers) has meant that local kingdoms and leaders were adept in adjusting to changing political situations of different centers of power rather than a fixated spatial network; an expertise needed to navigate the current fluid globalized world today.

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