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Opinion

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Asean needs a culture shock

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Mon 19 Oct 2009 12.00 BST

This past month has seen Malaysia waging a culture war against Indonesia and Singapore, two fellow founding members of the [Asean regional grouping](#).

A regional food fight broke out when tourism minister Ng Yen Yen accused surrounding countries of hijacking [Malaysia's popular dishes](#).

Earlier, Malaysia had also unwittingly incensed Indonesians when a documentary about its tourism featured the traditional [pendet dance](#) commonly performed on the Indonesian island of Bali. In retaliation, some Indonesians formed a vigilante group to hunt down Malaysians working in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta.

Battle lines between Malaysia and Indonesia were also drawn over the rightful ownership of the intricately patterned [batik fabric](#). When Unesco [approved Indonesia's bid](#) to include this cloth in its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Indonesian media played it up as a victory over Malaysia where there had previously been efforts to patent batik designs.

Meanwhile, Thailand and Cambodia had been wrangling over the ownership of the [Preah Vihear temple](#) located at their borders - a dispute that was also born from a Unesco decision last year to designate the ancient Buddhist temple as a world heritage site for Cambodia (to the chagrin of Thai leaders who are now appealing against this decision). Already, clashes between Cambodian and Thai troops have caused fatalities on both sides.

To downplay Asean's culture war as trivial is unwise. This conflict threatens the

regional grouping's unity, forcing its member states to uphold a state of continuing socio-political, even military, tension that is almost akin to the cold war. The skirmishes between Thai and Cambodian troops and the near-violent spat between Indonesians and Malaysians signal a disturbing trend. So too are the reactions of Singaporean bloggers if one considers the results of a survey commissioned by the Asean Foundation last year which found that Singaporean youths are the least likely among their peers in the 10-member grouping to consider themselves Asean citizens.

To bridge the gaping cultural divide, Asean needs to instil a much-needed paradigm shift that will see its people define "culture" beyond mere superficialities. Instead of

being fixated on a distinct dish, dress or dance, Southeast Asians have to start seeing culture from a socio-historical perspective. Given that the region was once part of the Silk Road where traders from all over Asia had moved freely, any instances of cultural heritage are likely to be a meshing of many.

As founding members of the grouping, Indonesia, [Malaysia](#) and Singapore are well-placed to contribute to this undertaking. Taking the case of multicultural Singapore, this would mean capitalising on the notion of hybridised cultures to encourage endeavours that break down racial barriers such as in school public performances where Chinese pupils dance to Indian bhangra music or Malay students perform the Chinese opera, among others.

There are other ways of instilling such a culture shock. To mitigate the spread of parochialism in future generations, Asean could develop an educational programme highlighting its sense of shared history that could be adapted by schools in the different member-states. The ideal curriculum should capture discourses that not only decentres the idea of a fixed identity but promotes the view that culture is evolutionary and not static. Hence, this month's forum by historians from Malaysia and Indonesia to suss out common cultural links is laudable.

Or Asean leaders could consider setting up a committee of experts to rule on cultural disputes between member-states. Professing multiculturalism as its motto, this committee should also advise the Unesco which had inadvertently fuel Asean's culture war when it ruled in favour of Indonesia and [Cambodia](#) on the batik and the Preah Vihar temple respectively. After all, such a committee would gel well with Asean secretary-general Surin Pitsuwan's promise of focusing on culture as the hitherto ignored third pillar of the regional grouping after economic and defence when he first took over last year.

Whatever Asean chooses to do, it needs doing soon. As the Indonesian invasion threat

of Malaysia suggests, the region's culture vultures are already hovering on the horizon.

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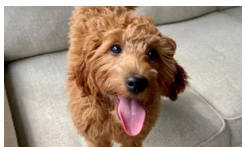
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