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# Imagination Across the Sea: *Looking into the History of Connectivity of the Middle East and Southeast Asia*



Looking back at how the history of postcolonialism and decolonization unfolded across Southeast Asia after the end of the Second World War, we can see that the once dominant imperialism of Great Britain, the United States, The Netherlands, France and other European nations collapsed in the political tensions of the Cold War, where the US and the Soviet Union (and their respective allies) fought for dominance, while individual countries (some not existing as nation-states pre-World War Two: for example, Indonesia) jostled for their independence.

Given this, the way that the Southeast Asia region might be related to other regions in regard to differing cultural contexts but with similar complexities, is through a consideration of the development of their nation-state identities. A great deal of post-independence literature regarding the connectivity of Southeast Asia with other regions (especially in Indonesia, as history text books: e.g., sourcing the journals of Marco Polo), referred to those early periods of mobility in the ninth and tenth centuries—including Arab merchants who were then living in Malacca, Sumatra and Java, as noted by historical author Jadul Maula—bringing about cultural exchange through extensive networks of trade and migration. Jadul noted that cultural contact through trade is evidenced in the existence of Arabic words absorbed into the old Javanese language dating from the Kingdom of Kediri in the twelfth century. And in later periods, not only language but various cultural expressions enriched and reshaped the local cultural conditions of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago.<sup>1</sup>

In over four hundred years of European colonialism and the resulting complexities of that history, the relationship between Southeast Asian and Arab countries has greatly shifted, most significantly, political and diplomatic issues following post-World War II independence, both in Asia and Africa. Southeast Asian postcolonialism/decolonization became an important focus for competing powers during the Cold War, particularly as the newly independent countries began to see the importance of a neutral and independent geopolitical concept. A turning point in the relations between these newly created countries in Asia, Africa and the Arab region was the Asian-African Conference (*Konferensi Asia-Africa*) in Bandung, Indonesia, that took place in April 1955. The conference was initiated by Sukarno, First President of Indonesia, Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, and other Asian leaders, its aim to oppose colonialism and neo-colonialism, promote Afro-Asian cultural and economic co-operation, which included declarations of greater solidarity for artists, intellectuals and activists in the Global South.

This essay aims to establish referential points in the relationship between the contemporary art sectors in Southeast Asia and Arab countries, in particular the Sharjah Biennial that has delivered significant contributions to reconnect and rewrite the history of scattered, shared experiences of cultural movements from both regions, the first instance being the collaboration of the Sharjah Biennial and Biennale Jogja Equator series in 2013, and the second being the presence of a large number of Southeast Asian artists in the 2019 Sharjah Biennial: *Leaving The Echo Chamber*.

It needs to be highlighted that the terminology of “Arab region” refers to the political outlook of the Biennale Jogja Foundation given the discrepancies of ideological construction within current geopolitics. In the context of international social discourse, Indonesian politics tends to use the term “Middle East” to refer to such countries as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran and others. But on the world map the location of these countries is seen not to be east of Indonesia, but rather the opposite. This terminology is a political construction more relevant to the context of the US, if not the West in general, without considering any critical understanding of it in the Southeast Asian region. As a result, the Biennale Jogja Foundation proposed, from its own context, to confront this Western influence in the way various regions are viewed and classified.

**BIENNALE JOGJA AND SHARJAH BIENNIAL**

The Biennale Jogja Equator Series (BJE) is an initiative undertaken by artists and arts professionals from Yogyakarta, to investigate geopolitical frameworks and power relations in the equatorial regions, eg. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Yemen, India, Nigeria and so on. This critical dialogue not only relates to the postcolonial dominance of the political and economic systems of participating countries as can be seen by such global divisions as G-7, G-20 etc., but in addition, the indifference of such established global orientations towards these equatorial countries' systems of knowledge production and art practices. The BJE seeks to provide alternative perspectives on the international art stage which so far have mainly been focused on the concepts of centre and edge, North and South, developed and developing, and other binary applications. By drawing on the equator as a concept for solidarity and being largely inspired by the 1955 Asian-African Conference, the BJE attempts to expand its partnerships through cultural diplomacy with equatorial countries in order to ensure its broader international scope.

The major influences in early postcolonial Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia, involved India and countries from the Arab region. The relationships between Indonesia and these countries can be easily traced back to the long history of the spread of religion and cultural assimilation through ocean and land-based trade routes. In the context of art, Arab culture fused into various kinds of music, performing arts, calligraphy, architecture, etc.

The significant change in Indonesia's political orientation from the 1960s to the early 1970s markedly altered the international political landscape. Stronger relations with the United States served as the main foundation of Indonesia's international political platform during President Suharto's New Order regime, which was followed by the establishment of relations with cultural organizations with countries such as France, Great Britain, The Netherlands and Germany. The participating countries of the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement<sup>2</sup> were no longer the Indonesian government's main focus. As such, politically and culturally, this brought about a discontinuity of those decolonization solidarity initiatives. With the post-WWII onset of rapid global economic growth and connectivity, through what Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan called the "global village"<sup>3</sup> that produced a world-wide uniformity in popular culture, mass media reach and the incorporation of Western education systems, Indonesia's collective knowledge, of its long history of regional associations, as well as the bonds established between these nation-states was set aside, if not forgotten.

While it is often stated that Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of all countries in the world, the crucial political shift after the Cold War significantly reduced, apart from economic links, connectivity between Indonesia and Arab countries. After the 1960s, the latter, especially Saudi Arabia, became closely aligned to the US, through trade (oil) and political relationships. Yogyakarta scholar Al Makin, writes in *Patching Up the Cracks: Nusantara and the Arab World* that the US' political preservation of the Saudis had been long underway, even contributing to regional wars during 1980s and 1990s (Iraq-Iran; Iraq-Kuwait), while Indonesia was too burdened by Islamic historiography and theology, the Arab region being the source of its religious knowledge structure, to take notice.<sup>4</sup> Al Makin argued that many Indonesian religious groups see the Arab as defender of Islam and in opposition, the West as Islam's enemy. But this binary is neither simple nor straightforward; the two positionings do not completely demarcate the entire perspective. With such limitations, of the long history of relationships being taught in Indonesia's educational system, it is not surprising that there are such simplifications and stereotypes within both Indonesian and Arab communities.

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The BJE's engagement with the Arab region has provided opportunities to develop and expand partnerships and contemporary art practices relevant to the discourses of related periods in shared histories. With the burgeoning momentum of *Reformasi* after the fall of Suharto in 1998, Muslim communities gained a stronger position in the political arena, leading to their growing following and in some instances an increase in fundamentalism – with tensions heightening between Islam and non-Islam, and Arab and the West, becoming the discourse of everyday life, coinciding with the advent of Islam Nusantara,<sup>5</sup> that offered a more open-minded perspective of the notion of being Muslim within the context of a diverse Indonesian society.

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Indonesian artists Prilla Tania and Tintin Wulia were each in Sharjah for one month working with artists and local communities as part of the 2013 Biennale Jogja XIII Equator 2 projects. It was the first international residency program organized by Biennale Jogja using funds allocated from the state budget. Based on a meeting between Biennale Jogja and the Sharjah Biennial through the Sharjah Art Foundation, it was agreed that future long-term collaborations were necessary to strengthen partnerships across countries in the southern hemisphere and to review the partnerships of the past. During her time in Sharjah, Prilla Tania was captivated by the cityscape and the movement of people going about their daily activities. Sharjah's port, in its historical and contemporary context is the city's most striking feature, an entrance and exit point, a gate through which people have come and gone, settle and visit. On her exploration of the cityscape, Prilla Tania documented the alleys and streets and people's movements. The most populated areas, such as the old town with its iconic landmarks of museums, galleries and historical houses, are located next to the harbour and market. The configuration of Sharjah's downtown, of markets, mosques and palace on the same main axis is replicated in ports in Indonesia, particularly those located on Java Island. In addition to alleyways with white coral stone walls, these iconic locations in Sharjah's cityscape include courtyards, around which Yuko Hasegawa constructed her curatorial framework for the 2013 Sharjah Biennial: *Towards a New Cultural Cartography*. Tania's artwork, *Takhtet Al Qaleb* (2013), in contrast, was a video projection of Sharjah's cityscape alongside an installation made from paper, depicting the streets of the city.

Tintin Wulia's first time in Sharjah resulted in the work *Terra Incognita, Et Cetera* (2013) for the 2013 Sharjah Biennial, a performative-participatory installation in the form of a map, exhibited previously in its initial form in The Netherlands, Singapore and Indonesia. At Sharjah, visitors wrote their names in different languages and scripts on the painted wall map displayed at the nineteenth century Baiq Al-Sherkal exhibition venue, with its open archway and courtyard spaces, presenting another imagination of an 'insider-outsider' project. This became a landmark presentation for Wulia and the artwork due to its ability to engage wider audiences across the Arab region, Africa, and South Asia. When invited later in that year to participate in a residency at the Sharjah Art Foundation, Wulia proposed the project *Babel* (2013), based on her meeting with Emirati-Palestinian artist-poet, Hamsa Younis, who introduced her to differing perspectives on Muslim identity. Wulia reconsidered how Muslim identity might be defined by those who live in different contexts, focusing on languages that demonstrated the broader perspectives of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. She saw how Arabic – moving along the trade routes that predated the European colonization of Southeast Asia – had a major influence on the development of local languages,

including those communities whose dialects at that time were largely influenced by the Pallava script,<sup>6</sup> identifying some Arabic words that had been borrowed by Indonesia languages. In addition, in a contemporary context of post-Cold War global conditions, Wulia perceived what she saw as the rise of the new global nomadism initially outlined in her proposal for Biennale Jogja. *Babel* thus became a reflection of her experience living in a place where different voices are simultaneously heard. In addition to Prilla Tania's and Tintin Wulia's residencies in Sharjah, Biennale Jogja has also partnered with curator Sarah Rifky to provide opportunities for two Indonesian artists, Duto Hardono and Venzha Christiawan to participate in residencies in Cairo with the art initiative and education-focused cultural space, Beirut, co-founded by Rifky. The timing of these residencies in Sharjah and Cairo was compelling given the political dynamics in the region with the then ongoing Arab Spring uprisings. As one of the artists in this residency program, Duto Hardono, coming from the generation which did not directly experience the *Reformasi* movement after 1998, the great political tensions in Cairo at that time were a revelation.

Returning to Al Makin's focus on the relationship between Islam and democracy, in questioning if democracy is relevant in Islamic society, these artists preferred to absorb the spirit of rethinking their own position as Indonesian in this complex global political movement and reflecting upon their own position related to the West.

#### SOUTHEAST ASIAN ARTISTS IN SHARJAH BIENNALE 2019

One of the three sections in the 2019 Sharjah Biennial: *Leaving the Echo Chamber* was curated by Vietnam-based Zoe Butt, titled *Journey Beyond the Arrow*. (The other curators were Claire Tancons and Omar Kholeif.) Sharjah Biennial's choice to invite three curators was surprising given the previous decade they had appointed a single curator (most of them female). Each section was thematically separate, the three curators' exhibitions introducing their different areas of research focus and interconnected frameworks, in particular hybrid identity, postcolonialism, and speculative history. Zoe Butt has been working in the Southeast Asian region for more than two decades, and her extensive practice of engaging regional artistic communities has significantly contributed to various approaches of art making and discourse. In *Journey Beyond the Arrow*, Butt chose a provocative approach to examine transnationalism from its early history of colonialism and trade-mobility since the early sixteenth century, and how that has shaped diaspora and multiculturalism—including their darker historical aspects often hidden from the mainstream. These issues, for example, were clearly depicted in the works of Indonesian artist Jompet Kuswidananto, US-Vietnamese artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Malaysian artist Ahmad Fuad Osman and Thai artist Ampannee Satoh.

Jompet Kuswidananto's Sharjah Biennial work *Keroncong Concordia* (2019), is a search into the post-WWII liminal condition connecting Indonesia, The Netherlands, Africa and Suriname during 1940s to early 1950s. The scattered stories of these places—narrated by those who are still alive and witnesses to history, as well as through researching archives highlighting the boundaries between heroes and villains, victims and perpetrators, freedom and building new colonies, meetings and farewells—become transparent in the relationships between the people involved. Modern structures and ideas of nation-states and new social systems imperceptibly appeared within the symbolism of scattered but interconnected decorative lights, with a three-channel video projection deliberating on the historical context of violence and disengagement in these places. Butt notes on how Africa and Indonesia were connected through different encounters, including the Black Dutchmen that she found in Ghana;



*There, the Belanda Hitam, or Black Dutchmen, are given memorial, the story of their trade as 'trophies' to the Dutch East Indies recorded in this little-known house on a hill. Keroncong Concordia, while anchored in Bandung (a club whose building hosted the Bandung Conference in 1955), is also an artistic gesture that speaks to a broader community, whose experience of assimilation as 'intercolonial subjects' deserves further visibility and consideration.<sup>7</sup>*

Ahmad Fuad Osman's *Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project* (2016-) focuses on the historical narratives of early cosmopolitanism throughout the Indonesian archipelago, beginning with the trading of spices in Banda and Melacca, to the arrival of Europeans in the region. Osman's ongoing project is a fictional memorial built from fragments of archaeological evidence, scholarly interviews, popular folklore and oral religious histories. It is an attempt to reconstruct a lost character and a vanished archive; an undertaking to negotiate the identity of a man celebrated today in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines as Enrique de Malacca, Enrique de Cebu, Enrique Maluku, Daeng Malik Siluak, and Panglima Awang. This extensive archive is constructed in the form of a museum display with wall texts, prints, paintings and other artefacts which lead the audience to imagine the figure of Enrique within the context and narratives that have become part of the foundation of the greater Southeast Asia community. His project connects the interweaving historical narratives of different regions, of South Asia and Arab traders, of European explorers and the Indonesian-Malay archipelago, that has shaped the understanding of the region's cosmopolitanism.

An equally entangled historical context of 'the idea' of Southeast Asia appears in Tuan Andrew Nguyen's *The Specter of Ancestors Becoming* (2019), a four-channel video and multiple photographic print installation in an outdoor courtyard in the Sharjah heritage area, of imagined scenes of conversations highlighting the nuances in strategies of remembering by families of French-Senegalese soldiers who have returned to Dakkar in West Africa with their Vietnamese wives after the fall of French rule in Indochina. The nocturnal installation not only provides an emotional experience because of its dramatic story but also the experience of the viewer's bodily presence within this outer and inner being, there and here, past and present. The returned soldiers reflect upon the meaning of military victories and trophies, and they share their grief in front of family and friends' graves, with their ghosts and dreams. This conjunction of different lives of Vietnamese, African and European protagonists and their descendants depicts how war brings about dark human encounters and new possibilities of time and space.

Ampannee Satoh is a Thai artist from Pattani, a southern region that remains under significant stress due to four decades of political conflict. Culturally, Pattani people (Narathiwat) are more inclined towards, given their geographic closeness to Malaysia, Malay culture and (the religion of) Islam. For decades, Pattani people have experienced a broad spectrum of violence, ranging from attacks by the Thai military to ethnic and religious separatist bombings. Her video and photography installation, *TUGU 1370 : 1425* (2019) explores an era marked by the abolition of the Thai sultanate system by King Rama V (1853-1910) and the subsequent centralization of power, which led to increased tensions between dominant Buddhist society and the Malay (Muslim) community. Satoh focused on two landmarks in urban Pattani built as historical witness to continuous conflict between militarized Buddhism and the Muslim inhabitants. One is the bullet shaped Police Monument erected in Dusun Nyor to honour the victims of the 1948 rebellion between Malay-Muslim villagers and Thai police and soldiers (rumoured to house the remains of the latter involved in bloody confrontations), about which today's people of Narathiwat have little idea or understanding of





its representation and meaning. The other is the Tak Bai Memorial, commemorating the Tak Bai Massacre of eighty-five people in Narathiwat province in 2004 (at the time Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government had been targeted by bomb blasts attributed to terrorists) when the Thai military arrested protestors from the local community who were demonstrating against the arrest of fellow villagers. Satoh contrasts these two monuments as a reflection upon her Muslim identity within this complex historical narrative, and for the Sharjah audience to gain a perception on these different contexts and positions.

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In the context of the guileful, well-established relations between countries in the Arab region (of which the relationship between the Emirate of Sharjah and the Arabian Peninsula constitutes a small element) and Southeast Asia, one should not only focus on the complex histories traced and elucidated through these artist projects but also their interconnected postcolonial tensions and increasingly complex modern power relations of which the politics of religion plays a significant role. These artists' reflections provide us with a mechanism to question concepts of representation and identity, not only related to the collective construct of race, ethnicity or nation-state, but also considerations that facilitate an examination of the blurring of established lines between classifications, thus advancing diversity.

Religiosity and spirituality have been important aspects of Southeast Asian communities before the advent and institutionalization of modern religions. The Southeast Asian region was strongly spiritual, based on animistic beliefs which powerfully shaped cultural expression, from its ancient to the modern periods with rituals and traditions incorporated into architecture, performing arts, music, dance, literature and much more. In contrast, contemporary art practices have been generated as an organic encounter between the institutionalization of art with the living heritage of various traditions and beliefs, their form and application undeniably unique and specifically related to their local context and circumstances. While there is an extensive influence of Arab culture in the art practices of Southeast Asia, its assimilation enriching language of expression and discourses, it has nonetheless been often compliant to, and 'under the shadow' of the hegemony of Western art and history. The artworks discussed here feature how these artists are willing to reach beyond the nostalgia of this connectivity and reflect more upon the critical position of their current geopolitical situations. Their art, as a political stance, presents their personal perspective for the immense potential for new knowledge and understanding that fosters a drive towards an acceptance of difference.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jadul Maula, 'Arab Adapted, Java Embraced: Creativity in the Cultural Relationship between Nusantara and the Arab Region', *A Path of Pot-Holes: Navigating the Edges and Vortex of the Indonesian-Arab Region Relationship through Biennale Jogja XII 2013*, Biennale Jogja Foundation, 2013

<sup>2</sup> A forum of 120 developing world states not formally aligned with or against the major power blocs, drawing upon the principles established by the Bandung Conference in 1955

<sup>3</sup> McLuhan coined the term in his books *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962) and *Understanding Media* (McGraw-Hill, 1964) in which he describes the phenomenon of the entire world becoming more interconnected as the result of the daily production and consumption of media, images and content by global audiences

<sup>4</sup> Al Makin, 'Patching Up the Cracks: Nusantara and the Arab World', *A Path of Pot-Holes: Navigating the Edges and Vortex of the Indonesian-Arab Region Relationship through Biennale Jogja XII 2013*

<sup>5</sup> Islam Nusantara is a distinctive brand of Islam as a result of indigenization and contextualization of the universal Islamic values according to the socio-cultural realities of Indonesia, as an alternative to global Islam dominated by Arabization, ie. Saudi Wahhabism

<sup>6</sup> The Pallava script is a Brahmic script named after the Pallava dynasty of South India from the fourth century AD, which spread to Southeast Asia and evolved into various Indonesian scripts such as Balinese, Javanese, Kawi and Sundanese

<sup>7</sup> Zoe Butt, 'Journey Beyond the Arrow', *Sharjah Biennale 14: Leaving The Echo Chamber* (exhibition catalogue), Sharjah Art Foundation, 2019