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Myth, Memory, and Identity: A Study of folklore
and Nationalism in Southeast Asian States

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Abstract

This research explores how folklore shapes national identity and influences nationalist movements in Southeast Asian states, addressing the critical interplay between myth and collective memory in constructing state narratives. By analyzing how folklore serves as a vehicle for promoting national unity and cultural pride, this study seeks to elucidate the mechanisms through which folklore informs contemporary nationalist discourse. The primary contention proposed is that the intertwined relationship between myth and collective memory is instrumental in framing national identity, allowing for both the reinforcement of historical narratives and the mobilization of populations around shared cultural symbols. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data. Ethnographic interviews with community stakeholders and folklore practitioners serve as foundational qualitative resources, alongside an examination of relevant folklore texts and historical documents. The quantitative aspect is informed by surveys gauging public perceptions of nationalism and identity across various Southeast Asian states, providing a broader context for the qualitative findings. Limitations encountered included accessibility to specific historical texts and variance in local interpretations of folklore, which posed challenges in establishing a consistent framework for analysis. The findings suggest that folklore plays a pivotal role in reflecting and actively shaping national consciousness in Southeast Asia. It was observed that state can leverage narratives rooted in myth to foster a sense of belonging and collective identity, especially during sociopolitical upheaval. Ultimately, this study underscores the significance of folklore as a dynamic component in constructing national identities, revealing broader implications for understanding the interplay between culture and politics in a region characterized by diverse ethnic landscapes and historical complexities.

Keywords: *Collective Memory, Culture, folklore, Identity, Myth, Nationalism, Southeast Asia.*

Introduction

In Southeast Asia, the relationship between folklore, national identity, and nationalism is a compelling and multifaceted topic that warrants careful exploration. This region, known for its diverse ethnicities, languages, and traditions, has witnessed nationalist movements that frequently draw on cultural narratives and myths to cultivate a shared sense of identity. Often perceived as a relic of the past, folklore is a dynamic and evolving element of cultural identity, playing a significant role in shaping national narratives and fostering communal bonds. In an era marked by globalization and technological change, understanding how folklore intersects with nationalism is crucial, particularly in a region with a complex colonial history and ongoing struggles for independence.

Southeast Asia's postcolonial states have often turned to myths and folklore as tools for nation-building, using them to unify diverse populations and articulate visions for the future. Scholars like Benedict Anderson have highlighted the role of shared stories and collective memories in creating "imagined communities" where individuals feel connected despite never meeting. This theoretical perspective provides a valuable framework for examining how folklore influences national identity in Southeast Asia. However, while existing research has explored political movements or cultural narratives in isolation, the interplay between folklore and nationalism remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by investigating how folklore shapes national identity and informs nationalist movements in the region.

The central research problem guiding this study is, *how folklore influences national identity and nationalist movements in Southeast Asia*. In order to answer this question, this study examines the relationship between myth and collective memory, with particular emphasis on its role in constructing state narratives. The research aims to uncover their role in shaping contemporary national identities by analyzing specific folklore narratives. Additionally, it examines how nationalist movements use folklore to mobilize populations and foster unity. Finally, the study evaluates how public perceptions of nationalism are shaped by folkloric expressions and collective memories, employing qualitative and quantitative methods to understand these dynamics comprehensively.

This research holds significant academic and practical value. Academically, it contributes to the literature on nationalism and identity by integrating discussions of folklore, myth, and memory, particularly in a postcolonial context. Practically, it offers insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners navigating issues of identity and unity in increasingly diverse societies. Furthermore, the study has the potential to inform cross-cultural dialogues and promote

intercultural understanding in a global context marked by rising nationalism and xenophobia.

The paper is structured to address the research problem and achieve its objectives systematically. It begins with a literature review that situates the study within existing scholarship on folklore, nationalism, and identity. Next, the methodology section outlines the qualitative and quantitative approaches used to collect and analyze data. The analysis section explores specific folklore narratives and their implications for national identity across Southeast Asia, supported by case studies that illustrate broader themes. The discussion synthesizes the findings, highlighting how folklore influences collective identity and nationalist movements in the region. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key findings and their implications for future research and practical applications.

Literature Review

The role of folklore in shaping national identity in Southeast Asia is a testament to the unique cultural context and the power of collective memory. The region's diverse cultures, languages, and histories provide a rich tapestry for examining how folklore influences national identity. Folklore, which includes myths, legends, traditional beliefs, and oral narratives, serves as a cultural remnant and a potent tool for constructing collective identities, shaping memory, and fostering social unity in nations marked by colonial histories and ethnic diversity. As a repository of communal memories, folklore allows societies to navigate their historical evolution and assert their identities in an era of globalization and modernity. Scholars have extensively explored the role of folklore in nation-building processes in Southeast Asia, particularly how these narratives underpin national myths and collective memory. For instance, Anderson (1983) emphasizes how nations are 'imagined communities' formed through shared stories and narratives, which foster a sense of belonging among individuals. Similarly, Ong (1996) and Rosaldo (1986) have highlighted how folk narratives reflect and reinforce power dynamics, socio-political structures, and the experiences of marginalized communities. These studies reveal that folklore can inspire unity and aggregate divisions, especially in multi-ethnic societies where competing narratives vie for dominance. The resurgence of nationalism in Southeast Asia, driven by economic and political changes, has renewed interest in folklore as a tool for cultural revival and resistance. Scholars like Bunnell (2004) have shown how folk traditions are increasingly mobilized in nationalist rhetoric, influencing public policy and educational curricula to cultivate national consciousness. However, while much research has focused on the political use of folklore, there is a pressing need for more nuanced studies on how individual and collective identities evolve through interactions with folklore over time, particularly in digital media and transnationalism. This is especially true in the context of diasporic and cross-border communities, where traditional narratives are both

preserved and transformed, highlighting the evolving nature of folklore in a globalized world.

By identifying gaps in the literature, this review aims to guide future research and deepen our understanding of how myth, memory, and identity converge in the region. The study of myth, memory, and identity in Southeast Asia has evolved significantly over the 20th and 21st centuries. In the mid-20th century, scholars like David Kang examined the historical ties between nationalism and cultural memory, suggesting that local traditions could be harnessed for nation-building (Rangarajan, 2023). This period emphasized indigenous folklore as a means to forge national identity in the wake of colonialism. As Southeast Asian nations gained independence, the focus shifted to reclaiming local histories, with folklore studies highlighting how traditional stories and myths shaped new national narratives. For example, the Meitei people of Manipur redefined their identity through oral histories blending Indigenous and Hindu elements (Vang, 2019) reflecting broader efforts to reconcile colonial histories with contemporary national narratives (Wang, 2018).

In the 21st century, the discourse has expanded to include critical examinations of how folklore intersects with political ideologies and conflicts. Recent studies reveal that state-sponsored narratives can uphold and undermine folkloric traditions, illustrating the dual role of these narratives in reflecting and shaping societal identities. Globalization has further complicated this dynamic, as local folklore increasingly interacts with global narratives, leading to a more prosperous but complex understanding of identity formation. These developments emphasize the enduring relevance of folklore in contemporary Southeast Asian contexts, highlighting the enduring nature of folklore in shaping national identity. Folklore plays a crucial role in shaping collective memory and cultural identity, serving as a medium through which communities articulate their historical experiences. For instance, the Meitei folklore, which blends Hindu and indigenous elements, reflects their colonial past and ongoing societal changes (Rangarajan, 2023). In Thailand, folklore reinforces national identity amid global influences (Vang, 2019). At the same time, the music of indigenous Filipino groups illustrates how cultural expressions can reflect shared histories and moral universes (Wang, 2018). Similarly, the epic narratives of the Miao people demonstrate how folklore preserves history in the face of political change (Brehm, 2018, p. 104-119). However, gaps remain in understanding how these narratives adapt to or resist dominant national discourses, particularly regarding the role of state institutions in shaping folkloric traditions and their impact on ethnic minorities (Mendoza, et al, 2012, p. 457-460). These tensions highlight the need for further research into how folklore influences contemporary identity politics.

Researchers studying folklore, nationalism, and identity in Southeast Asia have employed diverse methodological approaches, each offering unique insights. Ethnographic methods have

been particularly valuable in uncovering local narratives and practices, revealing how folklore is an archive for collective memory and socio-political identity (M Mora, 2005). On the other hand, historical analyses critique official histories that often marginalize complex local identities, as seen in Indonesia's decolonization process studies. Comparative approaches have enabled scholars to examine how regional dynamics influence national identities, while literary analyses explore how folklore is represented in literature, revealing tensions in national identity formation (Fairlee, 2011, p. 329-330) (Yuan J et al., 2012, p. 119-149). Despite these contributions, gaps remain in understanding how folklore adapts to modernity, particularly in rapidly changing political landscapes. Future interdisciplinary research integrating performance studies and cultural sociology could provide deeper insights into these dynamics (Mora, 2005). Theoretical perspectives on folklore and nationalism in Southeast Asia have enriched our understanding of this complex relationship. Constructivist theory, for example, hypothesizes that national identity is socially constructed through shared narratives, myths, and memories (Rangarajan, 2023). This framework is beneficial in analyzing how Southeast Asian societies use folklore to assert cultural uniqueness and national solidarity (Vang, 2019). Narrative theory further emphasizes the role of storytelling in shaping collective memory, highlighting how folklore can glorify a nation's past while serving political agendas (Wang, 2018). Memory studies, meanwhile, focus on how traumatic histories shape national consciousness, with cultural narratives binding communities together in opposition to external threats (Fairlee, 2011, p. 329-330). These theoretical approaches reveal significant gaps in the literature, particularly regarding the impact of globalization on local folklore and identity politics, pointing to the need for further research.

This literature review has explored the relationship between folklore, nationalism, and identity in Southeast Asia, emphasizing how myths and collective memories shape national identity. Folklore is a cultural remnant and a dynamic tool for constructing social narratives and political ideologies. Scholars like Anderson and Ong have demonstrated how folklore fosters collective consciousness, articulating diverse communities' shared aspirations and historical experiences. However, gaps remain in understanding how folklore operates in diasporic contexts and adapts to globalization. Future research should explore these areas, employing interdisciplinary approaches to deepen our understanding of Southeast Asia's evolving interplay between myth, memory, and identity.

1. The Interplay of Myth and Collective Memory in Southeast Asian Nationalism

The intricate interplay of myth and collective memory serves as a fundamental component of nationalism in Southeast Asia, where folk narratives not only reflect cultural heritage but also actively shape contemporary national identities. Myths in this context function as vessels

of historical consciousness, enabling communities to anchor their identity in a shared past that goes beyond individual experiences. This communal memory is essential in fostering solidarity among diverse ethno linguistic groups, particularly in a postcolonial context burdened with the legacies of fragmentation and external domination. Folklore, thus, acts as a unifying force that reinforces a standard narrative, providing a framework within which individuals can locate their identities and align their aspirations with national goals. The capacity of myth to adapt to changing circumstances further enhances its relevance as states manipulate these narratives to activate support for nationalist endeavors. This adaptation is particularly observable during socio-political turmoil, when governments may invoke historical tales of heroism, sacrifice, or cultural superiority to inspire patriotism and resilience among their populations. In light of this, it is critical to analyze how specific folklore narratives are harnessed to articulate national identity across various Southeast Asian contexts. For instance, stories of national heroes who embody the ideals of bravery and justice are frequently cited during political campaigns or national celebrations, becoming emblematic of the virtues a state seeks to cultivate among its populace. Such mythical figures serve as idealized representations of national character and as cultural touchstones that reinforce narratives of unity in diversity. Therefore, blending myth and memory facilitates a collective understanding of belonging to a nation, concretizing the drives toward national cohesion amidst diverse cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, the politicization of folklore in this region underscores the mechanisms through which specific memories, often sidelining contradictory or marginalized narratives that do not align with the dominant national identity. This selective memory can lead to the construction of an idealized national past that simplifies complex histories, thereby shaping public perceptions of nationhood and identity. Nation-states often engage in what can be termed “mythmaking,” utilizing folklore to anoint specific historical interpretations as the “truth” while delegitimizing others. This process is particularly salient in countries where the collective memory is fraught with conflict or division, as governments seek to foster national alignment and inhibit dissenting voices. The implications of this interplay manifest in the socio-political landscapes of Southeast Asia, where individuals increasingly express their identities through the lens of national folklore, reflecting both pride and uncertainty. The resurgence of interest in local myths and legends serves simultaneously as both a cultural affirmation and a response to globalization, which poses threats to traditional identities. Thus, contemporary national movements often leverage folklore to galvanize popular support, frame collective goals, and challenge colonial narratives that have historically marginalized indigenous voices.

Further complicating this framework is the role of transnational cultures, which interact with local folklore, blending mythic elements from different origins and creating hybrid cultural identities. This phenomenon illustrates how folklore is not static but a fluid element that evolves in response to internal and external influences. In this light, globalization does not necessarily diminish the significance of local folklore; instead, it presents opportunities for reshaping and revitalizing national stories, allowing for a more inclusive approach to identity that encompasses the multifaceted nature of Southeast Asian societies. In conclusion, exploring the interplay between myth and collective memory within the context of Southeast Asian nationalism reveals its profound impact on national identity construction. The strategic use of folklore as a tool for national cohesion brings to the forefront questions regarding authenticity, representation, and the inherent dynamics of power in shaping cultural narratives. By revealing how states wield folklore to foster nationalist sentiment, this analysis contributes significantly to a broader understanding of how culture and politics intertwine in the intricate fabric of Southeast Asian identities, providing key insights for future research into the connections between cultural traditions and contemporary nationalisms.

1.1. Defining Myth and Memory: Theoretical Frameworks

The interplay between myth and collective memory is a cornerstone of nationalism in Southeast Asia, where folk narratives not only reflect cultural heritage but also actively shape modern national identities. Myths serve as vessels of historical consciousness, allowing communities to root their identity in a shared past that surpasses individual experiences. Folklore, in this sense, acts as a unifying force, providing a standard narrative that helps individuals connect their identities to national goals. The adaptability of myths to changing circumstances further enhances their relevance, as states often reshape these narratives to rally support for nationalist causes.

To understand this dynamic, examining how specific folklore narratives articulate national identity across Southeast Asia is important. For example, stories of national heroes—symbolizing bravery and justice—are frequently highlighted during political campaigns or national celebrations. These figures become cultural symbols, embodying the virtues a nation seeks to promote and reinforce narratives of unity amid diversity. By blending myth and memory, communities develop a shared sense of belonging, strengthening national cohesion despite cultural differences. This sense of belonging and shared identity is a testament to the unifying power of folklore in Southeast Asia. However, the politicization of folklore also reveals how selectively curate memories, often sidelining narratives that challenge the dominant national identity. This selective memory can create an idealized version of the past, simplifying complex histories and shaping public perceptions of nationhood. Governments engage in what might be called ‘mythmaking,’ using

folklore to legitimize specific historical interpretations while marginalizing others. This process is especially significant in countries with histories of conflict or division, where states aim to foster national unity and suppress dissenting voices. The impact of this dynamic is evident in Southeast Asia, where individuals increasingly express their identities through the lens of national folklore, reflecting both pride and ambivalence. Adding to this complexity is the influence of transnational cultures, which interact with local folklore to create hybrid identities. This phenomenon shows that folklore is not static but evolves in response to internal and external influences. Rather than diminishing the importance of local folklore, globalization offers opportunities to reshape and revitalize national stories, allowing for a more inclusive approach to identity that reflects the diversity of Southeast Asian societies.

In conclusion, the relationship between myth and collective memory plays a significant role in shaping national identity in Southeast Asia. The strategic use of folklore as a tool for national unity raises important questions about authenticity, representation, and power dynamics in cultural narratives. By examining how states use folklore to promote nationalism, this analysis contributes to a broader understanding of the intersection between culture and politics in Southeast Asia. It also underscores the need for further research into how cultural traditions influence contemporary forms of nationalism, given the evolving role of folklore in shaping national identity.

1.2. Folklore as a Vehicle for National Identity Construction

Folklore plays a crucial role in shaping national identity, especially in Southeast Asia, where cultural narratives and nationalistic sentiment are deeply intertwined with diverse traditions and practices. As previous sections have shown, the connection between myth and collective memory is key to understanding how these stories highlight shared historical experiences and create a sense of belonging among different ethnic groups. In many Southeast Asian societies, folklore is more than just a collection of tales—it is a living repository of values, customs, and historical narratives that reflect the nation's social fabric. These stories preserve the collective past and embody ideals and aspirations that resonate with modern national identity. For example, national epics and legends provide a foundational mythology that legitimizes the nation-state, weaving various cultural threads into a unified identity celebrated through education, media, and public discourse. This way, folklore acts as a cultural glue, binding individuals together under a shared historical narrative.

To understand how folklore shapes national identity, it is important to examine the role of state in promoting specific narratives. Governments often use folklore as a strategic tool to foster patriotism and unity, particularly during times of crisis or social change. State leaders shape

public perceptions of the nation's history and culture by emphasizing certain myths and stories, creating a collective memory that reinforces a dominant national identity. For instance, rituals, ceremonies, and commemorative events centered on folklore celebrate cultural heritage and rally citizens around the themes of resilience, unity, and pride. These performances create emotional connections among individuals, turning abstract ideas of citizenship into tangible experiences that strengthen loyalty to the nation. However, the role of folklore in national identity construction is not limited to state efforts. Local communities also play an active part in reinterpreting and revitalizing folklore in response to contemporary challenges. In Southeast Asia, where globalization threatens traditional practices, communities often revive and adapt folklore to assert their cultural identity in an increasingly homogenized world. These adaptations can strengthen local identities while aligning with national narratives, highlighting the complex relationship between local cultures and national identities. Folklore thus becomes a space for negotiation, where the preservation of cultural heritage coexists with the desire for national belonging. This dynamic shows how folklore reflects collective historical memories and the ongoing tensions within evolving national identities.

The enduring power of folklore lies in its ability to resonate across generations, maintaining a sense of historical continuity essential for national identity. As stories are retold and adapted, they remain relevant while preserving core elements that give them meaning. Storytelling becomes a dynamic practice through which individuals negotiate their identities—not only about their regional or ethnic backgrounds but also in connection to the broader national identity. Additionally, as folklore is shared and disseminated, it fosters intercultural dialogue and promotes understanding among diverse groups within the nation, contributing to a more inclusive sense of identity. The role of folklore in shaping national identity is particularly evident in education, where folklore is often integrated into history and literature curriculums. These educational practices reinforce the importance of folklore in teaching values of patriotism and social cohesion to younger generations. Doing so ensures the continuity of myths central to the national narrative, elevating folklore from mere entertainment to a vital component of national consciousness.

1.3. Case Studies: folklore and Nationalism in Specific Southeast Asian States

The relationship between folklore and nationalism in Southeast Asia can be understood through specific case studies that highlight the interplay of myth, memory, and national identity. These examples demonstrate how folklore is not just a reflection of cultural heritage but also a dynamic tool for shaping national narratives and fostering unity.

1.3.1. Indonesia: The Ramayana Epic and National Unity

The Ramayana, one of the world's great epics, is central to Indonesian culture, particularly in Java, Bali, and other regions where Hinduism and traditional animist beliefs have historically flourished. In Indonesia, the Ramayana is not merely a religious or literary text but a living tradition adapted and reinterpreted to reflect local values, histories, and identities. Its role in shaping national unity and identity is profound, as it serves as a cultural bridge that connects diverse ethnic and religious groups under a shared narrative of heroism, morality, and resilience. The Ramayana was introduced to Indonesia through Indian traders and scholars around the first millennium CE, during the period of Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia (Mahulikar, 2002). Over time, the epic was localized, blending with indigenous traditions and beliefs to create uniquely Indonesian versions of the story. For example, in Java, the Ramayana was adapted into the Kakawin Ramayana, a poetic rendition written in Old Javanese during the 9th century. This adaptation incorporated Javanese cultural elements, such as the importance of harmony (*rukun*) and the integration of local deities and spirits into the narrative. The Ramayana's themes of loyalty, duty, and the triumph of good over evil resonated deeply with Indonesian audiences, making it a cornerstone of cultural expression. Its stories were performed in traditional art forms such as *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry), *wayang wong* (dance drama) and *sendratari* (ballet), which became vehicles for transmitting moral and cultural values across generations (Bagaskara et al., 2024).

One of the most significant ways the Ramayana has been used to foster national unity is through *wayang kulit*, the traditional shadow puppet theatre. *Wayang kulit* performances are not just entertainment but also a form of cultural education and spiritual reflection. The puppeteer (*dalang*) narrates the story, accompanied by a *gamelan* orchestra, and uses intricately crafted leather puppets to bring the epic to life. The *dalang* often adapts the story to address contemporary issues, making the Ramayana relevant to modern audiences. The Indonesian government has actively promoted *wayang kulit* as a national art form, recognizing its potential to unify the country's diverse population. For example, during the Sukarno era (1967–1945), *wayang kulit* was used to promote the ideals of the newly independent nation, such as unity (*persatuan*) and social justice. The government sponsored performances in rural and urban areas, ensuring the Ramayana reached a wide audience. By framing the epic as a symbol of national identity, Indonesia created a shared cultural narrative that transcended regional and religious differences. The Ramayana's adaptability has made it a powerful tool for constructing national identity. The epic is often reinterpreted in Indonesia to reflect local values and historical contexts. For instance, the character of Hanuman, the monkey god, is particularly revered in Java and Bali. In

Javanese versions of the Ramayana, Hanuman is depicted as a symbol of loyalty, strength, and devotion, embodying the ideal of service to the nation. His adventures are often emphasized in performances, making him a relatable and inspiring figure for Indonesian audiences. Similarly, the hero of the epic, Rama, is portrayed as a just and wise leader who upholds *dharma* (moral duty). This portrayal resonates with Indonesian ideals of leadership, particularly in the context of the nation's struggle for independence and subsequent efforts to build a unified state.

By celebrating Rama's virtues, the Ramayana reinforces values such as integrity, responsibility, and unity, which are essential for national cohesion. In contemporary Indonesia, the Ramayana is vital in shaping national identity. The epic is celebrated in festivals, such as the annual Ramayana Ballet in Yogyakarta (Caturwati et al., 2022), attracting domestic and international audiences. This large-scale performance, held against the backdrop of the Prambanan Temple, combines traditional dance, music, and storytelling to bring the epic to life. The Ramayana Ballet is a cultural spectacle and a symbol of Indonesia's rich heritage and its ability to adapt ancient traditions to modern contexts. The Indonesian government has also integrated the Ramayana into educational curricula, ensuring that younger generations know its stories and values. Schools often organize field trips to *wayang kulit* performances or Ramayana ballets, providing students with a tangible connection to their cultural heritage. By teaching the Ramayana, Indonesia reinforces its national narrative and fosters a sense of pride and belonging among its citizens.

1.3.2. The Philippines: Jose Rizal as a Symbol of National Struggle

Jose Rizal is more than just a historical figure in the Philippines; he is a national symbol whose life, works, and martyrdom have been mythologized to inspire patriotism and resistance against oppression (Morris, 2003). As a writer, physician, and nationalist, Rizal played a crucial role in awakening Filipino consciousness through his literary masterpieces, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. These works, which exposed the injustices of Spanish colonial rule, not only stirred the Filipino spirit but also influenced revolutionary leaders such as Andrés Bonifacio and Emilio Aguinaldo. His execution on December 30, 1896, in Bagumbayan (now Luneta Park) transformed him into a martyr and became a rallying point for the Philippine Revolution. Although he was not directly involved in the armed struggle, his writings and ideas were a significant inspiration for those who fought for independence. Rizal's legacy as a national hero is rooted in historical events in the way in which his image has been shaped by folklore, national memory, and cultural narratives. Over time, Rizal's story has been elevated to near-mythical proportions, with various legends reinforcing his image as an extraordinary figure. Some stories depict him as a prophet who foresaw his death, deliberately positioning his body to fall facing the rising sun, symbolizing the dawn of Philippine independence (Quibuyen, 1997). Others highlight his healing skills,

claiming he possessed medical knowledge beyond his time, enhancing his image as a wise and benevolent figure. More radical beliefs have even portrayed him as a messianic figure, leading to the formation of *Rizalista* religious sects that venerate him as a divine being. Some myths suggest that Rizal faked his execution and escaped into exile, later guiding the country under a new identity. While these stories are historically unfounded, they reflect the Filipinos' deep-rooted reverence for him, embedding him in the country's cultural consciousness. It is important to note that these myths are not historically accurate, but they do reflect the deep reverence Filipinos have for Rizal, which has embedded him in the country's cultural consciousness.

The Philippine government has institutionalized Rizal's legacy to reinforce national identity and civic duty. His life and works are mandatory school subjects through Republic Act No. 1425, known as the Rizal Law. This law, enacted in 1956, mandates the teaching of the life, works, and writings of Rizal in all schools, public and private, to ensure that students learn about his contributions to the nation. His image appears on Philippine peso banknotes and coins, and monuments dedicated to him stand in every major city. The Rizal Monument in Luneta Park, where his remains are enshrined, is one of the most iconic landmarks in the country. Every year, Rizal Day (December 30) is a national holiday to commemorate his sacrifice, while his birthday, June 19, is also celebrated with various educational and cultural events. His influence extends to popular culture, inspiring numerous films, plays, and literary works that continue to portray him as the ultimate embodiment of Filipino nationalism and heroism. Even in contemporary times, Rizal's ideals remain not just relevant but crucial in national identity, governance, and social reform discussions. His advocacy for education, civic responsibility, and moral leadership is not a relic of the past but a guiding principle for movements that address corruption, poverty, and inequality. Political leaders frequently invoke his name, urging Filipinos to emulate his sense of duty and integrity in nation-building. His message of self-determination and empowerment resonates in ongoing struggles for sovereignty, human rights, and historical truth. Rizal's story is not just a relic of the past but a living force that continues to shape the aspirations and ideals of the Filipino people.

Ultimately, Jose Rizal's transformation from a historical figure into a national folk hero illustrates the power of storytelling in shaping nationalism. His life and martyrdom have been mythologized to create a lasting symbol of hope, resilience, and national unity. Through literature, education, and cultural narratives, Rizal remains deeply ingrained in Filipino consciousness, serving as a moral compass and a source of inspiration for future generations. His legacy is a testament to the enduring power of ideas and the profound impact of individuals who dedicate their lives to the cause of freedom and justice.

1.3.3. Thailand: The Sufficiency Economy and Traditional Values

Thailand's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP), introduced by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, is deeply rooted in traditional Thai values and has become a cornerstone of the nation's economic and social policies (Whietley, 2010). This philosophy emphasizes moderation, self-reliance, and sustainable development, aligning with Buddhist principles of balance and ethical living. It was initially proposed in response to economic crises and globalization, advocating a middle path between excessive materialism and economic vulnerability. SEP has since evolved into a guiding principle for Thailand's development, influencing governance through its emphasis on ethical decision-making, agriculture by promoting sufficiency farming methods, education by instilling values of self-discipline and sustainability, and community resilience by encouraging self-reliance. By framing these traditional values as a means of achieving long-term national stability, Thailand has successfully integrated folklore, ethical teachings, and modern economic strategies into a cohesive national identity.

The tale of *Phra Aphai Mani*, a classic Thai epic written by Sunthorn Phu, is one example of how traditional folklore reflects the ideals of SEP. The story follows the journey of Phra Aphai Mani, a prince who learns the importance of wisdom, patience, and moral integrity over material wealth and power. Throughout his adventures, he faces challenges that test his resilience, resourcefulness, and ethical decision-making—qualities that resonate with the principles of SEP. Like many other Thai folk tales, the story teaches that true prosperity comes not from greed or conquest but from sustainable and ethical living. By drawing connections between folklore and modern economic policies, Thailand has reinforced the idea that its development model is deeply rooted in the country's cultural and moral heritage. The Thai government has actively promoted SEP as a national strategy, incorporating it into policies addressing economic inequality, environmental conservation, and rural development. It has been particularly influential in agriculture, where farmers are encouraged to adopt sufficiency farming methods, such as mixed-crop cultivation, organic farming, and water conservation techniques, reducing dependence on external resources and market fluctuations. The philosophy is also applied to education, where schools integrate SEP principles into their curricula by teaching subjects like ethics, sustainability, and community responsibility, thereby instilling these values in young generations. Even in urban areas, businesses and policymakers use SEP to encourage ethical entrepreneurship, fair trade, and corporate social responsibility.

Internationally, Thailand has promoted SEP as a model for sustainable development, sharing its principles with other nations, especially in Southeast Asia. This promotion has taken various forms, including hosting international conferences, providing technical assistance to other

countries, and participating in global sustainability initiatives. The United Nations recognized SEP in 2006 as an effective strategy for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting Thailand's success in applying traditional wisdom to contemporary global challenges. The philosophy's emphasis on local empowerment, environmental stewardship, and ethical governance aligns with modern discourses on sustainability, making it a relevant and adaptable framework for economic and social development beyond Thailand's borders.

The enduring success of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy demonstrates how traditional values and folklore can be effectively mobilized to address modern challenges while reinforcing national identity. By integrating cultural heritage into state policies, Thailand has created a narrative that resonates across all sectors of society, fostering unity, resilience, and long-term prosperity. The philosophy's legacy continues to shape Thailand's approach to development, proving that traditional wisdom, when adapted thoughtfully, can provide enduring solutions in an ever-changing world.

1.3.4. Cambodia: Angkor Wat as a Symbol of Resilience

Angkor Wat is a powerful symbol of national identity and resilience in Cambodia, representing both the grandeur of the ancient Khmer Empire and the nation's ability to overcome historical adversities. Built in the early 12th century during the reign of King Suryavarman II, Angkor Wat was initially dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. However, with the gradual transition of the Khmer Empire to Buddhism, Angkor Wat also transformed into a Buddhist temple (Norindr, 2006). This religious shift is reflected in its massive structure, intricate bas-reliefs, and celestial alignment, which signify the empire's prosperity and advanced engineering capabilities. Over the centuries, Angkor Wat became more than just a religious monument—it evolved into a cultural and national icon that continues to inspire Cambodians, reinforcing a sense of pride and continuity with their past. Despite its historical significance, Angkor Wat and its surrounding temples have witnessed periods of decline, neglect, and destruction. During Cambodia's colonial occupation, civil wars, and the brutal Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), the temple complex suffered looting, vandalism, and deterioration. Priceless artifacts were stolen, carvings were defaced, and the structures were left to decay, mirroring the country's struggles for survival. However, in the decades following Cambodia's recovery from war and genocide, Angkor Wat emerged as a unifying symbol of national resilience. The Cambodian government strategically incorporated Angkor Wat into its nationalist discourse, using it as a focal point for rebuilding national identity and fostering unity among its people. The temple's presence on the national flag—the only country in the world to feature a UNESCO heritage site on its flag—demonstrates its unparalleled importance in the Cambodian consciousness.

Myths and legends surrounding Angkor Wat further reinforce its role as a symbol of resilience and divine protection. The legend of the *Naga*, a mythical serpent often associated with Angkor Wat, is deeply ingrained in Khmer folklore. According to local beliefs, the Khmer people are descendants of a *Naga* princess and an Indian Brahmin, symbolizing a sacred link between Cambodia's people and their divine origins. The *Naga* is also seen as a guardian spirit, representing strength, renewal, and protection—qualities that resonate deeply with Cambodia's history of struggle and recovery. By intertwining historical grandeur with mythological significance, Cambodians have strengthened their collective memory and cultural pride, ensuring that Angkor Wat remains an enduring source of inspiration. In recent decades, Angkor Wat has played a pivotal role in Cambodia's economic and cultural revival, primarily through tourism and heritage conservation. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992, the temple attracts millions of visitors annually, generating revenue and employment while raising global awareness of Cambodia's rich history. The government and international organizations have made significant investments in its preservation, ensuring that the site remains a testament to Cambodia's resilience and cultural continuity. Educational programs in schools underscore the historical and symbolic significance of Angkor Wat, instilling a sense of national pride in younger generations and fostering optimism for Cambodia's future.

Beyond its role in tourism and cultural heritage, Angkor Wat has become a rallying symbol for national recovery and modernization, linking Cambodia's ancient past with its aspirations for a stable and prosperous future. Its image is used in everything from official documents and banknotes to political speeches and national celebrations, reinforcing that Cambodia, like Angkor Wat, has withstood the test of time. The temple serves as a reassuring reminder of Cambodia's strength, endurance, and ability to rise from hardship, making it not just a historical monument but a living testament to the resilience of the Cambodian people.

1.3.5. Vietnam: The Legend of the Dragon and the Fairy

The Legend of the Dragon and the Fairy (*Lạc Long Quân* and *Âu Cơ*) is one of Vietnam's most revered foundational myths, deeply embedded in the nation's cultural and political identity. This legend tells the story of *Lạc Long Quân*, a dragon lord from the sea, and *Âu Cơ*, a fairy princess from the mountains, who fell in love and gave birth to a hundred sons (VIETNAM.COM, n.d.). Eventually, they decided to part ways—*Lạc Long Quân* took fifty sons to the coastal regions, while *Âu Cơ* led the other fifty to the mountains. Their eldest son became the first *Hùng King*, founding the *Hồng Bàng* Dynasty, which is considered the beginning of Vietnamese civilization. This myth is not merely a tale of origins but a profound symbol of unity, resilience, and national identity, reinforcing the belief that all Vietnamese people, despite regional differences, share a

common ancestry. The legend has been actively incorporated into Vietnam's national discourse, serving as a unifying narrative in historical and modern contexts. The division of *Lạc Long Quân* and *Âu Cơ*'s children into coastal and mountainous regions symbolizes the diverse geography of Vietnam and the harmony between different ethnic and regional groups. Despite the physical separation, the myth underscores the idea that Vietnamese people, whether from the lowlands or the highlands, are part of one extended family, bound by shared heritage and cultural values. This notion of unity has been particularly significant during times of conflict, such as the struggles against Chinese domination, French colonial rule, and the Vietnam War. By invoking the legend, leaders, and scholars have reinforced the message of national solidarity and collective resilience in the face of external threats.

The *Hùng* Kings, the descendants of *Lạc Long Quân* and *Âu Cơ*, are venerated as the founding rulers of Vietnam. Their reign, which began with the first *Hùng* King, is considered the beginning of Vietnamese civilization. Their legacy is commemorated annually during the *Hùng* Kings' Festival (*Giỗ tổ Hùng Vương*) on the 10th day of the third lunar month. This festival, recognized as a national holiday, sees thousands of Vietnamese people making pilgrimages to the *Hùng* Kings' Temple in *Phú Thọ* Province, paying tribute to their ancestors. The government actively promotes this tradition to strengthen national consciousness and historical continuity, emphasizing that Vietnam's cultural and political roots extend back thousands of years. The festival also reinforces the importance of filial piety and respect for ancestors, key values in Vietnamese society. In addition to fostering unity, the legend of the Dragon and the Fairy embodies ideals of strength, perseverance, and patriotism, which continue to shape Vietnam's national identity. The dragon symbolizes power, courage, and adaptability, while the fairy represents grace, wisdom, and harmony—qualities often emphasized in Vietnamese cultural and political narratives. The dragon, a symbol of power and courage, is often associated with the ruling class and the nation's strength. The fairy, on the other hand, represents grace, wisdom, and harmony, and is often associated with the nation's cultural and spiritual values. The story has been featured in school curriculums, literature, and official speeches, ensuring that future generations recognize their shared heritage. Vietnamese leaders have often referenced the legend to instill a sense of duty and resilience in the population, particularly during periods of war, economic hardship, and modernization.

Beyond its political and cultural significance, the legend reflects Vietnam's deep connection to nature and the environment. The myth's depiction of the union between the sea (*Lạc Long Quân*) and the mountains (*Âu Cơ*) mirrors Vietnam's geographical landscape, emphasizing the balance between land and water. This harmony is reflected in traditional Vietnamese agricultural practices, particularly wet rice cultivation, which has sustained the country's economy for centuries. By

embracing this legend, Vietnam strengthens its national identity and fosters a cultural appreciation for its natural environment. Today, the legend of the Dragon and the Fairy remains a cornerstone of Vietnamese national pride, reminding the country of its deep-rooted history, unity, and resilience. It is frequently referenced in national celebrations, political rhetoric, and educational materials, reinforcing that a common lineage connects all Vietnamese people. Whether in peace or struggle, the legend serves as a powerful inspiration, fostering a sense of collective strength and proving that folklore remains a potent force in shaping and sustaining national identity.

1.3.6. Malaysia: Hang Tuah and National Heroism

The legend of *Hang Tuah*, a figure from the 15th century Malacca Sultanate, is a cornerstone of Malaysian national identity. His unwavering loyalty, martial prowess, and wisdom, as depicted in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, have shaped Malaysia's understanding of courage, duty, and resilience. While historians continue to debate whether *Hang Tuah* was a historical figure or a mythical hero, his cultural and political significance is undisputed, making him a central figure in Malaysia's national identity. One of the most poignant episodes in *Hang Tuah's* story is his tragic duel with his childhood friend and fellow warrior, *Hang Jebat* (Nanney, 1988). Falsely accused of treason, *Hang Tuah* was secretly spared by the Sultan, while *Hang Jebat*, believing his friend had been unjustly executed, rebelled against the ruler. When *Hang Tuah* was reinstated, he was ordered to kill *Hang Jebat*, leading to a dramatic and tragic confrontation. This episode embodies the Malay concept of loyalty (*kesetiaan*) and duty to the ruler (*Daulat raja*)—themes that have been deeply ingrained in Malaysia's political and cultural consciousness.

The Malaysian government has actively promoted *Hang Tuah's* legend as a source of national pride and unity, particularly in reinforcing Malay cultural identity. His story is taught in schools, depicted in literature, and performed in *bangsawan* (Malay opera) and traditional theater. *Hang Tuah's* famous declaration, "*Takkan Melayu hilang di dunia*," meaning "Malays will never vanish from the world," has become a powerful rallying cry for Malay nationalism and cultural preservation. This phrase has been frequently cited in political discourse, especially in times of national uncertainty, to emphasize the resilience and continuity of Malay identity. Beyond his role in shaping Malay nationalism, *Hang Tuah's* legacy resonates with Malaysia's broader national identity, emphasizing universal values such as bravery, justice, and loyalty. His legend serves as a historical reminder of Malaysia's rich maritime past, highlighting the significance of the Malacca Sultanate as a powerful center of trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. By honoring *Hang Tuah*, Malaysia strengthens its connection to its Malay heritage and its role in Southeast Asia's regional and global history, making all Malaysians feel included in this rich cultural tapestry. In contemporary Malaysia, *Hang Tuah's* image continues to be celebrated in public monuments,

educational curricula, and cultural projects. His story is also referenced in discussions about leadership, loyalty, and ethics, making him a moral and ideological figure beyond just folklore. At the same time, modern scholars and writers reinterpret his legacy, questioning the rigid notion of loyalty and exploring the nuances of his character about justice, governance, and societal change. This ongoing debate keeps *Hang Tuah*'s story relevant and engaging for all Malaysians. Ultimately, *Hang Tuah*'s legend remains a dynamic and evolving symbol of Malaysian heroism, serving as a powerful force in shaping the country's historical consciousness and collective memory. His story continues to inspire national identity, political thought, and cultural pride, proving that folklore remains a potent tool in shaping historical narratives in Malaysia.

1.3.7. Myanmar: The Legacy of King Anawrahta

King Anawrahta (1014–1077 CE), the founder of the Pagan Empire, is a revered figure in Myanmar's history and folklore. His legacy is deeply intertwined with the formation of Myanmar's national identity, as he is credited with unifying the region and establishing Theravāda Buddhism as the dominant religious and cultural force (Eikeri, 2020). Through military conquests, administrative reforms, and religious patronage, *Anawrahta* laid the foundations for a centralized Burmese state, which would later influence the development of Myanmar's political and cultural institutions. Over time, his image has been mythologized in Burmese folklore, transforming him into a symbol of unity, resilience, and righteous leadership. *Anawrahta*'s most significant achievement was the profound transformation of Myanmar's religious landscape through the spread of Theravāda Buddhism. Before his reign, the region was influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous animist beliefs. However, after conquering Thaton, a Mon kingdom in the south, *Anawrahta* brought back Buddhist scriptures, scholars, and artisans, integrating Theravāda Buddhist practices into the state's governance and religious life. His devotion to Buddhism is exemplified by his construction of temples and pagodas, including the famous Shwezigon Pagoda in Bagan, which became a center for Buddhist learning and pilgrimage. These contributions not only shaped Myanmar's religious identity but also reinforced a national identity centered around Buddhism, which continues to influence the country's socio-political structure today.

Beyond religion, *Anawrahta* is celebrated as a nation-builder and military strategist. Under his leadership, the Pagan Empire expanded its control over vast territories, encompassing much of Myanmar. He established a feudal administrative system, integrating various ethnic groups under a centralized rule while allowing local leaders autonomy. His military campaigns and diplomatic efforts helped forge a sense of Burmese unity, laying the groundwork for later dynasties. The Burmese chronicles, historical records that blend fact with folklore, often depict *Anawrahta* as a warrior king guided by divine favor, reinforcing his image as a protector of the land and the

Buddhist faith. In Myanmar's modern nationalist discourse, *Anawrahta's* legacy is frequently invoked to promote themes of unity, resilience, and cultural pride. Successive governments have emphasized his contributions to national identity, portraying him as an ideal ruler who exemplified wisdom, strength, and devotion to Buddhism. His story is taught in schools, commemorated in historical sites, and referenced in political rhetoric to reinforce Myanmar's connection to its historical roots. The city of Bagan, the heart of *Anawrahta's* empire, remains a UNESCO World Heritage site and a symbol of Myanmar's cultural heritage, attracting pilgrims and tourists who honor his legacy.

Despite his revered status, modern interpretations of *Anawrahta's* rule have sparked lively and ongoing discussions about the complexities of his reign. While he is credited with unifying Myanmar, his military campaigns also involved the conquest and subjugation of other ethnic groups, raising questions about the nature of his leadership. In contemporary Myanmar, where ethnic tensions persist, his legacy is sometimes viewed through a more critical lens, with debates on how historical narratives should be framed in a diverse and multi-ethnic nation. These debates engage the audience in the country's evolving historical narrative, making them feel part of the ongoing discourse. Nevertheless, *Anawrahta* remains an enduring icon of Burmese identity and national resilience. His legacy as a political visionary, religious patron, and cultural unifier continues to shape Myanmar's historical consciousness. Whether through temple architecture, folklore, or nationalist rhetoric, his story serves as a powerful reminder of Myanmar's rich historical past and enduring cultural traditions, fostering a sense of connection and continuity with the country's heritage.

1.3.8. Laos: The Phra Lak Phra Lam Epic

The *Phra Lak Phra Lam* epic, a cornerstone of Laos's literary and cultural heritage, is a key player in shaping the country's national identity. This Lao adaptation of the Ramayana, deeply entrenched in the country's folklore and religious traditions, acts as a cultural bridge between Buddhism and Lao heritage ("Laos," 2011). While it shares some commonalities with other Southeast Asian versions of the Ramayana, *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is distinctly Lao, incorporating local elements, values, and settings that set it apart from its Indian origins. The epic, passed down through generations via oral traditions, dance, theatre, and religious ceremonies, is a living narrative that continues to influence Lao society. The story of *Phra Lak Phra Lam* follows the lives of two brothers, *Phra Lak* (Lakshmana) and *Phra Lam* (Rama), who embark on a journey of dharma (righteousness), loyalty, and heroism. Their adventures, trials, and battles symbolize the struggle between good and evil, with strong Buddhist undertones emphasizing moral values, patience, and justice. Unlike the Indian Ramayana, which has a more Hindu-centric worldview,

the Lao version is deeply infused with *Theravāda* Buddhist principles, making it an essential part of the country's religious and philosophical identity. Monks, storytellers, and performers have used the epic to teach Buddhist virtues, reinforcing its role as a moral and ethical guide for the Lao people.

The *Phra Lak Phra Lam* epic is performed during festivals and religious ceremonies, particularly in Buddhist temples and royal courts. It is commonly enacted in Lao Lamvong dance, puppet theatre, and Khon masked dance-drama, where elaborately costumed performers bring the story to life. These performances are not merely artistic expressions but nationalistic and cultural affirmations, reinforcing Lao identity in the face of foreign influences. The epic is also closely associated with the That Luang Festival, one of Laos' most significant Buddhist celebrations, where monks and devotees gather to honor the story's teachings. The Lao government has actively promoted *Phra Lak Phra Lam* as a national unity and cultural pride symbol. Recognizing its importance in maintaining the country's heritage, it has been included in school curriculums, literary works, and state-sponsored cultural programs. By emphasizing its uniquely Lao aspects, the government has used the epic to differentiate Laos from its larger neighbours, particularly Thailand and Cambodia, which also have their versions of the Ramayana. This distinction reinforces a sense of national identity, asserting Laos' independent cultural heritage in the region.

Despite the challenges of modernization and globalization, *Phra Lak Phra Lam* remains a resilient part of Lao consciousness. While Western media may influence some younger generations, efforts to preserve and adapt the epic in contemporary formats—such as films, digital storytelling, and literature—have kept it relevant. Cultural organizations and religious institutions continue to ensure that the epic remains a living tradition, linking Lao people to their historical roots and instilling a sense of pride in their heritage. In essence, *Phra Lak Phra Lam* is more than just a mythological tale; it reflects Lao values, national resilience, and cultural identity. The epic inspires Lao society through its teachings of morality, perseverance, and righteousness, ensuring that the nation's cultural heritage is preserved for future generations.

2. Conclusion

The study of folklore and nationalism in Southeast Asian states reveals the profound impact of myth and memory in shaping national identity. Across the region, folklore has been instrumental in unifying diverse populations, but more importantly, it has been a key in preserving our rich cultural heritage. Whether through epic tales, historical figures, or sacred sites, folklore is a tool for constructing collective memory, allowing nations to link their past to their present aspirations. By examining specific case studies, this research highlights how folklore is not merely a relic

of the past but a dynamic force actively mobilized by governments, cultural institutions, and communities to foster a sense of national belonging. The Ramayana epic has been reinterpreted in Indonesia to reflect national values, using wayang kulit performances to promote moral teachings and unity. Similarly, in the Philippines, Jose Rizal has transcended his historical role to become a folk hero, embodying the nation's struggle for independence and democracy. In Thailand, the philosophy of the sufficiency economy, rooted in traditional wisdom and folklore, has been integrated into modern governance, demonstrating how ancient narratives can shape contemporary policies. Beyond being an architectural marvel, Cambodia's Angkor Wat stands as a symbol of resilience, connecting the nation's glorious past to its post-war recovery and collective identity, inspiring us with the strength of the Cambodian people. The myth of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ in Vietnam emphasizes a shared ancestry that unites the people, reinforcing national solidarity in times of change. Likewise, Malaysia's legendary warrior Hang Tuah has been immortalized in education and cultural performances, promoting values of loyalty and patriotism in a multi-ethnic society. Myanmar's King Anawrahta, through his association with Buddhist expansion, has become a historical and spiritual symbol of national unity. In Laos, the Phra Lak Phra Lam epic, a localized version of the Ramayana, continues to shape national consciousness through festivals, literature, and religious teachings.

These case studies serve as compelling evidence that folklore is more than just storytelling—it is a potent instrument of nation-building. By invoking myths and historical narratives, Southeast Asian states have successfully crafted national identities that bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. Governments and cultural institutions strategically mobilize folklore to strengthen nationalism, instill moral values, and foster resilience in times of crisis. However, as globalization and modernization challenge traditional narratives, these nations must adapt folklore to contemporary contexts to ensure its continued relevance in shaping national consciousness. This adaptability underscores the dynamic nature of folklore, ensuring its continued relevance in the shaping of national identity. This research underscores that myth, memory, and identity are deeply intertwined in constructing nationalism in Southeast Asia. Folklore, as a powerful tool, not only preserves historical and cultural heritage but also reinforces a shared sense of belonging, helping nations navigate political, social, and economic transformations. As Southeast Asia continues to evolve, its folklore will remain a vital force in defining and sustaining national identity, proving that the past is remembered and actively lived in the present.

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