From the Floating Lotus to Groot's Wisdom: Engaging Contemporary Ecological Challenges with Southeast Asian Cultures

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Abstract—The late ASEAN Secretary General, Surin Pitsuwan, had a yet to be realized dream of turning ASEAN from a relatively successful regional organization into a community. Given the heightened threats to human security coming from ecological problems, it is important to ponder the ways in which cultural treasures in Southeast Asia could help Southeast Asians, young and old, face these ecological threats as a community. To pursue this thesis, this article is organized in five steps. First, it identifies the ecological threats in Southeast Asia in the forms of traditional elements: earth/soil, wind, fire, and water. Second, it examines the traditional epistemic grounds for knowledge and practices in dealing with nature. Third, it uses the ancient story of a wounded warrior discovering the Malay martial art of *Silat* to suggest solutions to these threats. Fourth, it reviews two successful cases of protecting nature in Southeast Asia, "yellow trees" in Thailand and "green mosques" in Indonesia. Finally, it turns to a successful Marvel movie for inspiration on how to achieve a new self-understanding to protect and foster human (and non-human) community.

Introduction: Surin Pitsuwan's legacy

In the program "The Asia Chess Board" organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC on 25 June 2021, Professor Amitav Acharya, the eminent scholar of ASEAN, pointed out that there are three basic ideas that ASEAN owed to the late Surin Pitsuwan, perhaps its most colorful, widely respected, and authentic secretary general. They are: Surin's criticism of ASEAN non-intervention stance and his call for a more flexible approach "even if it means interfering in the domestic affairs of member states"; his commitment to "people's ASEAN", not merely state relationships but also civil society; and lastly his open advocacy of democracy and human rights.[1]

While I have little to disagree with Acharya's take on Surin's contributions to ASEAN, the image that vividly stands out in my memory of Surin Pitsuwan as ASEAN Secretary General is of him tirelessly giving talk after talk, waving the ASEAN little green book while speaking. Toward the end of his tenure, I believe Surin understood that his most difficult mission was to transform ASEAN from a highly successful regional

[1] https://www.csis.org/analysis/pawn-or-queen-asean-chessboard (accessed 26 September 2022).

Journal of the Siam Society, Vol. 111, Pt. 2, 2023, pp. 3–22

organization into a human community that is "caring and sharing," which would only be possible with tolerance and acceptance of cultural, historical, religious, and linguistic diversity, among others.[2] Surin reiterated his conditions for engendering the ASEAN community by underscoring three aspects: because ASEAN is diverse, "our people" need to learn to live with diverse behavior, with mutual respect among them; while ASEAN economic success is great, "what is more important … is the equitable distribution of that growth"; and there is a need for cultural, civilizational, and religious dialogue. He concluded optimistically that ASEAN leaders "are very much aware of the challenges before them. That's why the cultural and religious community are as conscious of this as the economic and political community as the security community, because without a strong human cultural community ASEAN will be on a very flimsy foundation."[3]


Figure 1. Surin Pitsuwan

I believe that his most ambitious mission for ASEAN was to move it from being a regional organization of ten diverse states into a human community with multiple ethnic and religious identities among people with hundreds of languages. Surin's intended legacy is so very difficult to realize precisely because ASEAN was too successful as a regional association of states. The question at this point is: would ASEAN's existence as a regional organization be adequate to cope with unprecedented ecological threats presently facing the Earth, both natural and human-made? Or due to these perilous threats, does Surin's legacy of an "ASEAN human community" have a chance to spring to life to usher in the new age of Southeast Asia?

The thesis and the argument

In pursuit of Surin Pitsuwan's ASEAN legacy of transforming the regional organization into a human community underscoring the values of sharing and caring among people, this article is an attempt to argue that it is important to raise the question

[2] Surin Pitsuwan, "Vision of ASEAN Community on Societies and Cultures," in Saran Wongkajit (ed.), *ASEAN: Community in Dimensions of Culture, Conflict and Hope* (Bangkok: Sirinthorn Anthropological Center, 2014), p. 18 (in Thai).

[3] Surin Pitsuwan, "Untitled Keynote Speech," 24 August 2012, in Imtiyaz Yusuf (ed.), *ASEAN Religious Pluralism: The Challenges of Building a Socio-Cultural Community* (Bangkok: Konrad Adenaur Stiftung, 2014), pp. xix–xxii.

of how cultural treasures in Southeast Asia, both traditional and popular, ancient as well as contemporary, could help Southeast Asians face these ecological threats as a community. Courting this question, this article begins by discussing the prevalent ecological threats in the forms of Asian traditional elements: earth/soil, water, wind, and fire. Second, given how ASEAN has dealt with such threats suggests that there is indeed a need to let go of the dominant conceptual mode which renders people blind to others' sufferings and deaf to cries of those oppressed, and in which "the others" are seen only as objects that states can utilize and manipulate at will. This part is to demonstrate that it is difficult to pursue Surin's legacy precisely because of the dominant epistemic belief governing the structure and practices of modern lives including organizations such as ASEAN. I then advance a critique of such dominant understanding of being human not as one who thinks, but as one who breathes, an act that naturally connects one's life with others. To accentuate the fact that such epistemic critique is not merely isolated philosophical rumination, the third part explores an ancient Southeast Asian story of how a wounded warrior discovered *Silat*, a traditional Malay form of martial arts, in the process of fighting the floating lotus, as a fascinating example of how humans might reconnect with the elements in nature through different body movements including breathing. Fourth, to move into real life experiments of how Southeast Asian cultural resources could be used to protect nature, two relatively contemporary examples will be briefly examined. They are: "yellow trees," the ordination of trees by Buddhist monks in Thailand to protect the forest; and "green mosques," the setting up of environment friendly mosques in Indonesia. Finally, drawing from contemporary popular culture, the immensely successful Marvel movie, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, this keynote address concludes with an examination of how a most unique superhero explains why he decides to sacrifice his own life to save his inter-galactic friends from impending death as a modern inspirational story of how living nature could foster human (and non-human) community. Though contemporary popular culture is oftentimes condemned as the foreign invasion of globalization through cultural artifacts such as Hollywood films, I argue that these artifacts are in fact sites of power and resistance where cultural politics manifests itself.[4] The steps by which I walk through this thesis can be captured in five phrases: Threats: Soil, Water, Wind and Fire; *spiro ergo sum*, "I breathe therefore I am"; the warrior and the Floating Lotus; "Yellow Trees" and "Green Mosques"; and finally: the Guardian Groot's wisdom.

Threats: soil, water, wind and fire

In the eyes of the US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, climate change is "a profoundly destabilizing force of our world" that makes it difficult to defend the US and its allies. To stabilize global security, it is therefore important for the US to seriously address the existential threat of climate change in Southeast Asia. Such American policy would also help the US "reap the soft-power benefits, gain advantages from high levels

[4] William A. Callahan, *Cultural Governance and Resistance in Pacific Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 5–6.

Figure 2. Impact of tsunami of 26 December 2004 at Banda Aceh (photo Michael L. Bak at Wikicommons)

of trade and investment, and promote US prosperity back home."[5]

Instead of pursuing Austin's security-oriented lead to identify "existential challenges of climate change in Southeast Asia," I would rather return to a traditional notion of what constitutes the Earth as a living planet, namely earth/soil, water, wind and fire.[6] While it could be argued that it is these elements that make planet Earth a living organism, under the drastic environmental changes that have put our world at risk, the erosion of these elements themselves indicate how our planet is heading towards a descent into a grim future. Let me elaborate.

Soil. When focusing on the soil threat to the Earth in general, and Southeast Asia in particular, many would be rightly reminded of the deadly effect of the tsunami of 26 December 2004. A 9.1 magnitude earthquake shook the seas near the coast of Sumatra, the northwestern reaches of the Indonesian archipelago. Within weeks, 227,000 people were declared dead or missing in the tragedy that affected fourteen countries across two continents. Shockwaves caused by the monstrous quake reached shorelines as far as South Africa, some 5,300 miles away.[7]

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[5] Murray Hiebert and Danielle Fallin, "Security Challenges of Climate Change in Southeast Asia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 5 October 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/security-challenges-climate-change-southeast-asia (accessed 27 September 2022).

[6] I understand that there are at least two theories of fundamental elements constituting the earth: Chinese and Indian. In Chinese Wuxia literature, there are five elements (五行) that serve as the foundation of the earth. They are: earth, water, wood, fire, and gold. On the other hand, Buddhism, influenced by Indian philosophy, proposes that there are four fundamental elements comprising a human body. They are earth (solid element in the body: skin or eyes), water (liquid element in the body: blood, sweat and tears), wind (body gases), and fire (body temperature, burning energy).

[7] Feliz Solomon and Suyin Haynes, "A Look Back at Asia's Most Devastating Earthquakes," *Time*, 10 August 2018, https://time.com/5359504/asia-earthquake-tsunami-history/ (accessed 9 September 2022).

Figure 3. Xiaowan Dam in Nanjian county, Yunnan province, Southwest China (photo Credit: Guillaume Lacombe/Cirad)

It is important to note that the frequency of earthquakes in the world is not increasing. In fact, earthquakes with a magnitude beyond six seem to have decreased from 16,849 occurrences in 2021 to 8,433 in 2021 up to the month of August. In Southeast Asia alone, the West Sumatra earthquake of 6.1 magnitude on 25 February killed nineteen people, while the Luzon earthquake of 7.0 magnitude on 27 July killed eleven people in Cordillera, Philippines. I believe there is another danger related to soil that also merits our thinking about the future of Southeast Asia.

Over 22–26 August 2022, the Malaysian Society of Soil Science together with the Institute of Biological Sciences, University of Malaya organized its fifteenth international conference of the East and Southeast Asia Federation of Soil Sciences Society in Kuala Lumpur (ESAFS 2022) on the theme "Our Soils Our Future." The conference looked at degradation due to soil erosion, soil pollution, soil organic matter, carbon depletion, soil sealing/capping, soil compaction, and soil acidity, salinity, and alkalinity. Such soil atrophy, influenced by climate change, is negatively affecting food production, and therefore food security, national economies, provision of ecosystem services and increasing poverty in East and Southeast Asia. In addition, the situation is aggravated by unsustainable soil management practices, resulting from rapid economic development and intense urbanization of countries in the region. In short, "our soils are indeed our future" because maintaining and improving soil health is crucial for Southeast Asia to have sufficient food for its population in the future.[8]

Water. In 2019, Southeast Asia was said to have faced its worst drought in a hundred years, aggravated by the fact the China's eleven dams on the northern part of

[8] https://www.msss.com.my/esafs2022/, accessed September 27, 2022.

the Mekong River further deprived downstream nations of water.[9] The Mekong River is the tenth largest river in the world. From its origins in the Tibetan plateau, the first 2000 kilometers of the Upper Mekong Basin, covering some 190,000 square kilometers, are in Chinese territory. From Yunnan province in China, the Mekong flows downstream through five other countries: Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Rich in both biological and cultural diversity, this region is home to over 240 million people with more than a hundred different ethnic groups.[10]

Due to rapid socio-economic and cultural change, guided by a growth-oriented economic development model, increasing transnational cooperation in infrastructural development, and freer cross-border flows of people and commercial goods, the existing cultures characterized by subsistence practices and local knowledge have come under serious threat. Focusing on the impacts of transnational infrastructure development, especially the construction of hydro-electric dams in China and the blasting of shoals and reefs for commercial navigation, Yos Santasombat argues that this "transnational enclosure", an increasingly centralized decision-making process, enables the state and commercial interests to gain control of this great river of life. He writes:

> Enclosure tears people from their rivers, lands, and forests, removing these natural resources, along with accompanying knowledge and cosmologies, from the cultural framework in which they have been embedded and forcing them into a new framework which reinforces the values and interests of the state and dominant groups."[11]

Wind and Fire. A combination of wind and fire threatens the well-being of people in Southeast Asia in the form of haze. Often produced by fires in extremely fire-prone swamps in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), Sumatra or in Malaysia, haze severely undermines Southeast Asian economies by reducing productivity and tourism, while increasing emergency medical spending. In 2015, haze cost Indonesia US$ 16 billion, while in 2019, the cost was US$ 5 billion. Haze is made up of dangerous biomass particles which can enter human lungs and bloodstream, causing short and long-term respiratory, dermatological, and ophthalmological complications among young children and adults alike. The 2015 haze killed from 40,000 to 100,000 people in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

The fires that produce these hazes occur both intentionally when land is prepared for planting, or accidentally from lightning during thunderstorms. These fires can burn underground for a very long time while releasing potent smoke that can travel vast distances, crossing various national boundaries. Very bad haze reaches almost all areas of Southeast Asian nations. Without a large amount of water from heavy rainfall, it is close to impossible to suppress.

[9] Hiebert and Fallin, "Security Challenges."

[10] Yos Santasombat, *The River of Life: Changing Ecosystems of the Mekong Region* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2011).

[11] Yos, *River of Life*, pp. 7–8.

Figure 4. Haze in Riau province, Indonesia in March 2014 (photo: AFP)

What is most remarkable about the haze produced by wind and fire is that both the causes and effects cross national boundaries. Sometimes, it was local commercial palm-oil and pulpwood plantations. Other times, foreign plantations have been linked to fires. Home governments of foreign plantations have defended their national companies against accusations of causing haze. Haze has caused diplomatic rows between Indonesia, which labeled complaining neighbors as "ungrateful" for the fresh air that Indonesia provided them outside the haze season! Singapore has put in place an extraterritorial law that can hold liable any entity that causes haze in Singapore.[12]

Taking the threats from the four elements of soil/earth, water, wind, and fire together, what emerges is that ASEAN is facing multiple problems that have a very complex transboundary nature which cannot be addressed by any individual country. More importantly, because of the dominant transnational enclosure reality of ASEAN, unless the regional organization finds a way to shed the shield of collective nation-states that constitute this regional organization and pursues Surin Pitsuwan's legacy of transforming it into a "sharing and caring" community, it has very little chance of coping with the avalanche of complex threats which have produced destructive climate change in Southeast Asia.

[12] Helena Varkkey, "Borderless haze threatens Southeast Asia," *360 One World Many Voices*, 15 August 2022, https://360info.org/borderless-haze-threatens-southeast-asia/ (accessed 28 September 2022).

Spiro ergo sum[13]

In the previous section, I have discussed various environmental threats to Southeast Asia. A most glaring man-made threat perhaps is what the Chinese government has done in the past decades to the international Mekong River. In constructing its eleven hydro dams in the northern part of the Mekong River, the Chinese government has exercised its rights on the portion of this international river which passes through its national territory. As Yos Santasombat puts it sharply: Mekong as the river of life for hundreds of millions of people is torn asunder from local fabrics of self-reliance and redefined as "state-property" to be exploited for commercial interests.[14] Yos's ferocious indictment of the Chinese could be construed as resulting from how his theoretical notion of "transnational enclosure" has been influenced by Marxist ideas, and specifically primitive accumulation, or David Harvey's "accumulation by dispossession" as suggested by some.[15] However, I believe that something much deeper has been at work to make it possible for a river of life to be transformed seamlessly into a commercially viable state-property. It is the epistemic grounds responsible for such a cruel miracle that needs to be called into question.

In the early 20th century, drought in India caused so much distress that around nineteen million Indians are reckoned to have died of hunger in 1901. But according to Sarah Dry's *Waters of the World* (2019), these famine-led deaths were due less to lack of rain than to the British imposition of a cash economy. Indian farmers were discouraged from their traditional practice of storing grain for hard times with the result that millions perished when famine struck.[16] It is also remarkable to note that the proposal that human activity was affecting the atmosphere was rejected as implausible as late as 1938.[17] Because human action was not considered part of the earth ecology at the time, this almost self-evident truth was considered far-fetched. To alter this belief requires an assessment of the dominant epistemic ground responsible for such segregation.

This need was eloquently addressed by Amitav Ghosh in his *The Great Derangement* (2016), which delivered a strong indictment of European and American fiction for failing to address "the most pressing problem of all—the global climate change catastrophe."[18] Ghosh pointed out that this failure could be attributed to the fact that contemporary fiction is heir to an intellectual legacy that values the probable over the improbable, and the steady norm over the turbulent exception. As a result, fiction writers were incapable of even imagining the scale of the crisis. Calamity of such magnitude was therefore

[13] Some discussion in this part is drawn from my "Breathing the Others, Seeing the Lives: A Reflection on Twenty-First Century Nonviolence," in Joseph Camilleri and Deborah Guess (eds), *Towards a Just and Ecologically Sustainable Peace: Navigating the Great Transition* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 229–248.

[14] Yos, *River of Life*, p. 8.

[15] Ian G. Baird, "Review of Yos Santasombat's River of Life," in *Anthropos: International Review of Anthropology and Linguistics,* 108 (March 2013), pp. 360–361.

[16] Jenny Uglow, "What the Weather Is," *The New York Review of Books*, 65, 20 (19 December 2019), p. 57.

[17] Ibid., p. 58.

[18] Aaron Matz, "Flaubert's Planet," *The New York Review of Books,* 69, 12 (21 July 2022), p. 23.

Figure 5. Amitav Ghosh (photo: asiasociety.org)

"unthinkable." Ghosh concluded that it was this vast "Western" *epistemic tradition* that had restrained them.

To critically examine such epistemic ground influencing modern intellectual traditions, let me proceed by analyzing a book *Time* considered "the eco-bible" of the latter part of the 20th century. E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* is in fact a creative critique of mainstream economics which shifts the focus to "economics as if people mattered" with a prominently innovative chapter on "Buddhist Economics." Mainstream economics, he believes, has been under the influence of six leading ideas dominating the modern mind, which are products of 19th and 20th-century thinkers: evolution, competition, materialism, sexual instinct, relativism, and positivism. I believe, however, that Schumacher missed a most distinguished 17th-century philosopher who continues to influence modern and postmodern thought in terms of dominant epistemology and its critique. His name is René Descartes.

Descartes wrote: "I, who was thinking them, had to be something; and observing this truth: I am thinking therefore I exist, …." He continued: "if I had merely ceased thinking, I would have no reason to believe that I existed, even if everything else I had ever imagined had been true. I thereby concluded that *I was a substance whose whole essence or nature resides only in thinking*, and which, in order to exist, has no need of place and is not dependent on any material thing."[19]

It is the thinking activity of the person as a disengaged actor that defines one as

[19] René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, translated with an introduction and notes by Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 28, 33.

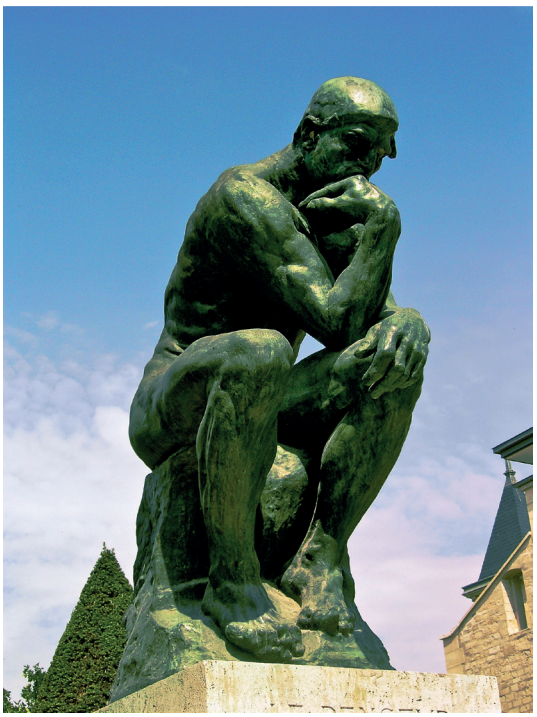
Figure 6. Rodin, The Thinker (photo: Wikicommons)

being human. This formulation was elegantly enshrined in the renowned philosophical dictum: *Cogito ergo sum* or "I think therefore I am." The image of the Cartesian human could very well be August Rodin's statue "The Thinker," but with a roofed wall blocking him from the world, with all lives effectively left outside so he could do his "thinking" in isolation. It is this idea of the isolated human being doing the thinking, separated from the rest of lives of the world, that is in some ways responsible for one's inability to see life in other living beings. Or if the life is indeed seen, then it becomes a means to the ends of the seeing agent, which consequently makes it easier to indulge oneself in a globalized world of indifference instead of facing and preparing for the ecological crisis that will impact all of us as a human community. It is therefore important to explore alternative epistemic ground that could help forge a way to be human that is conducive to caring for the earth and other humans.

While Descartes' dictum of *Cogito ergo sum* connects the thinking agent with their existence philosophically, for the human agent who thinks, no matter how secluded or concentrated they are, a realistic philosophical assumption will have to also assume that *the thinking agent is alive*. For humans, to be alive means to be able to breathe. But there are different ways to imagine a human being who breathes as a replacement to the unrealistic disengaged self that is trapped in a Cartesian wall doing the thinking in seclusion. Through the Buddhist exercise of concentrated breathing, the being reconnects with the world, cares for the world, and, in a world framed by the language of detachment, pursues the cessation of suffering born from the illusion of attachment. In Islam too, breathing is what makes us human. But while in the Buddhist lexicon the key word is *detachment*, in Islam it is through *remembering the profound way in which humans are connected to God* that makes us human and different from other living beings.

The Qur'an says that once God breathes life into the human, then hearing, sight, feelings and mind follow.[20] This means that when a human is with life, then they can hear, see, and feel the world around them. What then does one see or feel when looking at the world? This Qur'anic verse invites humans to see the lives of all created living things. But *how does* one see these lives? One must remember that in the act of creation,

[20] Surah-chapter 32: Ayah-verse 9; *The Qur'an*, translated by M. A. S. Abdul Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 13.

God breathes life into humans and so they themselves breathe. For a human, breathing is the act of living. But what does the human breathe? In the physical world, in the company of other humans, is it the dust of lives from the others that they are breathing in?

Inspired by both Buddhist and Islamic deliberations on breathing, I argue that we do indeed share the same source of lives. When we breathe others in, they can be seen and heard as the precious life that we all are. Hearing and seeing other humans therefore enables us to feel how they are, and as a result care for them. This enables us to replace the philosophic *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) which has trapped humans helplessly in the Cartesian wall for so long, with *Spiro ergo sum* (I breathe therefore I am). By breaking down the Cartesian wall to breathe in others in the context of the natural world, one emerges with a new epistemic sense of how it is precisely the wind of life that connects us all in a human community.

The question at this point is: is this "alternative epistemic ground" of *Spiro ergo sum* only a philosophical rumination? Or is it possible to find traditional Southeast Asian cultures, perhaps outside of philosophical Buddhist and Islamic influences discussed above, that could serve as a fertile cultural ground for the advent of a Southeast Asian Community? This is where one turns to the ancient story of the warrior and the floating lotus.

The warrior and the floating lotus

Once upon a time, there was a wounded warrior floundering from a defeated battle in pain. Overwhelmed and delirious in agony, the warrior reached a fast-flowing stream. He followed the water upstream until he reached a gorgeous waterfall. To rest his wound, he sat beneath the shade of a nameless old tree. Suddenly he noticed a lotus flower rushing down the torrent. The beautiful flower ended up floating on the pool right underneath the waterfall.[21]

The wounded warrior found something strange about the nature of the alluring lotus. He watched it carried by the current. The lotus looked like it could dance. Sometimes

Figure 7. Floating lotus

[21] Lian Sutton, "Embodying the Elements within Nature Through the Traditional Malay Art of Silat Tua," *eTropic* 17, 2 (2018), https://journals.jcu.edu.au/etropic/article/view/3652.

it sank under the raging river, but then popped up again. The curious warrior picked up a rock and threw it at the dancing lotus on the luminous water. With his trained accurate throw, the lotus sank just below the surface only to reappear unfazed on the pool elsewhere. Now even more agitated, the warrior, who had by now forgotten his wounds, picked up a nearby branch and threw it at the frolicking lotus as a wooden lance. Again, the flower twisted and turned, flowing with the current, sometimes sinking and at other times rising exquisitely.

Now evidently furious, the warrior drew his mighty sword, charged into the water, and began thrusting and hacking at the playful lotus without success. The delicate lotus flower merely swirled, twirled, and twisted away, each time appearing either too far or too close for his sword to attack. Already defeated in battle, the warrior must now have felt worse for being defeated by the lotus flower. He staggered back to the old tree, drenched in constrictive anger and tired beyond belief. With a heart of burning fire, the warrior took a deep breath and decided to meditate on the experience of his battle with the strange lotus flower.[22]

What followed was an awakening within the warrior which was at once simple and profound. The apparent fragility of the lotus flower combined with the softness and yielding nature of the water to create a harmonious form which no hardened force could destroy. The warrior began looking at all aspects of nature to aid his battle against the invincible lotus. He found his answer in a profound understanding of the Four Elements commonly cherished in so many Southeast Asian cultures.

It was this new-found imagination of the connection between the Four Elements that was at the forefront of a holistic understanding of the mind and body as reflected in *Silat Tua* in the Malay World. The Elements are explored in both the environment of training, and in terms of how they are harnessed in the mind and body. It is common for the *Silat* practitioner or the martial arts maestro to begin by defining and differentiating the characteristics of each Element, taking the maestro from the outside to the inside, and vice versa. This is indeed an example of a possible pedagogical structure of Elemental exploration within the art.

At first the *pesilat* (the *Silat* fighter), like the wounded warrior in the story of the origin of this martial art, searches from the outside, in the interaction between man and Element. The *pesilat* may be encouraged to train in different terrains, from grassy plains to sandy beaches, and muddy banks to thick jungle grounds. In this process, the *pesilat* may learn to move closer to the earth for strong grounding (Earth), *to work with the breath (Air/Wind)* and the natural internal rhythm of the heart (Fire), so as to flow (Water) with Nature, as did the lotus flower when dancing in the water in the origin story.[23] This in fact was the beginning story of *Silat Tua*, a traditional Malay martial art that has an intimate and complex relationship with nature.[24]

I have discussed the origin story of *Silat Tua* to convey the idea that within the heart

[22] Zainal Abidin Shaikh Awab and Nigel Sutton, *Silat Tua: The Malay Dance of Life* (Kuala Lumpur: Azlan Ghanie, 2006), pp. 17–19.

[23] Sutton, *Embodying the Elements.*

[24] Awab and Sutton, *Silat Tua*, p. 13.

of Southeast Asia, especially in the Malay world, the advent of a traditional martial arts alluded to the ways in which the human can connect with nature, not dominating it, but living in accordance with its foundation, flows, energy, and connections: earth, water, fire and the breathing air. In an extraordinary way, if the story of the wounded warrior and the floating lotus is in fact the cultural story of how in the "dance of life", humans can touch, flow, catch the fire inside, and breathe in the lives around them, then I would argue that the need to shift the epistemic ground from *Cogito* to *Spiro ergo sum* is not merely a philosophical contemplation, but a possible future because the cultural underpinning for just such a shift does exist. The next step is to explore some modern manifestations of how a reimagined relationship between humans and nature have been attempted in modern times.

Buddhist "yellow trees" and Islamic "green mosques"

Yellow trees. Thailand is a country of 517, 645 sq km. In 1973, 43.2 percent of this area was forest. Some forty-six years later in 2019, this had fallen to 31.7 percent.[25] Deforestation was worst in the late 1980s, when forest cover was only 28 percent in 1988. In Northeastern Thailand at the time, there were 932 cases of conflict of which 54 percent were over land use and 31 percent over forests. In the early 1990s, Thailand experienced a rising wave of conflicts related to natural resources, with more than half between rural villagers and state agencies. They were results of a development policy with a strong emphasis on industrialization and a highly centralized management of natural resources by the state. Importantly, state officials believed that villagers could not live in harmony with the forests, and that state agencies were the "real" protectors of natural resources.[26]

In this context, one fine afternoon in 1992, the Coordinating Group for Religions in Society and other Thai NGOs invited the leaders of the Chipko Movement to come to Thailand to share their experiences of fighting against deforestation in India with their Thai civil society colleagues. The Chipko Movement began in Chamoli district in 1974, when women and girls from Reni village led by Gaura Devi stood in front of trees marked for felling. They put their bodies between the trees and armed men prepared to cut down those trees. Gaura Devi told the tree cutters in front of her: "This forest nurtures us like a mother, you will only be able to use your axe on it if you shoot me first." After a three-day standoff, the men withdrew and the movement of courageous activists who nonviolently protect the forests with their lives by hugging the trees (*chipko* means "hug" in Hindi) became legendary.[27]

In the packed small auditorium at Thammasat University on that day, I saw in the audience a young monk, well-known for his respected demeanor and interest in

[25] Royal Forestry Department, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Forest Mapping Project 2020 https://www.forest.go.th/land/รายงานโครงการจัดทำข้อม-9/ (accessed 12 November 2022).

[26] Wongsa Khamdee and Suvit Laohasiriwong, *Conflict Management in Thailand: Synthesis of Experiences and Research Document* (Khon Khaen: Dispute Resolution Institute, Khon Khaen University, 1996), pp. 32–36 (in Thai).

[27] Chaiwat, "Breathing the Others, Seeing the Lives," p. 245.

Figure 8 (top). The Chipko Movemenet, Uttar Pradesh, 1973 (photo: Wikicommons, author unknown)
Figure 9 (left). Sunderlal Bahuguna (photo: India Today archives).
Figure 10 (right). Phra Paisal Visalo (photo: semsikkha.org)

nonviolent action. If my memory serves me right, I thought I saw his eyes glitter with hopeful wisdom while listening to the story as told by the then Chipko leader, Sunderlal Bahuguna, a close associate of Gaura Devi. This monk Phra Paisal Visalo had earlier edited the first book in Thai on the Chipko movement,[28] and later started an extraordinary cultural experiment in Thailand's forest protection.

What is most fascinating is how the traveling story of the Chipko movement inspires other forms of highly creative nonviolent action to protect forests in different contexts. From the mind of the young Buddhist Thai monk listening to the Indian Hindu activists, perhaps among other influencing factors, an innovative way to protect local forests in

[28] See Phra Paisal Visalo (ed.), *Oab Kord* (Chipko) (Bangkok: Coordinating Group for Religions in Society and Peace and Development, 1991) (in Thai).

Figure 11. Ordaining trees in the community forest for protection at Ban Thung-yao, Lamphun, in 2017 (Photo: Jarunee Khongswasdi).

Thai society was born. Creatively drawing on their own cultural resources and strength, the monk and his colleagues decided that since they were empowered to ordain people according to Buddhist tenets, why not ordain trees as a cultural measure to save the forest from the loggers' saws and blades? Thai monks then performed Buddhist rituals and tied saffron or yellow robes, the color of Buddhist monks' simple attire, around some trees that needed protection. With cultural resources at their disposal, the trees turned magically yellow, and the forests became visually enchanted with Buddhist sacredness.

Though it is hard to tell whether this cultural nonviolence put a complete stop to illegal cutting of trees in Thai forests, it is not that difficult to imagine that some Thai loggers were discouraged from cutting down trees when they saw Buddhist yellow robes around them. I would also contend that, while in the Indian case the woodcutters might be deterred from carrying out their abominable task due to the legal and moral forces underscoring the consequences of cutting down people hugging the trees in front of them, in the Thai case it is highly likely that it is the *cultural force*, not legal, of seeing ordained yellow trees that has the power to halt them.[29]

The idea of ordaining trees to save Thai forests also caught the official imagination. On 5 June 1996, a network of Northern Thai farmers together with local monks,

[29] Chaiwat Satha-Anand, "Two Plots of Nonviolence Stories: From the Streets of Bangkok to the Forests of Thailand, *Social Alternatives*, 16, 2 (April 1997), p. 14.

academics, private companies, and state agencies initiated a mega-project to ordain fifty million trees in one hundred community forests in Northern Thailand. The project, designed in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the Late King Rama IX's ascension to the throne, concluded on his birthday, 5 December.[30] Thai state agencies continue to organize events for ordaining trees on different occasions. For example, on 5 June 2021, the mayor of Umong Tambon in Lamphun inaugurated a 2021 environment day campaign with tree planting and ordaining trees.[31]

These activities vouch for the fact that the cultural power of ordaining trees has moved beyond the extraordinarily creative initiatives of civil society to become accepted and even fashionable among the mainstream establishment, namely Thai state agencies at different levels, local as well as national.

Green Mosques. In November 2017, the then Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla launched an initiative to help mosques in the country to generate renewable energy, manage water, increase food sustainability, reduce and recycle waste, and provide environmental education. This new initiative aimed to establish a thousand eco-mosques by 2020.[32]

This ambitious project was a collaboration between top Muslim clerics, the private sector, the health and planning ministries, universities, and other religious groups to create environmental awareness in communities across the country. Hayu Prabowo, head of environment and natural resources at the Indonesian Ulema Council, said: "Most Muslims in Indonesia listen more to religious leaders than the government…. If an Islamic leader says something they will follow but if the government says something, they may not."[33] The idea of eco-mosques or "green mosques" is said to stem from asking how to make mosques the center for environment and education within a community.

Though I have not seen what has become of former Vice President Kalla's thousand eco-mosque initiative, perhaps the most glorifying example of how Indonesia has been successful in carrying out its "green mosque project" is how the Istiqlal Mosque, the biggest mosque in Southeast Asia with a capacity to accommodate some 200,000 worshippers right in the heart of Jakarta, has become the first place of worship in the world to be certified as an environmental-friendly place of worship by the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank Group. Here are some of the things that earned the Istiqlal Mosque such an accolade.

The Indonesian government redesigned the Istiqlal Mosque with state-of-the-art energy-saving measures which include reflective paint for roofs and external walls, energy-saving light bulbs, and solar photovoltaics. As the notion of Islamic cleanliness is defined by water, and Muslims need to use water faucets for ablution at prayers five times a day, the use of water at mosques presents a real problem. The Istiqlal Mosque

[30] Ibid., pp. 14–15.

[31] https://www.chiangmainews.co.th/social/1681282/ (accessed 8 November 2022).

[32] Michael Taylor, "Indonesia unveils plan to roll out 1,000 eco-mosques by 2020," Reuters, 16 November 2017 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-climatechange-religion-idUSKBN1DG1J8 (accessed 27 October 2022).

[33] Michael Taylor, "Can Indonesia's Muslim leaders boost public climate change action?" 17 August 2022, https://www.context.news/nature/can-indonesias-muslim-leaders-boost-public-climate-change-action (accessed 1 November 2022).

Figure 12. Solar panels at Istiqlal Mosque, Jakarta (photo © Yorri / Greenpeace)

solved this issue by reducing its water consumption. The mosque installed new low-flow faucets which flow at a rate of five rather than sixteen liters per minute, along with water-efficient urinals, flush system, and grey water treatment.[34]

What is remarkable about the Istiqlal Mosque's achievement is that everything listed which enables the mosque to receive a high honor from the World Bank Group are all assessable technical measures. Indonesia's biggest mosque is painted "green" with energy-saving technologies. A question could also be raised at this point: in what way do such actions by a mosque work toward alleviating environmental challenges in Indonesia and create conditions where society will indeed become more ecologically sustainable? In thinking through these questions, it is important to briefly examine what a mosque really is in Islam.

In Islam, a mosque is far more than a religious place of worship. It has always been understood as having dual functions, both religious worship and civil, ever since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. From Egypt to Algeria, mosques turn out to be centers of opposition with privileged status, oftentimes outside the sphere of state control, with a communication network that will always be partially independent. Ideas generated from these networks of mosques, the core of the Islamic religious structure, cut across national borders. From Friday sermons (*khutba*) to unofficial teachings and activities in these mosques around the Muslim world, "customary values have been perpetuated, political and social issues discussed, and strategies for action planned."[35]

[34] Ayu Purwaningsih, "Indonesia Mosque Goes Green," DW, 9 June 2022, http://85.217.170.64/en/mosques-in-indonesia-go-green/video-62077965 (accessed 14 November 2022).

[35] Chaiwat Satha-Anand, "'Red Mosques': Mitigating Violence Against Sacred Spaces in Thailand and

Perhaps because of what a mosque is in Islam, it is far more important to ask what a mosque can do in the fight against environmental destruction and perhaps how it can restore a better-balanced ecological reality in Indonesia? In July 2022, top Islamic representatives met at the Istiqlal Mosque to discuss ways to raise awareness about global warming and develop climate solutions linked to Islamic teachings. Imams and other religious leaders are respected and listened to in Indonesia, and might have a big impact on both government policy and citizen action. A digital campaigner at climate activist group 350.org remarked: "Imams could affect a lot of social change…seeding awareness of environmentally-friendly life and propelling the climate movement at the grassroots level." The head of Greenpeace Indonesia urged religious leaders to "dig more into Islamic teachings about the earth and repairing it." On grounds that almost 90 percent of Indonesia's 270 million people are Muslims, and the nation has 800,000 mosques, 37,000 Islamic boarding schools, and more than 170 Islamic-led universities, Zulfira Warta, a climate project leader at WWF Indonesia, demanded that Muslim religious leaders promote environmental issues among their congregations and communities. In 2014, a few years before the "green mosque" project, Indonesia's highest Muslim clerical council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) issued a world first non-legally binding *fatwa* (religious edict) against killing endangered animals, and in 2016 another edict to stop the burning of land and forests. Such *fatwas* could certainly bolster government regulations and inspire people to support environmental protection. The head of the Indonesian conservation group Satya Bumi concluded that: "We have the solutions—we (just) need all actors to play their part and our Muslim faith can underpin all of this."[36]

Conclusion: From "Nowhere left to go" to Groot's wisdom

This article began with a dream of ASEAN's most prominent visionary diplomat, the late Surin Pitsuwan of pursuing a caring and sharing Southeast Asian *community*, and has offered examples of climate action in two very different cultural topographies: Thai/Buddhist and Indonesian/Islamic. But if we are now living "with a whole row of Damocles swords hanging above our heads,"[37] especially in terms of ecological reality, then we need to realize that at present, we have *Nowhere Left to Go*.[38]

We have "nowhere left to go" because a new exodus is rapidly taking place all over the world. The rise in global temperature is causing plants, animal species, as well as people to move toward the poles and higher cooler ground. This exodus has begun to

Beyond," in Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (eds), *Southeast Asian Muslims in the Era of Globalization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 201–202.

[36] Taylor, "Can Indonesia's Muslim leaders boost public climate change action?"

[37] Umberto Eco, "Sign of the Times," in Umberto Eco, Stephen Jay Gould, Jean-Claude Carriere, and Jean Delumeau, *Conversations About the End of Time*, produced and edited by Catherine David, Frederic Lenoir, and Jean-Philippe de Tonnac (New York: Fromm International, 2001), p. 213.

[38] Benjamin von Brackel, *Nowhere Left to Go: How Climate Change is Driving Species to the Ends of the Earth*, translated by Ayça Türkoğlu (New York: The Experiment, 2022).

overwhelm biological and political stability.[39] Compared to the Biblical/Quranic great flood, the problem of today's climate change is far more onerous. While Noah had to cope with just forty days of rain, according to Camille Parmesan, "there is no end in sight" for the perils of today's climate change where the change never stops.[40]

Benjamin von Brackel concludes his captivating work *Nowhere Left to Go* with these words:

> the less we allow the earth to warm, the more areas we return to nature, and the more reserves and corridors we create, the more species we will be able to save, and we will at least be able to pass on fragments of life on this planet to our children and their children."[41]

But even if our modest aspiration about the world is merely "to pass on fragments of life on this planet to our children and their children", I think it wise to heed Mark Brett's painful admonition that: "Our grandchildren will not thank us for righteous indignation that simply leaves our politics broken."[42]

How then should we try *not* to leave "our politics broken"? Let us reread von Brackel's conclusion in *Nowhere Left to Go* again, but this time with a close textual analysis. In a portion of that prophetic paragraph comprising just fifty-four words, von Brackel uses the word "we" five times, "our" once, and ends the sentence with the future of "our children and their children." These five "we" words are also associated with four clear climate actions: first, "we" must work not to allow the earth to get warm; second, "we" must return more areas to nature; third, "we" must create more reserves and corridors; fourth, "we" must save more species. Only by committing to these climate actions, will the fifth "we" be able to pass along "fragments of life on this planet" to our children and theirs. Put another way, the most important task is to construct a sense of "we" that is powerful enough to carry out these required climate actions.

Here I will turn to popular culture and solicit Groot's wisdom as the final inspirational story necessary for the construction of a sense of "we" that is powerful enough to face the existing climate malady. Groot is a most unusual superhero from one of the most successful Marvel movies in the past few years, *Guardians of the Galaxy*. The movie is an intergalactic adventure of four "losers": Peter Quill/Star Lord, a human (with a godlike father, but that is another story); two humanoid aliens, the female assassin Gamora, daughter of the Titan Thanos, and the frightful Drax; Rocket, a genetically-engineered raccoon with advanced technical knowledge and a foul mouth; and Groot, a tree-like being with immense power. While innocent, Groot is at once deadly and sweet in equal measure.

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[39] Bill McKibben, "Where Will We Live?" *The New York Reviews of Books*, 69, 15 (6 October 2022), pp. 6–10.

[40] Ibid., p. 6.

[41] Ibid., pp. 6–8.

[42] Mark G. Brett, "Response: Utopian Versus Prophetic Visions," in Camilleri and Guess, *Towards a Just and Ecologically Sustainable Peace*, p. 331.

Figure 13. Guardians of the Galaxy: Groot, Rocket, Peter Quill, Gamora, Drax (images: Disney+)

The most memorable attribute of Groot is his speech which consists of only three words: "I am Groot." His communication technique depends on the various tones, sounds, and facial expressions which accompany these three words and are expertly used with fantastic communicative effect.[43]

At the end of the movie, when the guardians' galactic ship has been shot down, and the heroes are about to meet their demise, Groot the hero-tree uses his power to protect the guardians. The tree is protecting other lives. In Groot's dying moment, when he can save everyone in his tree-like shielding embrace, Rocket the bio-engineered raccoon, his closest friend, tearfully asks Groot why he is doing this when he knows full well that using his power in this way will kill him. Groot musters what's left of life to answer Rocket's question with the never-before spoken words: *"We are Groot."*

Perhaps, Groot's wisdom lies in knowing that there comes a time when the singular "I" that he has used all his life has to give way to the collective "we". By substituting the "I" with the "collective we" that cares for others and is ready to share our destiny, at times paying the necessary price, could a human community, in Southeast Asia or elsewhere in the galaxy, become strong enough to engage the challenges of climate change?

[43] Vin Diesel, the gravelly voiced American actor who vocalizes Groot's three words, had fun doing this in so many languages.