

THE SPICE ROUTE AS REGIONAL CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE: IDENTITY, SOFT POWER, AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Irsyaad Suharyadi^{1*}, Eka Fera Nur Anggraini²

^{1,2}*Universitas Lampung (Indonesia)*

*) email: irsyaadsuharyadi@fisip.unila.ac.id

Abstract

This article explores the Spice conduit as a global cultural conduit, how it shaped regional identity in Maritime Southeast Asia, and how it is being reinterpreted as a soft power pillar. Southeast Asia was historically integrated into early global economic and cultural systems through the Spice Route, which linked the archipelagic areas through extensive networks of maritime movement, trade, and cultural exchange. The Spice Route was more than just a commercial route; it was a complex social and cultural environment where power dynamics, interaction, and hybridity shaped identities. This study uses a qualitative historical-critical method to examine how memories of the Spice Route are mobilized and remade in modern cultural diplomacy, drawing on maritime historiography, regional identity theories, and the idea of soft power. The results demonstrate that whereas narratives of marine cosmopolitanism and regional connection have been reinforced by the rebirth of the Spice Route, its current use is frequently influenced by specific national goals. Because of this, shared heritage is often divided into incomplete narratives that prioritize symbolic appeal while ignoring local experiences, colonial violence, and historical injustices. The paper makes the case that the Spice Route offers a framework for interaction through which identities are constantly negotiated rather than naturally creating a cohesive regional identity. Its legitimacy as a soft power source rests on regional cooperation, historical accuracy, and local community inclusivity. In the absence of these prerequisites, the Spice Route runs the risk of becoming little more than cultural branding rather than a useful diplomatic tool. By emphasizing the moral and political difficulties in turning historical memory into modern soft power, the study adds to conversations on maritime heritage, cultural diplomacy, and regional identity in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Spice Route, Maritime Southeast Asia, cultural diplomacy, soft power.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Southeast Asian archipelago, consisting of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, and Timor Leste, has been considered an entity that is not a geographical region divided by race, language, and religion. Instead, it is defined by strong maritime relations between these countries. Inter-community relations in this region arose as a result of the continuous movement of goods, people, stories, languages, and values along with maritime trade. Among the many trade routes that crossed this region, the spice route that lasted from the 15th to the 17th century became the main focus that brought this region into the global economy. Products such as cloves from Maluku, nutmeg from the Banda Islands, pepper from Sumatra and Kalimantan, and cinnamon were shipped through various transit points,

connecting the Indonesian islands with India, the Middle East, China, and even Europe. Various maritime trading centers emerged in places such as Sriwijaya, Malacca, Banten, Gresik, and Makassar, serving not only as business hubs but also as dynamic cultural convergence points.

However, more than just an economic route, this also became a cultural corridor where traces and influences mixed and enriched regional identities. Traders from Gujarat brought Islam and the influence of West Indian architecture. Chinese migrants brought the colors of porcelain, trade rules, and Confucianism. However, the Portuguese and Dutch then arrived with a different legacy, going beyond coastal forts and introducing new patterns for settlements and plantations. The Portuguese and Dutch changed the social and economic structure of the region. Based on these interactions, a fluid and layered identity emerged as an archipelago. The Malay language emerged as a common terminology for all islands. Wayang art forms emerged with Hindu and Buddhist influences, blending with local stories and symbols. At the same time, there were foods such as rendang and fried rice with intercontinental experiences and influences.

Based on Anthony Reid's historical perspective on the Age of Trade (1400-1800), this is considered the emergence of maritime dominance as a space for forming identity in this region. Unlike Indochina, this region remained agrarian. However, protests against this historical pattern emerged. This gave rise to the Peranakan community, the tradition of inter-island marriages, and sailing festivals. This strengthened the sense and idea of belonging between islands within the same maritime cultural space.

Over the past two decades, the Spice Route has once again become a topic of discussion, no longer merely a mystery about ancient routes, but also related to the cultural and diplomatic agendas set by Southeast Asian countries. The Indonesian government initially revived interest in the Spice Route with UNESCO in 2015, highlighting that it was an ancient shipping route that influenced inter-ethnic interactions and knowledge transfer over centuries. Malaysia has revived its maritime heritage with its current role as the manager of Malacca as a world heritage site and its position emphasizing Malay seafaring traditions and expertise. The city-state of Singapore has brought a new focus to regional history with a new emphasis on maritime museums and exhibitions on Southeast Asian seafaring.

Brunei maintains its heritage as a Malay sultanate with its historical traditions and culture. On the eastern side of the region, the governments of the Philippines and Timor-Leste are increasingly recognizing the importance of maritime spaces such as the Sulu Zone and the Dili Coast as integral parts of the larger narrative of inter-island relations. All these developments indicate that the Spice Route today is not considered a distant historical memory, but rather a symbolic resource that is attempting to

reconstruct itself in the face of challenges and opportunities arising from Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

Although the Spice Route is once again frequently raised in the cultural and diplomatic agenda in Southeast Asia, the way this route is interpreted and utilized is not yet fully aligned. On the one hand, the Spice Route is understood as a symbol of maritime identity and the historical interconnectedness of the Southeast Asian archipelago. This narrative emphasizes past experiences shaped by mobility, exchange, and cross-sea interactions. On the other hand, however, the utilization of the Spice Route often moves within the framework of each country's national interests, whether for image building, tourism promotion, or specific cultural diplomacy agendas. As a result, the meaning of the Spice Route does not always present itself as a complete regional heritage, but rather as a collection of partial narratives that are selected and highlighted according to need.

This condition shows that the Spice Route is not only related to history or cultural heritage, but also to the process of interpreting and negotiating meaning at the regional level. The tension between efforts to build regional identity, the diplomatic interests of nation-states, and the increasingly dynamic geopolitical context of the Indo-Pacific is an important issue in reinterpreting the Spice Route as a global cultural route. Based on this issue, this study aims to examine how the Spice Route is constructed and interpreted in contemporary cultural diplomacy practices, and to what extent these narratives contribute to the formation of the identity of the Southeast Asian Archipelago region. In practical terms, this study is expected to provide material for reflection on the management of maritime cultural heritage so that it is not merely symbolic, but also more sensitive to the complexity of history and regional interests.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the connection between maritime history and modern cultural diplomacy, this study combines a historical-critical analytical approach with a qualitative research methodology. By placing historical narratives within their larger political, social, and cultural settings and challenging the ways in which these narratives are chosen, understood, and repurposed in the present, the historical-critical method goes beyond descriptive descriptions of the past.

Three primary categories comprise the literature analyzed in this study. Historiographical works on Southeast Asian maritime history, including significant contributions by Reid, Andaya, Lapian, Tagliacozzo, and Manguin, make up the first category. The historical underpinnings for comprehending the Spice Route as a dynamic maritime area influenced by power dynamics, mobility, trade networks, and cross-cultural interactions are provided by these books.

Theoretical works on regional identity and international relations make up the second category. The analysis of identity formation, cultural flows, and soft power is

framed by the theories put forward by Acharya, Appadurai, and Nye. Particularly in the context of Southeast Asia, these viewpoints allow the research to link pre-modern patterns of contact with modern processes of identity building and diplomatic practice.

Documents and reports from UNESCO, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, and policy studies from Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste are among the works in the third category that discuss current cultural policies and heritage efforts. In order to comprehend how historical accounts of the Spice Route are mobilized, promoted, and institutionalized within contemporary cultural diplomacy tactics, these sources are examined.

The analysis investigates how pre-modern maritime history is reinterpreted and transformed into a strategic cultural resource in the present by putting these three literary bodies into conversation. This method highlights the advantages and disadvantages of employing shared maritime heritage as an instrument of cultural diplomacy by enabling the study to discover continuities, ruptures, and conflicts between historical experience and current policy goals.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Spice Route and the Formation of Regional Maritime Identity

Research findings show that the spice route cannot be understood merely as a series of ports or interregional trade routes. This route was a socio economic space formed by the convergence of commercial interests, local political dynamics, and the power strategies of various empires. Therefore, when discussing the formation of regional identity along this route, the interconnection between these elements becomes inseparable. The formation of regional identity took place in several layers. First, human mobility and the intensity of cross-sea interactions gave rise to hybrid practices, evident in language, religion, culinary traditions, and even navigational knowledge. Second, power relations played a role in determining who had access to resources and who had the right to shape and legitimize historical narratives.

Third, memories of the spice route have been sorted and fragmented, especially since the emergence of nationalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when some historical experiences were highlighted while others were set aside.

Taking Indonesia as an example, since 2015 the spice route has been constructed as a historical narrative that affirms the cosmopolitan character of this region. This narrative positions Indonesia as a maritime civilization with a network of important ports that played a role in global dynamics in the past (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015; Laksmana, 2016). This presentation of history is considered effective in strengthening Indonesia's image as a maritime country and providing a historical basis for the Global Maritime Fulcrum policy.

However, from a critical perspective, this narrative faces a number of problems. First, the selection of the historical period presented tends to be selective, thereby

ignoring other historical experiences that are problematic or traumatic. As a result, the history of the spice route is presented as a series of episodes that highlight maritime glory, while the dynamics of power and inequality in the past receive less attention. Second, this approach risks simplifying the complexity of Indonesian history in a global context by focusing on specific periods and actors, resulting in a limited historical picture.

3.2 Contestation of Maritime Heritage Narratives and the Politics of Representation

The second finding states that Malaysia exhibits similar dynamics to Indonesia, but with different characteristics. The narrative of Malacca as the center of the Malay world is emphasized to assert the continuity of Malay culture while strengthening the historical legitimacy of the Malaysian nation-state (Andaya, 2008). In practice, site conservation and museum exhibitions utilize maritime aesthetics to support tourism, which has proven to attract visitors, but risks simplifying historical complexity into a single iconic representation (Winter, 2018). When transnational cultural claims such as disputes over culinary symbols or traditional dances meet, differences in identity can trigger tensions at the regional level. In this context, cultural heritage, which was originally intended to build appeal, often turns into an arena of diplomatic competition that consumes political energy.

A different approach is seen in Singapore, which integrates maritime history as part of a globally accessible narrative of a cosmopolitan port city. The preservation of historical relics through museums and planned curatorial practices makes Singapore's historical narrative appear controlled and aligned with trade and service-based economic interests. This kind of curation also shows how history can be repackaged to be relevant to international audiences.

However, this approach still raises concerns because it has the potential to ignore the voices of local communities, such as the Peranakan community, which is part of the living history of this region as discussed in Appadurai (1996) and Andaya (2008).

Other cases, such as Brunei, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste, are fraught with issues of limited government capacity, lack of conservation resources, and different paths of colonization. Therefore, the reconstruction of their maritime heritage is prone to simplification and commodification. The Philippines, for example, has a complex Sulu Zone with a rich but conflict-ridden maritime history, colored by issues of domestic political relations; therefore, efforts to rediscover this heritage must relate to Muslim Mindanao in a way that avoids politicizing their own identity issues (Warren, 2007). Timor-Leste has a "new" history as a country, which gives it the opportunity to retrace its sandalwood history to claim a pre-colonial regional identity, but undoubtedly, the government's limited capacity poses a challenge.

3.3 The Spice Route as an Instrument of Soft Power Cultural Diplomacy

The third finding shows that the use of the spice route as an instrument of soft power demonstrates how historical memory can be converted into diplomatic capital. However, the effectiveness of soft power is highly dependent on the ability of the narrative to reach and resonate with third-party audiences, such as tourists, investors, and mantras. In this context, there are three main conditions that need to be met. First, the narrative must have historical credibility and not be perceived solely as a political agenda of the state. Second, the narrative needs to be inclusive by involving the active participation of local communities and paying attention to their needs and rights. Third, the sustainability of soft power requires funding support, expertise in cultural management, and public education. Without fulfilling these three conditions, soft power in foreign policy tends to be reduced to mere cultural marketing and does not have a real positive impact on local communities.

Relations with regional politics also have interesting implications. In promoting the Spice Route, countries are effectively providing an alternative narrative about Southeast Asia as not only a geopolitical space between major powers, but also a region of maritime imagination with global memory. This can strengthen regional presence in the Indo-Pacific region through "cultural objects" that are different from conventional geopolitical objects. However, there are also costs involved. Without regional cooperation, this potential could lead to fragmentation in terms of claims to shared heritage. ASEAN could be a platform for bringing countries together, but it lacks normative power due to the principle of non-intervention and the domestic goals of individual members, which stem from the functional need for a certain level of group compliance, as described in Acharya (2001).

At a practical level, there are a number of relatively successful examples of strategies that combine historical credibility with modern appeal. One cultural diplomacy practice used by a number of Asian countries is the use of cuisine as a means of shaping their international image. Through spice-based culinary programs, intangible cultural heritage can be introduced to a global audience while increasing interest in its history and culture of origin (Rockower, 2012). However, the use of cuisine in cultural diplomacy needs to be accompanied by an honest historical narrative so as not to reduce culture to a mere consumer product without historical context.

Practical policy recommendations indicate several important steps. First, the development of the Spice Route heritage narrative needs to be inclusive, involving coastal communities, local researchers, and civil society organizations so that the narrative presented reflects diverse experiences, including historical wounds. Second, a regional cooperation mechanism is needed to harmonize cross-border heritage claims in order to prevent symbolic conflicts, for example through a joint forum under the auspices of ASEAN-UNESCO that establishes guidelines for cross-border heritage management. Third, public education programs need to emphasize the complexity of the Spice Route's history, not only its cosmopolitan splendor, but also exploitation,

ecological change, and local resistance, so that soft power is built on historical truth, not myth.

In practice, the use of the Spice Route as an instrument of cultural diplomacy cannot be separated from its political economy dimension. Well-managed heritage tourism has the potential to provide significant economic benefits, but at the same time, it can pose the risk of cultural commodification and displacement of local communities if it is not based on the principle of sustainability. Therefore, a fair management model needs to ensure that the economic benefits of spice route management are enjoyed by the communities that have historically been the guardians of cultural traditions and knowledge, not solely by industry players. With ethical and sustainable management, the spice route can serve as a powerful source of soft power through a combination of cultural appeal and social justice.

4. CONCLUSION

Reading the spice route as a basis for understanding the formation of the identity of the Southeast Asian archipelago shows that this maritime history has functioned on two levels: the historical level, which includes a mixture of cultural practices, and the contemporary political level, which seeks to exploit this memory as a political resource rather than simply an actual historical resource. To consider this history merely as a trade route would effectively ignore it as a series of networks involving

human migration, the shift of ideas, and power struggles that represent an important part of the region's history over the centuries. To consider it merely as a channel of soft power in contemporary history would effectively deny this history by removing it from its historical context as a region of inequality and imbalance of wealth, inequality of cultural narratives.

An important discovery, however, is that the Spice Route did not inherently produce regional identities, but rather provided a starting point for interaction, which in turn facilitated the development of identities. The use of Malay as a lingua franca, the development of peranakan communities, the adoption of world religions, and the habit of consuming spices facilitated a "collective maritime consciousness" that distinguished this region from mainland Asia. This consciousness, however, continues to fluctuate in line with patterns of power, technology, and globalization, making constructivist theories such as Acharya's relevant, in which regional identity is constructed, not inherited.

At the contemporary level, the legacy of the spice route is increasingly being exploited as a source of soft power by a number of countries. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and the Philippines use maritime memory to strengthen their national image, promote tourism, and expand cultural cooperation by asserting their strategic position amid Indo-Pacific dynamics. However, the utilization of this heritage

often involves a process of narrative selection, in which countries tend to highlight aspects of history that are in line with their diplomatic interests, while other more problematic parts receive less attention. These aspects include historical experiences such as colonial monopoly practices, inter-state coastal conflicts, and the exploitation of local labor. In this context, the spice route has shifted from a complex history to a selectively constructed narrative that builds appeal but also limits the space for a more comprehensive understanding of heritage.

The revitalization of the spice route will only become credible soft power if it is based on historical honesty, community participation, and regional coordination. Heritage programs, if not based on historical honesty, risk becoming trapped in the glorification of the past. Without the involvement of coastal communities and local actors, heritage becomes a state project separated from its historical owners. Without regional coordination, each country can claim the same fragments of heritage, creating symbolic competition instead of collaboration. These three prerequisites, above all, are not only technical measures but also ethical responsibilities in managing shared heritage.

Historically, the spice route has remained not only a memory of communities and a diplomatic trophy, but also a form of cultural infrastructure that connects the past with the future. With reflective, critical, and inclusive management, this memory can serve as a strengthening factor for regions with a history of navigation that remains relevant in contemporary conditions. On the other hand, with superficial and utility-oriented management, it becomes a commodity that loses its meaning. The future of the spice route as a foundation for soft power depends on a delicate balance between memory and reality, pride and honesty, and a blend of nationalist considerations, not merely regional ones. At this juncture, it is important for the identity of the Indonesian archipelago to develop in a way that remains open, cosmopolitan, and critically self-aware in relation to its history.

REFERENCES

- Acharya, A. (2001). *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order*. Routledge.
- Andaya, B. W. (2008). *The world of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the early modern period*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Andaya, L. Y. (2008). *Leaves of the same tree: Trade and ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Anderson, B. R. O'G. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. University of Minnesota Press.

- Borschberg, P. (2010). *Maritime networks and the early modern world: A study of Southeast Asia*. NUS Press.
- Fernández, J. (2019). *Global cultural routes and contested heritage: UNESCO and the politics of history*. Routledge.
- Gullick, J. M. (2011). Trade, migration, and the development of Southeast Asian port cities. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 42(1), 33–55.
- Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Indonesia. (2015). *Revitalisasi Rute Rempah dan Pelestarian Warisan Maritim*. Jakarta: Kemendikbud.
- Laksmana, E. A. (2016). Maritime culture and Indonesian soft power. *Indonesian Journal of International Affairs*, 3(2), 45–62.
- Lapian, A. (1994). *Orang Laut dan peran mereka dalam perdagangan Nusantara*. Penerbit Masyarakat Sejarawan Indonesia.
- Manguin, P.-Y. (2011). *Southeast Asian maritime history: Networks, trade, and conflict*. ISEAS Publishing.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public Affairs.
- Reid, A. (1993). *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450–1680, Vol. 1: The lands below the winds*. Yale University Press.
- Reid, A. (1998). *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450–1680, Vol. 2: Expansion and crisis*. Yale University Press.
- Rockower, P. S. (2012). Recipes for gastrodiploacy: The impact of culinary diplomacy on international relations. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 8(3), 235–246.
- Soutullo, F. (2019). Dams, geopolitics, and environmental risks along the Mekong River. *Water International*, 44(7), 823–842.
- Tagliacozzo, E. (2009). *Secret trades, porous borders: Smuggling and states along a Southeast Asian frontier, 1865–1915*. Yale University Press.
- Warren, J. F. (2007). *The Sulu zone, 1768–1898: The dynamics of sea-based power in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Winter, T. (2018). *Heritage and tourism in Southeast Asia: Marketing identity and memory*. Routledge.