

Song and Dance over Cultural Heritage

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The latest spat started with a dance. When the Balinese pendet dance appeared in a recent advertisement promoting Malaysian tourism, Indonesia erupted.

Last week, there were a number of anti-Malaysia protests in towns and cities across Indonesia. And the day after Malaysia celebrated its independence on Aug 31, Indonesian hackers defaced more than 100 official Malaysian websites. Kuala Lumpur has apologised for the commercial, saying the mistake was made by a production house commissioned by Malaysia's Tourism Ministry. But Indonesians do not seem to have been mollified.

This incident comes at a time when Indonesia is claiming that many other cultural and artistic products from the country, such as batik fabric, have been 'stolen' or 'hijacked' by its neighbours.

If an unscrupulous businessman or company bought Indonesian batik, then removed the 'Made in Indonesia' label and replaced it with a 'Made in X' label, Indonesians would have justification for their anger. Legal action can and should be taken in such cases.

But for Indonesians to claim that batik per se - including the technique of wax-resistant dyeing - is solely Indonesian is to stretch the point.

We should remember that South-east Asia is one of the most diverse and fluid regions in the world. For thousands of years, it has been at the crossroads between China and India. This heritage is reflected in the richness of its cultures.

Unfortunately, the post-colonial histories of almost all South-east Asian states tend to over-emphasise the nation-state and its borders. This ignores the fact that the people of the region have long moved across the archipelago with ease, bringing - and leaving - their languages, beliefs and cultures.

It is ironic that the people of Asean now know little about one another. How many Indonesians realise that the Javanese language is still spoken in many parts of Malaysia? In both Malaysia and Singapore today, there are the descendants of Javanese, Sumatran, Bugis and Madurese migrants who settled in these countries centuries ago. Can one accuse Malaysia of 'stealing' the Javanese language? Surely not.

While batik did indeed emerge in Java, it was the most popular fabric for all the communities of South-east Asia, including Peranakan Chinese, Indians and Arabs as well as Eurasians and Westerners up to the mid-20th century. Batik may have reached its perfection in Java but it has also been produced in Sumatra, the Malay peninsula and southern Thailand. Batik production also existed in East Africa and even in Europe, where artists experimented with the fabric as a new art form in the decades between the two world wars.

We need to ask ourselves if it is even possible to copyright ideas, values and cultures in the first place. And if attempts were made to lay claim to the cultural origins of

certain ideas and arts, would we not be poorer as a result?

Indonesia today wishes to claim batik as its own, but what of the shadow-puppet theatre (wayang kulit) of Java and Bali, with its repertoire of stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the great epics of India? The stories are popular among Indonesians, Malaysians, Thais, Khmers, Lao and Burmese, though they originated from South Asia. What if India were to claim copyright over these tales? Would South-east Asians no longer be allowed to perform and enjoy them?

And on that score, let us not forget that the major cultural and belief systems that have shaped South-east Asian history - not least the influence of Buddhism and Hinduism in so many parts of Southeast Asia - also owe their origins to India. The Malay, Indonesian, Thai, Khmer, Lao and Burmese languages are also replete with words from Sanskrit and other South Asian languages and dialects.

One can sympathise with Indonesians who feel cheated in instances of downright plagiarism and imitation. Indonesia, like any nation, has the right to complain if its goods have been relabelled fraudulently. Yet South-east Asia is all the richer and more complex because of its shared historical and cultural roots. The commonalities of language, architecture, social norms and aesthetics should bridge the political gulf between countries instead of pushing them even further apart.

But this requires an understanding of the shared history of South-east Asia, which dates back to a time before the region was compartmentalised by modern nation-states. Addressing this complex past is an effort that is both academic and political.

We must recognise and promote an understanding of the region's collective history. And so, even if the political boundaries remain, the people of South-east Asia will once again be able to reconnect through culture and the arts.

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