Asian Journal of Environment, History and Heritage
December 2024 Vol. 8, Issue. 2, p. 67-81
ISSN 2590-4213 e-ISSN 2590-4310
Published by Malay Arts, Culture and Civilization Research Centre,
Institute of the Malay World and Civilization

WATERS OF UNITY: MARITIME HISTORY OF NUSANTARA FROM HINDU-BUDDHIST KINGDOMS TO THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

(PERAIRAN PERPADUAN: SEJARAH MARITIM NUSANTARA DARI KERAJAAN HINDU-BUDDHA HINGGA ZAMAN PRA-PENJAJAHAN)

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Abstract

The seas and oceans have long served as sources of inspiration and knowledge, challenging human perceptions historically rooted in myths and superstitions. Beyond their symbolic significance, these maritime spaces functioned as critical conduits for interregional connections, fostering mutual understanding, unity, and economic prosperity. In this study, we examine the maritime history of Nusantara, focusing on the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms and the subsequent pre-colonial era, to explore the dynamic interplay between indigenous maritime traditions and external seafaring influences. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in the Annales School framework, this research synthesises secondary data from historical, archaeological, and anthropological sources to uncover the patterns of continuity and change in maritime governance. By highlighting the underexplored role of Nusantara in shaping regional civilisations and navigating external pressures, this study bridges historical narratives with contemporary discussions on maritime governance. Our findings offer lessons from the past to inform sustainable development, regional cooperation, and strategic management of oceanic resources in the Indo-Pacific region. By focusing on the intersections of local maritime agency and global forces, we aim to advance the understanding of how maritime histories continue to influence the present and future.

Keywords: Maritime History, Nusantara, Pre-Colonial Era, Southeast Asian Historiography, Oceanic Networks

Abstrak

Laut dan lautan telah lama menjadi sumber inspirasi dan pengetahuan, mencabar persepsi manusia yang berakar umbi dalam mitos dan tahyul. Di luar kepentingan simboliknya, ruang maritim ini berfungsi sebagai saluran kritikal untuk hubungan antara wilayah, memupuk persefahaman bersama, perpaduan dan kemakmuran ekonomi. Makalah ini mengkaji sejarah maritim Nusantara, memfokuskan kepada kerajaan Hindu-Buddha dan era prapenjajahan seterusnya, untuk meneroka interaksi dinamik antara tradisi maritim peribumi dan pengaruh pelayaran luar. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berasaskan rangka kerja Sekolah Annales, penyelidikan ini menganalisis data sekunder daripada sumber sejarah, arkeologi dan antropologi untuk mendedahkan corak kesinambungan dan perubahan dalam tadbir urus maritim. Dengan menonjolkan peranan Nusantara yang kurang diterokai dalam membentuk tamadun serantau dan mengemudi tekanan luar,

kajian ini merapatkan naratif sejarah dengan perbincangan kontemporari tentang tadbir urus maritim. Penemuan ini menawarkan dapatan daripada masa lalu untuk menguruskan pembangunan mampan, kerjasama serantau dan pengurusan strategik sumber lautan di rantau Indo-Pasifik. Dengan memfokuskan pada persimpangan agensi maritim tempatan dan kuasa global, penulis berhasrat untuk memajukan pemahaman tentang bagaimana sejarah maritim terus mempengaruhi masa kini dan masa depan.

Kata-kunci: Sejarah maritim, Nusantara, zaman prapenjajah, historiografi Asia Tenggara, rangkaian lautan

INTRODUCTION

The maritime history of Southeast Asia, historically referred to as the Nusantara archipelago, underscores the pivotal role of seas and oceans in shaping civilisations (Evers 2016). Throughout history, the waters of the Nusantara were more than mere geographical features; they were integral to the socio-political and cultural fabric of the region (Sulistiono 2021). Early polities such as Kedah Tua, Langkasuka, Champa, and Funan were instrumental in controlling key maritime routes, including the Strait of Malacca, Strait of China, Karimata Strait, Sunda Strait, and Bali Strait (Yaapar 2019). These corridors facilitated not only trade and diplomacy but also the movement of scholars and pilgrims, fostering intellectual and cultural exchanges that connected major ports across the region. The seas served as conduits for the transfer of ideas, goods, and technologies, embedding maritime connectivity into the foundations of Southeast Asian civilisations (Sippanan 2018).

While the prominence of Srivijaya in the 6th century and the Majapahit Empire in the 13th century are well-documented, we argue that understanding the broader maritime dynamics of Nusantara requires exploring earlier polities and their contributions to regional connectivity. The kingdoms of Funan and Champa, for instance, controlled strategic points along early maritime trade routes and acted as intermediaries between China, India, and the wider world (Raj 2022). Archaeological findings, such as those at Oc Eo in present-day Vietnam, reveal the extensive trade networks that connected these polities to regions as far as the Mediterranean (Kim et al. 2016). Likewise, Kedah Tua and Langkasuka, situated on the Malay Peninsula, played crucial roles in controlling access to the Strait of Malacca, a waterway that remains significant in global trade today. These polities not only influenced regional geopolitics but also facilitated the exchange of religious and cultural traditions, particularly those of Hindu-Buddhist origins, which left a lasting legacy on the region (Shukri et al. 2018).

The contributions of Chinese and Middle Eastern navigators to these maritime networks remain an underexplored area of scholarship. Historical sources such as the I-Ching and early Chinese chronicles provide critical insights into the socio-political and cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia before the rise of Srivijaya. These records illuminate the cosmopolitan nature of maritime routes, demonstrating how trade, diplomacy, and cultural interactions shaped the foundations of regional civilisations. Chinese merchants, for example, were not merely traders but also cultural intermediaries, bringing with them ideas, technologies, and goods that transformed local societies (O'Reilly 2007). Middle Eastern sailors, on the other hand, played a crucial role in introducing Islamic influences to the region well before the establishment of Islamic Sultanates (Houben 2003). The integration of these external influences into local practices highlights the adaptability and resilience of Southeast Asian maritime societies.

The significance of maritime connectivity during this period is further underscored by Bellina's (2014) work on the Early Maritime Silk Road. Her research highlights how maritime networks facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural practices across Southeast Asia, linking the region to broader Indian Ocean and Pacific trading systems. The role of early ports such as Kedah, Palembang, and Champa in these networks underscores the importance of local agency in shaping global trade dynamics. These findings challenge traditional narratives that often prioritise land-based

empires, instead positioning maritime polities as key players in the development of early globalisation. The transition from Hindu-Buddhist thalassocracies, exemplified by Srivijaya and Majapahit, to Islamic Sultanates in the 13th century marks a significant shift in the region's maritime history (İrfanoğlu & Öztürk 2020). Islamic polities such as Samudera Pasai, Demak, Aceh, and Melaka redefined maritime governance, integrating Islamic principles into socio-political frameworks that shaped the trajectory of regional development (Ali & Sulistiyono 2023). These Sultanates not only inherited the legacy of earlier maritime kingdoms but also expanded it, fostering new forms of maritime connectivity that endured into the colonial era. Melaka, in particular, emerged as a hub of trade and cultural exchange, attracting merchants from China, the Middle East, and South Asia (Wilkinson 1935). Its strategic location at the crossroads of major maritime routes enabled it to control regional trade and solidify its status as a cosmopolitan centre of commerce.

With the arrival of Western colonial powers, the focus of governance shifted from maritime to mainland territories (Borschberg 2003). The Portuguese, Spanish, English, and Dutch prioritised territorial consolidation, transforming the region's economic and political structures (Mohd Daud et al. 2024). This reorientation diminished the centrality of the seas, leading to long-term implications for maritime governance. The Portuguese capture of Melaka in 1511, for instance, marked the beginning of a period in which external powers sought to control maritime trade routes for their own benefit, often at the expense of local economies and societies (Desai 1969). The Dutch East India Company's dominance in the region further entrenched this shift, as the focus moved from facilitating trade to monopolising it, fundamentally altering the nature of Southeast Asian maritime systems (Hoffman 1972).

As Southeast Asian nations transitioned into modern nation-states after the Second World War, the strategic and economic value of the seas became overshadowed by land-centric policies. We argue that this neglect has contributed to contemporary challenges such as economic disparities, cross-border crime, and regional conflicts (Kumar & Siddique 2008). The fragmentation of maritime networks that once unified the region has had lasting implications, as nations now struggle to coordinate policies on issues such as maritime security, environmental protection, and sustainable development. Revisiting the maritime heritage of the region, particularly through the lessons of historical maritime polities like the Malacca Sultanate, offers a critical opportunity to reposition the seas as unifying and developmental assets for regional prosperity. Moreover, the contemporary relevance of Southeast Asia's maritime history cannot be overstated. As global attention increasingly shifts towards the Indo-Pacific region, the strategic importance of the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca has re-emerged as a focal point in international geopolitics (Abadi & Abdullah 2023). Historical maritime routes, once conduits for trade and cultural exchange, now serve as potential flashpoints for conflict and competition. Understanding the historical dynamics of these routes can provide valuable insights into how they might be managed in the future. By contextualising Southeast Asia's maritime history within a global framework, we aim to contribute to ongoing discussions on the region's role in shaping both historical and contemporary maritime governance.

MATERIALS & METHODS

In alignment with the proposed research, we adopt a qualitative research design, relying exclusively on secondary data to explore the maritime history of the Southeast Asian archipelago. This approach begins with a comprehensive review of existing literature, drawing insights from historical documents, maritime logs, archaeological findings, and scholarly articles related to Southeast Asia's maritime history. To ensure methodological robustness, we employ the Annales School theory, which emphasises the longue durée perspective (Forster 1978). This theoretical framework allows us to investigate maritime history not as isolated events but as part of broader social, economic, and cultural structures that have shaped the region over centuries. By applying this lens, we aim to uncover patterns of continuity and change in the region's maritime activities and cultural exchanges.

The initial phase of the research involves systematically gathering and scrutinising secondary sources from national archives, maritime museums, libraries, and academic databases. Although primary sources are not directly consulted, our reliance on well-documented secondary materials

ensures that the analysis is grounded in credible and validated historical narratives. A critical source critique process is employed, where we cross-reference information from diverse repositories to assess the reliability and accuracy of the data. Materials include published collections of maritime logs, historical analyses of trade and diplomacy, and archaeological interpretations, which collectively provide a rich corpus for understanding the maritime history of the region.

To address the interdisciplinary nature of the study, we integrate perspectives from oceanography, anthropology, and cultural studies. For instance, oceanographic studies inform our understanding of historical maritime routes and the environmental factors influencing navigation, while anthropological analyses shed light on the cultural exchanges and social dynamics that emerged through these maritime interactions. Cultural studies provide additional context by exploring the symbolic and ideological significance of maritime activities in shaping regional identities. We also employ thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns in the secondary data, such as the development of maritime technology, the role of specific straits and ports, and the cultural exchanges facilitated by maritime networks. Our materials are drawn from extensive collections housed in libraries across Southeast Asia, including the National Library of Singapore, the National Library of Malaysia, and the Brunei Darussalam Library. These repositories offer access to published compilations of maritime logs, historical atlases, and analyses by leading scholars in the field. Additionally, peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes provide further insights into the historiography of Southeast Asia's maritime networks.

Although no extensive fieldwork or empirical data collection was conducted, a visit was made to a water village near Kampong Kota Batu in Brunei, which later moved to its present-day location along the Brunei River, as well as to the Kampong Ayer Cultural & Tourism Gallery, to gather materials. This reliance on a multidisciplinary synthesis of existing scholarship, complemented by on-site observations, ensures a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The interdisciplinary approach enables us to bridge gaps in existing literature and provide a holistic narrative that connects maritime history with broader regional and global contexts. The study culminates in the synthesis of findings, organised around the interplay between maritime routes, cultural exchanges, and socio-political developments in the region. By adopting this holistic methodology, we aim to contribute not only to the historiography of Southeast Asia's maritime history but also to its relevance in contemporary discussions on cultural and economic interconnectedness.

Figure 1. The author in front of the Kampong Ayer Cultural & Tourism Gallery, capturing a moment of reflection on the historical significance of Brunei's water villages
Souce: Field visit to Brunei (2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of maritime history has evolved over time, intersecting with multiple disciplines and perspectives, yet gaps remain in understanding key terms, concepts, and frameworks central to the field. By thematically analysing the existing body of literature, this review identifies these gaps and establishes a foundation for further research. The discussion is organised into three main themes: terminological and conceptual clarifications, interdisciplinary approaches to maritime history, and historical perspectives on maritime civilisations and governance.

Terminological and Conceptual Clarifications

The understanding of terms such as sea, ocean, and maritime is essential to contextualising maritime history. Sea is often defined as a body of water adjacent to land, whereas ocean encompasses vast, interconnected bodies of water (Ebralidze 2021). In ancient Malay cosmology, the term Tagaroa was used to describe the sea, signifying a large, life-giving entity (Roorda 2020). However, early Malay sailors distinguished between localised seas and the vast expanses of oceans known today, such as the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Matsuda 2012). This differentiation reflects a worldview that sees the sea as both a source of sustenance and a domain of mythology. The term maritime encompasses both physical and human dimensions of sea-related activities. Originating from Latin (maritime-us), maritime refers to navigation, trade, and cultural exchanges (Ali et al. 2021). Scholars like Ntona (2023) have argued that contemporary interpretations of maritime history often prioritise economic and political dimensions, such as fisheries, trade, and governance, while neglecting cultural and symbolic aspects. This observation highlights a need for a more holistic approach that integrates material and ideological perspectives.

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Maritime History

Maritime history inherently transcends disciplinary boundaries, drawing on fields such as oceanography, anthropology, and cultural studies. Scholars like Harlaftis (2020) and Andaya (2018) have emphasised the importance of interdisciplinary frameworks in understanding maritime activities comprehensively. Oceanography contributes to insights into physical conditions of seas and oceans, while anthropology examines cultural exchanges facilitated by maritime routes. For instance, human oceanography integrates the study of fishing technology, coastal settlement patterns, and maritime jurisprudence, offering insights into socio-economic dynamics of maritime communities (Simangunsong 2015). Despite this, a notable gap exists in the application of these methods to Southeast Asia's maritime history. While studies often focus on European maritime powers like Portugal and Spain (Aughton 2007), fewer works examine how Southeast Asian polities leveraged maritime resources for trade, cultural diplomacy, and political consolidation. Addressing this imbalance is crucial to contextualising regional maritime activities within global frameworks.

Historical Perspectives on Maritime Civilisations and Governance

The historiography of Southeast Asian maritime civilisations remains underexplored in comparison to land-based counterparts. Early scholarship on Southeast Asia's maritime history primarily revolved around European doctrines such as mare clausum (closed sea) and mare liberum (free sea) (Cartier 1999). These doctrines facilitated monopolisation of maritime trade routes and disrupted indigenous systems of maritime governance. In contrast, ancient seafarers and rulers in the Middle East, India, China, and the Nusantara viewed the seas as sources of opportunity and inspiration (Ali et al. 2023). Southeast Asian maritime powers, such as Srivijaya, Champa, and the Malacca Sultanate, controlled strategic straits like the Strait of Malacca to dominate trade networks and foster cultural exchanges (Rustandi 2023). However, fragmented studies on Southeast Asian maritime agency highlight a need to focus on indigenous perspectives. A critical gap is the lack of focus on how Southeast Asian societies conceptualised their relationship with the sea. While European maritime historiography emerged during the Renaissance, Malay civilisation historically integrated sea-based activities without explicitly labelling them as "maritime" (Ali et al. 2021). This distinction underscores the importance of examining indigenous terminologies and frameworks in regional historiography.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Overview of Maritime Kingdoms in Nusantara

The maritime history of the Southeast Asian Archipelago is deeply intertwined with the socio-political and economic motivations of its sailors, merchants, and rulers. Historically, the maritime route was not merely a conduit for trade but a lifeline that shaped the geopolitics and cultural exchanges in the region. The dominance of this maritime realm can be attributed to several factors, including the region's strategic location, the abundance of natural resources, and the adaptive maritime culture of its inhabitants (Young 2007). For instance, the Strait of Malacca, Sunda Strait, and the Sulu Sea served as crucial intersections connecting East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, enabling the flow of commodities such as spices, textiles, and ceramics (Evers 2016; Ahmad Tajudeen 2024). These routes were favoured for their relatively safe navigation conditions, predictable monsoon patterns, and the availability of port cities that offered essential services, including provisioning and repair facilities (Abdullah et al. 2023).

The maritime kingdoms of Srivijaya, Majapahit, and Malacca are often highlighted in historical accounts due to their extensive trade networks and geopolitical influence (Man et al. 2022). However, smaller kingdoms in Borneo, such as Sambas and Kutei, also played vital roles in sustaining these networks. Sambas, for example, served as a significant hub for gold and pepper, commodities that were in high demand among Chinese and Indian merchants. Similarly, Kutei, situated along the Mahakam River, acted as a key point of access for traders navigating between inland resource areas and maritime routes (Braddell 1949). These smaller polities were instrumental in maintaining the economic vitality of the region, even though they often operated under the shadow of larger maritime powers.

In addition to economic motivations, cultural and religious factors significantly influenced the use of maritime routes. The Nusantara seas were not only pathways for commerce but also channels for the spread of ideas, religions, and technologies. Pilgrims travelling to India and the Middle East for religious studies frequently relied on these routes, contributing to the dissemination of Hindu-Buddhist and later Islamic practices throughout the archipelago (Seshan 2016). The Sulu Sultanate, for instance, maintained strong ties with both the Islamic centres of the Middle East and the maritime kingdoms of the Malay Archipelago, facilitating a unique blend of religious and cultural exchanges (Saleeby 1908). Similarly, connections between the Philippines and the broader Malay world were deeply rooted in shared Austronesian linguistic and cultural heritage, which fostered a sense of interconnectedness across the seas (Andaya 2018).

The motivations of sailors and merchants in the region extended beyond mere survival or profit. Many were driven by a spirit of exploration and the quest for prestige within their communities. In Austronesian societies, maritime expertise was often linked to social status, with successful voyages enhancing the reputation of sailors and their sponsors (Ali & Abdullah 2024). This cultural dimension underscores the dual role of the seas as both a means of economic sustenance and a source of personal and communal identity. Geopolitical ambitions further shaped the utilisation of maritime routes. Under the leadership of figures like Hayam Wuruk and Patih Gajah Mada during the Majapahit era, the concept of Nusantara emerged as an early attempt to unify the Southeast Asian Archipelago under a single political framework. This vision extended beyond Java to encompass territories such as Borneo, Sulawesi, the Malay Peninsula, and the Philippine islands (Susilo & Sofiarini 2018). The Majapahit government strategically leveraged maritime routes to assert control over its vassal states, employing both naval strength and trade diplomacy to consolidate its empire. The Oath of Amukti Palapa, ascribed to Gajah Mada, symbolises this ambition, articulating a vision of regional unity through maritime dominance (Makin 2016).

Despite these aspirations, the rise of colonial powers in the 16th century significantly altered the region's maritime dynamics. The arrival of the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and British introduced new maritime policies that prioritised monopolisation over integration (Romadi 2022). The Treaty of

Tordesillas in 1494 and subsequent colonial agreements fragmented the archipelago, dividing its seas and territories among European powers. This shift undermined the traditional roles of maritime routes, reducing them to instruments of colonial exploitation (Coben 2015). For example, the British focused on developing Penang and Singapore as key trading hubs, while the Spanish consolidated their control over the Philippines, marginalising the pre-existing maritime networks that had connected these territories for centuries (Saravanamuttu 1986).

The socio-cultural context of the maritime routes during this period also reveals complex interactions between colonisers and local societies. European powers often relied on local sailors and navigators to traverse the unfamiliar waters of the archipelago. These collaborations, while pragmatic, also facilitated the exchange of maritime knowledge and practices, blending local expertise with European technologies. At the same time, resistance to colonial rule often manifested in the maritime domain, with local rulers leveraging their naval capabilities to challenge colonial incursions. The Sultanate of Sulu, for instance, maintained a formidable maritime presence that allowed it to resist Spanish dominance well into the 19th century (Warren 1975).

Maps of these maritime routes highlight the strategic intersections that shaped the history of the region. The routes linking major kingdoms such as Majapahit, Malacca, and Sulu to smaller polities like Sambas and Kutei illustrate a complex web of economic and cultural interactions. These maps also underscore the geopolitical importance of specific straits and seas, which served as both bridges and barriers in the region's maritime history. For example, the Sulu Sea not only facilitated trade between the Philippines and Borneo but also served as a contested space during the colonial era, reflecting the dual nature of maritime routes as zones of connection and conflict (Sutherland 2004).

In summary, the utilisation of maritime routes in the Southeast Asian Archipelago was shaped by a confluence of economic, cultural, and geopolitical factors. The region's strategic location and abundant resources made it a focal point for global trade, while its maritime cultures fostered a dynamic interplay of exploration, commerce, and identity. Smaller kingdoms like Sambas and Kutei, often overlooked in historical narratives, were integral to this maritime ecosystem, supporting the larger empires of Majapahit, Malacca, and Sulu. At the same time, the socio-cultural motivations of sailors, merchants, and pilgrims enriched the maritime routes, transforming them into spaces of exchange and innovation. By exploring these factors, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the region's maritime history, situating it within both regional and global contexts.

Post-Colonial Nation-State Formation and Maritime Fragmentation in Southeast Asia

Despite various attempts to revive the "Southeast Asian Spirit" and foster anti-colonial unity in Indonesia, Malaya, and the Philippines, most of these efforts ended in failure. The history of the Second World War and the Japanese occupation of the region between 1941 and 1945, while a dark chapter for its inhabitants, paradoxically offered a glimmer of hope for the reunification of the archipelago. The inability of colonial powers such as the Dutch in Indonesia, the British in Malaysia, and the Spanish in the Philippines to defend their territories during the war, combined with Japan's slogans like "Asia for Asians" and the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," opened space for local nationalist movements. These movements sought to reclaim the unifying spirit once championed by Patih Gadjah Mada through ideas such as Greater Indonesia, the Federation of Malay States, and the Pan-Malay identity. Key nationalists such as Apolinario Mabini, Wenceslao Q. Vinzons, and Diosdado Macapagal in the Philippines; Muhammad Yamin, Sukarno, and Hatta in Indonesia; and Ibrahim Yaacob, Burhanuddin Al-Helmi, and Ahmad Boestamam in Malaya fought for these ideals (Harper 2013).

However, the political realities and turmoil of the Second World War made the reunification of the archipelago an elusive goal. For instance, Sukarno declared Indonesia's independence in 1945 without involving Malaya, which only achieved independence under Tunku Abdul Rahman in 1957 (Drakeley 2005: Abdullah 2010). This divergence in timelines underscores how these nationalist movements ultimately succeeded in securing sovereignty for individual nation-states rather than

achieving a broader archipelagic unity centered on shared Malay identities. While Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and the Philippines have since developed rapidly and found common ground through ASEAN, the formation of nation-states and the regional spirit of unity remain complex and unresolved agendas (Keling et al. 2011). These challenges are partly rooted in the recent histories of these countries, having gained independence only in the mid-20th century following long periods of colonial domination (Karupiah & Abdullah 2022).

According to Embong (2001), this historical specificity, shaped by colonialism, has resulted in the creation of "ideal nations"—visions born out of struggles for independence and efforts to consolidate sovereignty. The spirit of unity and regional identity expressed through ASEAN and other cooperative frameworks exists more as an abstract ideal than a lived reality. This is evident in ongoing regional conflicts, such as the Malaysia-Indonesia confrontation, the Philippines' claim to Sabah, overlapping territorial claims, disputes over oil and gas concessions, the treatment of foreign workers, and broader socio-political tensions. These unresolved issues suggest that the regional spirit of unity is often undermined by competing national interests and the lingering effects of colonial-imposed boundaries.

Fukuyama (1992) argued in *The End of History that the post-Cold War era* marked the end of ideological evolution, with liberal democracy becoming the dominant global framework. Similarly, Ohmae (1995), in The End of the Nation-State, contended that nation-states would become obsolete in a globalised world where economic regions, rather than political borders, determine power and influence. For Fukuyama and Ohmae, the continued adherence to nation-state ideologies, especially in former colonies, is a hindrance to progress. They argue that these constructs are colonial legacies that fail to address the complexities of modern globalisation, where borders are increasingly fluid, and economic interdependence transcends political sovereignty.

This raises critical questions: What mechanisms or approaches could be employed to revive the spirit of unity in the Southeast Asian Archipelago? Can the traditional concept of Nusantara envisioned by Patih Gadjah Mada be reclaimed in the context of modern geopolitics? The historical fragmentation of the archipelago, exacerbated by colonial divisions and the establishment of rigid nation-state boundaries, presents significant challenges. Today, geopolitical tensions—such as disputes over oil and gas concessions in Ambalat, sovereignty claims in the Sulawesi Sea and Straits of Malacca, and the treatment of Indonesian workers in Malaysia—underscore the difficulties of fostering unity in a region marked by diversity and historical divisions.

The situation is further complicated by the geographic and maritime boundaries of the Southeast Asian Archipelago, which follow geometric and archipelagic principles. These boundaries often create friction among regional actors. For instance, the archipelagic baseline system employed by Indonesia and the Philippines has drawn criticism from other maritime nations, as it poses challenges to international trade and complicates maritime governance (Lokita 2010). Additionally, the separation of nation-states such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines by the South China Sea, Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and Java Sea has entrenched the perception of division rather than unity among these countries (Case 2013).

In this context, the vision of regional unity remains an aspirational ideal rather than a practical reality. The fragmentation of the archipelago, reinforced by colonial legacies and geopolitical tensions, continues to hinder the realisation of a cohesive regional identity. As former colonies of differing colonial powers, the region's countries face unique challenges in balancing national sovereignty with the need for regional cooperation. This struggle is further exacerbated by the pressures of globalisation, which demand increased interdependence while exposing the limitations of traditional state-centric ideologies (Kivimäki 2001).

While ASEAN has made strides in fostering regional collaboration, its effectiveness is often constrained by the diverse political, economic, and cultural priorities of its member states. The question remains: If the frameworks of the nation-state and regional state fail to address the complexities of the Southeast Asian Archipelago, what alternatives exist? The challenge lies in

reconciling the geopolitical realities of the region with the shared historical and cultural ties that have long defined its maritime identity. Any potential solution must navigate the dual pressures of maintaining national sovereignty while embracing regional interdependence, a task that requires not only political will but also a reimagining of the region's shared history and future.

Maritime Geography and Its Role in Unifying the Southeast Asian Archipelago

In comparison with the physical characteristics of land and sea, it is often assumed that terrestrial landscapes, with their solid and navigable surfaces, provide a greater sense of connectivity than the fluid and dynamic nature of the sea. However, a closer examination of the geography of the Southeast Asian archipelago reveals that all the land within this region is surrounded, interconnected, and even displaced by the sea. While the concept of a nation-state in the region is defined by "geometric boundaries" and the exercise of absolute sovereignty over territorial waters, the sea does not separate the region's territories. Instead, it unites them, often in ways that go unnoticed. Drawing inspiration from the Malay proverb "sea water is not broken," we propose that the most effective mechanism to strengthen regional unity and revive the spirit of the archipelago lies in celebrating the shared maritime history, culture, and arts as common heritage (Andaya 2018).

The selection of maritime heritage as both a bridge and a catalyst for unifying the region is informed by the unique and timeless nature of the sea. The sea follows no fixed borders, knows no national boundaries, and has long served as a connector of civilizations. Historically, it was the medium through which sailors, merchants, and traders established connections that shaped the identity and prosperity of the region. Hugo Grotius, in his seminal argument for the principle of mare liberum (the freedom of the seas), aptly stated that "the sea, like the air, cannot be conquered and should not be subjected to ownership by any single nation." This universal quality of the sea underscores its enduring potential to serve as a unifying force for the fragmented nation-states of the archipelago. However, to achieve this vision, leaders and people in the region must adopt a shared perception of the sea—not as a separator but as a medium that unites (Thornton 2004).

Historically, the Southeast Asian archipelago was characterized by a maritime-centric worldview that embraced the sea as a source of connection, sustenance, and identity. For many communities living on islands without airports or bridges, the sea was and remains the only viable means of travel to other islands or the mainland. To change the perception of the sea as a divider, the region's people must go beyond romanticizing the glorious maritime past and instead recognize the history, culture, and maritime arts as shared and universal. While geopolitical fragmentation and the creation of colonial-imposed nation-states have made it challenging to restore the spirit of unity once envisioned by Patih Gadjah Mada, the common maritime heritage offers a promising foundation for rekindling this sense of collective identity (Wiranto 2020).

The historiography of the region consistently points to a shared maritime legacy. Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests that humans inhabited the Southeast Asian archipelago as early as 500,000 years ago during the Pleistocene epoch. Early migrations, believed to have originated in Africa, align with the "Out of Africa" theory, which posits that Homo sapiens migrated into mainland Asia before spreading into the Pacific region, including New Guinea and northern Australia. At this time, much of Southeast Asia—including parts of present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines—was part of the contiguous landmass known as Sundaland (Oppenheimer 1998). This landmass connected the islands of the archipelago to the Asian mainland, facilitating early human migration and settlement.

Peter Bellwood's Austronesian migration hypothesis adds further depth to this understanding. According to Bellwood, Austronesian-speaking societies originated in Taiwan around 5,000 to 4,000 BCE before migrating southward into the Philippines, Borneo, Sumatra, and Java. These migrations were enabled by advanced seafaring technology, such as outrigger canoes, which allowed Austronesian societies to traverse vast ocean distances. This expansion brought linguistic, genetic, and cultural continuity to the region, forming the basis of later maritime civilizations in Southeast Asia (Bellwood 1997). Stephen Oppenheimer builds on this with his theory of Sundaland as a cradle

of early human innovation and maritime culture. He argues that the end of the last Ice Age, around 10,000 BCE, led to rising sea levels that submerged much of Sundaland, transforming it into the island chains we see today. This environmental shift necessitated maritime adaptation, including the development of stilt houses ("water funnel houses") and seafaring technologies like cadic boats (Oppenheimer 1998).

The shared maritime heritage of the region extends beyond physical adaptations to include rich cultural traditions. Austronesian-speaking peoples developed complex seafaring skills, music, dance, and oral storytelling, much of which continues in modern maritime communities. The use of cadic boats and the symbolic role of water in rituals highlight the centrality of the sea in Austronesian culture. These shared practices laid the foundation for the rise of powerful maritime kingdoms like Srivijaya and Majapahit, which united the region through trade and cultural exchange (Davenport 2014).

The cultural and historical significance of maritime heritage is exemplified by two enduring symbols: the water village and the cadic boat. Water villages, seen across Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines, reflect the region's adaptation to its maritime environment. For example, Brunei Darussalam's earliest capital was a water village near Kampong Kota Batu, later moved to its present-day location along the Brunei River. Italian traveler Antonio Pigafetta described the vibrant water-based community during his visit in the 16th century (Kampong Ayer Cultural & Tourism Gallery 2024). Today, water villages continue to stand in Sabah (Malaysia), although they face identity crises and threats from modernization (Kanumoyoso 2018).

Figure 2. A view of the water village near Kampong Kota Batu in Brunei, illustrating the enduring legacy of traditional settlement patterns along the Brunei River.
Source: Field visit to Brunei (2024)

Figure 3. The author aboard a boat navigating the water village near Kampong Kota Batu in Brunei, providing a firsthand glimpse into the enduring maritime traditions along the Brunei River.
Source: Field visit to Brunei (2024)

Similarly, the cadic boat serves as a testament to the ingenuity of Austronesian societies. Its design, suited to the seas and islands of the region, enabled efficient trade and navigation, connecting the archipelago's communities and supporting the rise of trading emporiums during the early 18th century. While Indonesia is often credited as the birthplace of the cadic boat, its presence in Malaysia and the Philippines underscores its shared heritage. As a symbol of the region's maritime legacy, the cadic boat should be preserved not as the property of any one nation but as a "universal heritage" for all the countries of the archipelago (Saunders 2013).

The preservation of maritime heritage, including water villages and cadic boats, is essential to reviving the spirit of the archipelago. These shared symbols remind us of a time when the sea united rather than divided, fostering a collective identity that transcended modern national borders. Local scholars must play a critical role in restoring maritime dignity as a tool for regional unification, recognizing that "the pen is mightier than the sword." However, current research and writing often remain confined to national frameworks, overlooking the broader regional connections that define the archipelago's shared past (Sen 2014). By embracing the common history, culture, and arts of the maritime world, the nations of Southeast Asia can begin to move beyond fragmentation and toward a renewed spirit of regional unity. The sea, as both a physical and symbolic force, offers an enduring foundation for this vision, reminding us that the boundaries imposed by colonial histories can be transcended through the shared heritage of the archipelago.

Epilogue

In revisiting the maritime history of the Southeast Asian Archipelago, this study has argued that the sea has historically been a unifying force, connecting the diverse communities of the region through shared cultural, economic, and political interactions. Contrary to the modern perception of the sea as a boundary that separates nation-states, we have demonstrated that the maritime realm was central to the development of the region's collective identity. The shared history, culture, and heritage of maritime activities—including trade, navigation, and cultural exchanges—have long shaped the socio-political trajectories of the archipelago. These insights, drawn from historical, archaeological, and linguistic evidence, challenge us to reimagine the role of the sea in fostering regional unity amidst the fragmentation caused by colonial legacies and modern nation-state boundaries.

The central thesis of this study posits that the spirit of unity within the Southeast Asian Archipelago, once championed by figures like Patih Gadjah Mada, can be revived by emphasizing shared maritime heritage as a foundation for regional cooperation. This thesis aligns with the argument that the sea, far from being a separator, is an integral element of the region's identity. By reasserting the significance of maritime culture—such as the water villages, cadic boats, and Austronesian migration patterns—we propose that the region's nations can find common ground for cooperation, transcending the geopolitical divisions that have long hindered unification.

We argue that this shared maritime legacy is not merely historical but carries contemporary relevance. The challenges faced by the region—ranging from territorial disputes, overlapping maritime claims, and resource management issues—underscore the need for a unifying framework that respects the region's collective past while addressing modern realities. The maritime heritage of the region offers a model for such a framework, as it embodies centuries of cross-cultural interaction, economic interdependence, and shared environmental stewardship.

The key findings of this study are threefold. First, the Austronesian migrations and the concept of Sundaland provide a deep historical context for understanding the interconnectedness of the region. These migrations illustrate how early human societies adapted to and thrived in a maritime environment, developing technologies and cultural practices that remain influential today. Second, the shared symbols of maritime heritage, such as the water village and cadic boat, reflect a common cultural and historical foundation that transcends modern borders. Third, the colonial fragmentation of the archipelago, while disruptive, did not erase these shared maritime identities. Instead, it highlights the resilience of these connections, which can be leveraged to address present-day challenges.

The study's arguments also engage with theoretical frameworks that emphasize the dynamic nature of maritime history. Drawing from Peter Bellwood's Austronesian migration hypothesis and Stephen Oppenheimer's concept of Sundaland, we situate the archipelago within a broader historical and environmental context. These theories underscore the importance of understanding the region as a cohesive maritime system rather than a collection of isolated nation-states. Additionally, the historiographical approach employed here demonstrates that the archipelago's history is not merely a series of disconnected events but a continuous narrative of adaptation, innovation, and interaction.

In conclusion, the maritime history of the Southeast Asian Archipelago provides a compelling lens through which to understand the region's past and envision its future. The sea, as both a physical and symbolic entity, has always played a central role in shaping the identities and interactions of the region's peoples. By reviving and reinvigorating this shared maritime heritage, we propose that Southeast Asia can foster a renewed spirit of unity and cooperation, one that respects the diversity of its nations while building on their shared past. This vision, grounded in historical evidence and cultural understanding, offers a pathway to overcome the divisions of the modern era and to create a future where the archipelago is united not by borders, but by its enduring connection to the sea. As this study has demonstrated, the unifying potential of the sea is not just a historical reality but an enduring lesson for contemporary Southeast Asia. We must reframe our perception of the sea—not as a boundary that divides but as a bridge that connects, a source of shared identity, and a foundation for regional unity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Received: 5th December 2024
Accepted: 16th December 2024
Published: 30th December 2024