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ASEAN has fascinated and perplexed me since I started my doctoral studies some fifteen years ago. It is easy to be sceptical of ASEAN, and for quite a few years I embraced that scepticism. The diversities of the region are well-known, and this has led to ten members with very different goals and interests, all of which serve to fray the regional project. Even the most notable trait of the region – the absence of major inter-state war between its members – has a chimerical quality to it, and the more one looks, the harder it is to attribute this 'peace' to ASEAN in any convincing way. Yet regional elites continue to take ASEAN seriously despite its failings. They invest considerable time and resources into its running and, despite its travails, whether in the South China Sea or the realisation of its internal goals, there is as yet little evidence of members disengaging with it. This continued interest displayed by the intelligent and politically savvy leaders of the region caught my attention. Whilst my scepticism has not been washed away, I am more open to the possibility that ASEAN's value is more than a list of its clear accomplishments would suggest.

This work, then, is part of my effort to appreciate why ASEAN continues to be important to regional elites. In doing so I seek neither to defend the regional project nor to condemn it. Instead I wish to make a small contribution to understanding it – one that takes the actions and words of practitioners seriously, although not necessarily at face value. Rituals and symbols are presented here as a way to understand the endurance and continued value attached to the regional project. I emphasise some things that others take for granted – the coming together of leaders, diplomats, and experts, and the orchestration and presentation of those meetings in both visual and written mediums. The rhythm and texture of regionalism as a practice interests me in this work.

This focus, I hope, holds the scepticism and optimism about ASEAN in balance in a way that respects the history and politics of the region. It allows me to argue that ASEAN has made a contribution to regional peace and security, just not in the way that its most ardent supporters claim. It also allows me to capture the dualism of ASEAN, its expanding activities and failings, in a new light; the creation and repetition of ambitious goals without reference to a failure to achieve these goals becomes central to the performance of ASEAN, not evidence of its weakness.

Finally, this work should be read as part of an ongoing conversation of my own thinking about the region. Too often existing frameworks from my own discipline, International Relations, have misunderstood ASEAN and framed it as either largely irrelevant or incredibly powerful. The wealth of empirical evidence for both sides of this debate suggests they are equally off the mark. Yet something holds the region together, both animating and shaping its politics

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and contributing to its successes and failures. Whatever this 'something' is, we should seek to articulate and understand it clearly, honestly, and sensitively. This work is my attempt to do just that.

1 Introduction

In November 2015, the Secretariat of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) released a sixty-eight page document to which no one beyond ASEAN paid any attention. The *Guide to ASEAN Practices and Protocol* is meticulous, detailing every aspect of how ASEAN organises its events. For ASEAN Summits, there are rules about the stage setting, the backdrops used, the flags to be displayed, and the seating of heads of state and government, spouses, mere VIPs, very VIPs, and ministers. Different seating arrangements are specified for ASEAN Summit plenary meetings, ASEAN Summit retreat meetings, signing ceremonies, and luncheon meetings. Similar levels of detail are provided for various ASEAN+1 meetings, ASEAN+3 (China, Japan, and South Korea) meetings, the East Asia Summit, advisory councils, gala dinners, hand-over ceremonies, closing ceremonies, and press conferences. Rules are outlined for meetings at ministerial and senior-official levels, and again for meetings with external partners (ASEAN 2015). The *Guide* is a blueprint for the management of ASEAN's stagecraft; how ASEAN presents itself to its members, how those members present themselves to one another under the ASEAN banner, and how the world sees the organisation.

It is easy to dismiss the *Guide* as a meaningless document produced at the expense of tackling other more important issues, and as yet another example of ASEAN's fixation on process. How can it possibly matter who stands where, given the range of internal and external challenges that ASEAN faces? Yet, to dismiss the *Guide* as not meaningful, and as not offering insight into what makes regionalism work in Southeast Asia, is a mistake. The *Guide* reveals the importance of two things that are rarely spoken about in the context of ASEAN – rituals and symbols. Rituals and symbols serve as a *representation* of a region at peace to citizens, other member-states, and the wider international community. However, this representation is not supported by the empirical record, which shows evidence of suspicion, mistrust, and competition. Rituals help to bracket this suspicion, and so the reality of the situation has mattered less than would be thought. Rituals and symbols also serve as a mechanism for the *performance* of regionalism where a wider circle of elites, and even individual citizens, engage in activities that demonstrate ASEAN's harmony as if there were no tension between them.

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Rituals and symbols have become the way that ASEAN creates the impression of unity in the absence of other unifiers. In this work I argue that ASEAN has fostered a form of regional order predicated on rituals and symbols. This order prioritises coexistence, national freedoms (from interference and to interfere), and 'opt-in' cooperation at the regional level – rituals and symbols promote and protect these goals not by addressing the root causes of threats to stability, but by limiting the potential damage that these threats can cause. As such, rituals and symbols have helped keep in check the centrifugal tendencies of the region, ensuring the continuation of ASEAN.

In this section, I introduce ASEAN by highlighting three defining features of its approach to regional governance. I then present the academic debate about ASEAN and regional order, framing it as a struggle to define what ASEAN is, why it endures, and whether it is successful. Whilst illuminating, this debate is enduring because each side is characterised by prominent and inescapable empirical weaknesses. Rituals and symbols offer a way to address these weaknesses. I outline the meaning of these terms and what they suggest about the creation and management of order, and then apply that to ASEAN.

1.1 The Three Characteristics of ASEAN

Formed in 1967, ASEAN is perhaps the most successful regional organisation outside the European Union. It has endured the Cold War and its ending, the 1997 Asian financial crisis, significant political change within many member-states, expansion of its membership from five to ten, and, at least so far, the rise of China.[1] To orient the reader and allow for the coming argument, I highlight three defining features of ASEAN – the preoccupation with sovereignty, the nature of regional reform over the last fifty years, and the issue of non-compliance. Understanding these three characteristics provides a perspective on the nature of ASEAN's regional order.

1.1.1 Sovereignty

ASEAN was created for the single purpose of promoting the enjoyment of national sovereignty by its members. Throughout most of ASEAN's history, this has served as a metaphor for promoting the freedom of authoritarian elites to go about their business unencumbered by internal and external challenges. This was not surprising given the situation in Southeast Asia in the 1960s.

[1] The original five members were Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Brunei joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. The latter four members are known as the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) countries.

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The very diverse states of the region had a shared recent history; all (except Thailand) had been colonised by European powers, and many had experienced occupation by the Japanese during the Second World War, decolonisation, weak central governments, the challenge of communist insurgencies, geopolitical competition between superpowers, and fear of a return to subservience to Western states. Elites were in conflict with each other over borders and ruled, often nominally, over societies rife with poverty and human insecurity. The regional project in Southeast Asia was to address these concerns and, in doing so, make states more, not less, sovereign in name and practice. ASEAN termed this as a commitment to building national and regional resilience 'on the principles of self-confidence, self-reliance, mutual respect, cooperation and solidarity' (ASEAN 1976c: article 12).

The commitment to sovereignty is not unique to ASEAN; it is shared by many other regional organisations.[2] However, none have taken it as seriously as ASEAN. Commitments to sovereignty have been ASEAN's constant companion from its founding 1967 Bangkok Treaty, to the dual agreements of 1976 (the Bali I Accords comprising the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the Declaration of ASEAN Concord), to the 2007 ASEAN Charter. ASEAN's preoccupation with sovereignty has resulted in a diplomatic environment shaped to respect and promote the sovereign prerogatives of its members. At a formal level, the commitments have been embodied in documents and treaties; ASEAN has stringent commitments to procedural equality. From these formal commitments, the 'ASEAN way' has emerged, which has attracted considerable attention. Although there remains ambiguity about what precisely it is, Acharya (1997: 328) argues that the 'ASEAN way' at its core 'consists of a code of conduct for inter-state behaviour as well as a decision-making process based on consultations and consensus' (Acharya 1997: 328). In this vein, some have linked this regional code to local Malay cultural practices of *musyawarah* and *mufakat* in an effort to identify the roots of this approach (Nischalke 2000: 90). The 'ASEAN way' has been framed as an indigenous alternative to Western-style conflict resolution (Möller 1998: 1088). Together, the commitments to sovereignty and the formal and informal procedural framework of ASEAN give the impression of a strong defence of sovereignty through realising two key aspects – non-intervention (not engaging in activities within another state's territory) and non-interference (not commenting on activities within another state).

[2] For example, the Charter of the Organization of American States calls on members 'to defend their sovereignty' (article 1), and the Constitutive Act of the African Union frames the objective of the organisation as to 'defend the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of its Member States' (article 3b).

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1.1.2 Regional Reform

The commitment to sovereignty throughout ASEAN's history does not mean that ASEAN has not changed (Davies 2016) – reform has been a key part of ASEAN's story. ASEAN's first thirty years were characterised by a slow and steady expansion of activities as regional elites slowly fleshed out the vague commitments to economic growth, political cooperation, and social stability that were reached in Bangkok. The year 1997 marked a partial discontinuity in the history of ASEAN reform. Spurred on by the Asian financial crisis of 1997, regional elites expanded ASEAN's activities into previously off-limit areas such as democracy and human rights, whilst also developing further their existing commitments. Unsurprisingly, the development of ASEAN's commitments led to a more complex institutional environment. For much of its history, ASEAN has been famously 'lightweight', with few meetings, a small and weak secretariat, and very little bureaucratic capacity of its own. Yet since 1997, ASEAN has become more densely institutionalised. At every level, from heads of state down, there are now regular meetings, committees, and work groups, supported by a growing secretariat based in Jakarta. In comparison to an institution that held just a handful of meetings in 1967, there are now hundreds of scheduled events and, behind those, a rich and complex network of constant communication (ASEAN 2017a). Yet underpinning all these reforms has been the constant restatement of the sovereign rights of members, and 'on-paper' commitments to non-intervention and non-interference.

1.1.3 Non-compliance

The tension between the centrality of sovereignty and an expansive range of governance commitments has emphasised ASEAN's perennial shortcoming of a lack of compliance with its commitments. The same states that created these central regional commitments – particularly the apparent defence of sovereignty and resultant prohibitions on interference and intervention – have also never lived up to them. The history of Southeast Asia, before and after 1967, has been characterised by frequent interference and intervention in the domestic affairs of fellow-members. Perplexingly, these activities have not attracted much, if any, opprobrium from other states in the region, and instead are seemingly accepted as a routine occurrence in the life of the region. In Southeast Asia, respect for sovereignty is the most valorised of commitments and simultaneously one of the most violated. Outside these central commitments, today's ASEAN faces compliance shortfalls in many areas. In the promotion of human rights and democracy, and in issues as diverse as environmental protection, economic integration, and trade policy, ASEAN's

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commitments are routinely violated. This gap between declarations and reality is expanding, yet ASEAN members remain unperturbed by their commitments being violated with impunity. ASEAN's order is characterised not so much by consensus, but instead by carefully governed disagreement, both amongst members, and between members and the regional commitments they have created.

1.2 The Academic Debate about ASEAN

ASEAN's preoccupation with sovereignty, its expanding remit, and the gap between 'on-paper' commitments and reality reveal ASEAN's enigmatic nature. Why do states create commitments that they have no intention of living up to? Why do members continue to invest time and resources into a regional project that seems so slight? What *is* ASEAN given its track record, and is it a success?

The two leading strands of academic debate about ASEAN were memorably characterised by John Ravenhill (2009) as either ASEAN sceptics or ASEAN boosters (see also Eaton & Stubbs 2006). Sceptical arguments about ASEAN are largely rooted in the realist tradition of International Relations (IR), with its focus on state power, self-interest, and mutual suspicion. Michael Leifer was a key figure in this debate (Leifer 1974; Emmerson 2006). Scepticism about ASEAN today can be characterised as a family of related claims rather than a single position. Some emphasise that contemporary ASEAN remains wedded to state sovereignty and state power, and therefore remains a captive of the ambitions and fears of national capitals (Narine 2009). This line of reasoning emphasises the commitments to sovereignty discussed above and the idea that since ASEAN is a vehicle of state power and freedom, it does not provide effective regional governance. ASEAN is seen as a weak institution, controlled entirely by its member-states who maintain a mutual suspicion of each other and of any commitments that would limit their freedoms. ASEAN's order is fragile and transitory, predicated on the whims of its most powerful members and, more importantly, of the global powers who play politics in Southeast Asia. This does not mean that ASEAN is useless, but it has little life beyond the utility that member-states see in it. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, the sceptical argument denies ASEAN's importance (Jones & Smith 2002, 2006).

The booster position is more positive about ASEAN, and has emerged over the last twenty years, led by Amitav Acharya (2001). The term 'security community', defined as a zone of peace where states share the reliable expectation of peaceful change, is crucial to the booster argument. Security

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communities produce reliable expectations of peace as states no longer think that armed conflict is an option in their interaction with other members of that community (the classic definition comes from Deutsch 1957). This 'unthinking' peace is the product of norms – inter-subjective beliefs about appropriate behaviour – and it is not surprising that booster arguments tend towards a constructivist framing of the region, emphasising the role of identity in international politics. In this reading, ASEAN is not just an institution created by states and beholden to them. Instead, ASEAN reveals the presence of deep social cooperation between member-states and their leaders, which in turn binds the region together in a thicker and fuller way than sceptics imagine is possible. ASEAN is not the captive of its member-states, and the member-states are not bound together by self-interest alone. Instead, a thick set of norms about appropriate behaviour and Southeast Asia's identity are commonly held across regional states. Central here are the diplomatic norms around consensus and unanimity, which, instead of signifying ASEAN's weakness, actually indicate its greatest achievement as they represent inter-subjective beliefs that create a true community. These shared norms bind members together and explain ASEAN's endurance and successes. In this sense, ASEAN's order is robust and enduring, resting as it does on a community of true sentiment shared at least by elites and spreading into the regional public.

Following Acharya's lead, Jürgen Haacke (2005) identified 'six norms' in ASEAN's diplomatic and security culture that comprised the 'ASEAN way' and mediated regional estrangement and insecurity.[3] Alice Ba (2009) focused on ideas about Southeast Asia to explain both regional troubles and unity, invoking constructivism to explore ideas about regional resilience. Hiro Katsumata (2004) traced shifting ASEAN diplomacy to new shared ideas about appropriate behaviour. Acharya (2004, 2005) continued to explore how shared ideas were shaping Southeast Asian regionalism, and was joined by others who focused on these ideas in different areas of ASEAN activity (Kraft 2001; Katsumata 2006; Collins 2007; Stubbs 2008).

The defining feature of the debate between these two frameworks is that both have generated non-replicable insights into ASEAN whilst at the same time never escaping their own serious explanatory shortcomings. Sceptical work explains why ASEAN is in so many ways a weak institution and why its

[3] The norms were 'sovereign equality; non-recourse to the use of force; non-interference and non-intervention; non-invocation of ASEAN to address unresolved bilateral conflict between members; quiet diplomacy; and mutual respect and tolerance'. See Haacke (2005: 214).

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commitments are so often violated. And yet sceptical arguments are poorly suited to understanding how and why ASEAN has endured for more than fifty years in the face of such turbulent change, and why states, many of whom remain poor in material and social resources, continue to invest effort in ASEAN. If ASEAN does not do anything for its members, why do they bear the costs of the organisation? Why do they pursue more sophisticated regional commitments and processes when states have no intention of realising these commitments? Perhaps most importantly, how can sceptics explain the significant achievement of fifty years of regional peace? Inversely, the booster argument helps illuminate why states persist in bothering about ASEAN, why states wished to join the organisation in the 1990s, why peace has endured in Southeast Asia, and why ASEAN is central to Asia-Pacific regionalism. Yet boosters struggle to explain ASEAN's obvious limitations – if states are bound by these norms, why do they violate them so often, so openly, and with such impunity (Davies 2013a)? When looking at the reality of ASEAN member-states' practices of intervention against the presumed norm of non-intervention, Lee Jones (2012: 218) concludes that 'the constructivist understanding of norms is simply unsustainable'.[4]

Despite ASEAN's long history, and an expansive academic engagement with it, observers of Southeast Asian regionalism remain unsatisfied. Our leading frameworks are unable to grasp ASEAN's true nature – the boosters radically overstate their case whilst the sceptics radically understate theirs.[5] The argument that I present is intended to step between the optimism of the boosters and the negativity of the sceptics. I do not intend to replace many of the insights of these approaches so much as to situate them within a broader framework. Over its life, ASEAN has been buffeted by shifting power politics, changing notions of legitimacy, and the development of its members; each has a part to play in explaining the evolution and current form of regional governance. My claim that rituals and symbols provide a foundational account of ASEAN on top of which other arguments can be positioned and debated is modest. Rituals and symbols do not explain everything that has happened to ASEAN or that ASEAN has achieved. In the remainder of this section, I develop this new perspective on ASEAN. The sections that follow explore how this approach has developed, endured, and operated during ASEAN's existence.

[4] Jones's work is just one of many that question the 'real' nature of non-intervention. See also Narine (1997); Johnston (1999); Nischalke (2000).

[5] Parallels exist between the inapplicability of these frameworks and the claim that there is a mismatch between International Relations theory and the practice of non-Western actors. See discussion in Acharya (2011); Kim (2018).

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1.3 Understanding Rituals and Symbols

The discipline of IR has dealt with rituals and symbols only sporadically.[6] In the study of IR in general and ASEAN in particular, rituals and symbols are mentioned but rarely investigated. Rituals have played a small role in the analysis of norms (Kratochwil 1989: 123–6) and in the study of peace-keeping (for example Rubinstein 2005: 536; Schirch 2005). The most sustained investigation has emerged from the study of diplomacy. The relationship between diplomacy, symbolism, and ritual is intrinsic in both Western (Neumann 2011) and non-Western traditions (Phillips 2017). Faizullaev (2013) emphasises the way that symbols represent the state and make it apparent to individuals, giving weight to their communicative, normative, and affective functions (see also Sending, Pouliot & Neumann 2015). Taku Yukawa (2017) refers to the 'ASEAN way' as a symbol of ASEAN but offers no conceptual analysis of this categorisation. Symbols have also been linked to the power of international organisations, especially the way in which they legitimate institutions and their functions (Hurd 2002, 2005; Chapman 2009). It is, however, in the fields of sociology and anthropology that much of the analytical investigation into rituals and symbols has occurred, and so it is these literatures that form the basis of the following discussion.

David Kertzer (1988: 6) provides what has become a standard definition for rituals and symbols. Rituals are defined as 'symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive' (Kertzer 1988: 9). Rituals provide some sort of organisation to social life, and a way to mesh together the regular and the improvised, the repetitive and the varying (Moore & Myerhoff 1977: 4, 5; Walzer 1967). Kertzer defines symbols as those things that 'instigate social action and define the individual's sense of self', which serve to make sense of the political process with which they are engaged. Rituals and symbols can only exercise importance because they are embodied and performed.[7] Moore and Myerhoff (1977: 6–7) note that rituals require repetition and formalisation, a public acting out of roles, special behavioural activities that exist only as part of the ritual, a clear order and sequence, an evocative presentational style including staging, and a clear

[6] There is also a small, now dated, literature that engages Emile Durkheim, whose work on the maintenance of societies provides much of the foundations of the study of rituals, and IR directly, although its focus is primarily on Kenneth Waltz's (mis)use of Durkheim's theory of mechanical and organic societies. See Larkins (1994).

[7] Fascinating parallels can be found between ASEAN's approach to performed ritualised regionalism and Clifford Geertz's (1980) pioneering work on Balinese society, in which he identified performance as the ends of political power, not a means to it.

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collective dimension which binds together participants with each other and the audience with the ritual.[8]

The formalism of rituals is enhanced by the deployment of symbols in ceremonial contexts (Chase 2005: 115). Symbols are the content around which ritual action occurs – the national flag at the memorial ceremony, the mortarboard at an academic graduation, the ten ASEAN heads of state linking hands in front of a screen emblazoned with the ASEAN motto. Symbols imbue rituals with meaning. Symbols become tools for the 'meaningful objectification' of that which they represent, making that thing 'sensible' to participants and audience (Faizullaev 2013: 92). In turn this objectification serves to create bonds, motivate action, confer honour, legitimate authority, and shape political action (Cerulo 1995: 32–3).

Rituals do not emerge fully formed – instead, they are created and strengthened over time. In this sense there is a clear power dimension to the study of ritual (Kertzer 1988: 25; Charlesworth & Larking 2014: 8). The power of certain individuals helps create rituals (although not all rituals are consciously constituted), and the performance of rituals with a degree of social competence bestows power on others. Rituals articulate the authority of positions and practices beyond the individuals who for a short time perform these roles. Rituals help shape conversations about viable futures and retards heretical futures as unthinkable.

Creation, repetition, and performance indicate the presence of an important temporal dimension to the study of ritual, but rituals do more than simply emerge *over* time; they link participants and observers *to* time in a particular way. When engaging in ritual behaviour either as a participant or an observer, we are linked with the past and reassured in the present. In this way, the new and potentially objectionable is rendered traditional and conservative through ritual's emphasis on continuity. The past is the source of ritual behaviour, the validation of current practices, and the foundation of future thinking. It is widely accepted that rituals can vary in their fidelity to the reality of the material, social, and political worlds and can systematically misrepresent reality. Rituals can hide or reveal, delude or clarify (Kertzer 1988: 87). This opens up a gap between how something is represented and the reality of that thing being represented. In this way rituals help to veil and obscure disorder and its causes by giving the impression of timeless harmony and consensus, and represent a balance between cooperation and competition (Sennett 2013: 89).

[8] Oren and Solomon (2015: 317) similarly emphasise the significance of repetition in their discussion of ritualised incantation as a securitisation device.

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