

## Cuisines in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines

Since cuisines are born on the land and grow within its climate, contours, topography, and geography, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines have bred sister cuisines that find similarities as well in Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei Darussalam. It is thus possible to speak of Southeast Asian cuisine even while acknowledging the regional differences that come from history, society, and culture.

Indonesia, for example, with its fifteen thousand islands, covers a large portion of Southeast Asia, and in the early twenty-first century its population (209.4 million) ranked fourth among the world's most populous nations. Although the islands vary greatly in size, climate, and soil and thus in cuisine, it is possible to speak of pan-Indonesian culinary traditions, to set them in their regional contexts, and to invite comparisons with their neighbors.

Malaysia is contiguous to Singapore on one side and to Brunei on the other. Its land, weather, and geographical features are similar to those of the rest of Southeast Asia. However, its population (23 million) is composed of Malay Muslims, Peranakan or Straits Chinese with roots in South China, and Indians, mainly from South India, so it developed three principal cuisines, Malay, Indian, and Chinese. The country's leaders emphasize its multicultural nature and consider all three cuisines equally national.

The Philippines (population 75.8 million), with seven thousand islands, many of them small, has the longest discontinuous coastline in the world. With its tropical weather, plains and mountains, and wealth of water sources, it developed a culinary pattern similar to those of Indonesia and Malaysia. History and the colonial experience, Spanish for almost four hundred years and American for forty years, mediated and transformed its basic Asian cuisine.

Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines therefore demonstrate cuisines that grew on virtually the same soil and in analogous weather conditions but which developed individual, regional characteristics through the actions of history and society on the countries' cultures. Certain similarities and commonalities stand out, however, even before the differences.

### Rice

Meals in all three countries assume the presence of rice, without which the repast is not a meal but a snack, *pangtawid gutom*, just to bridge hungers, Filipinos say. To the native varieties modern research, for example, that conducted by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines, has added high-yield, pest-resistant strains. But Asians treasure traditional strains for their fragrance, particular characteristics, and lore.

Deep from mythic history come the rice stories. The Bagobo people of Mindanao talk of the hero Lumabat, who wished to explore the sky with his sister Mebuyan. She refused, sitting firmly in a rice mortar, which sank into the earth with her as she scattered handfuls of rice. She has stayed underground since then. In a Javanese story Tisnawati, daughter of the supreme god Batara Guru, falls in love with a mortal, Jakasudana, of whom her father disapproves. The father punishes her disobedience by turning her into a rice stalk, but then, in pity, he transforms Jakasudana as well. Their marriage is reenacted by the Javanese harvest ritual in Malaysia.

The cooking of rice proceeds in similar ways. It is washed, cooked in water (steamed, boiled, or parboiled), and made the background and taste-shaper of Southeast Asian meals. Because of its mildness, rice invites contrasting tastes, the hot curries of Malaysia, for example, the chili-hot *sambals* of Indonesia, or the salty preserved fish (*tuyo, daing*) of the Philippines. It can be fried, as in Indonesian *nasi goreng* and the morning-after garlic-flavored Philippine breakfast rice (*sinangag*). Malaysians cook rice in coconut milk for the favorite breakfast dish *laksa* and cook thick coconut milk with fragrant herbs until it becomes oil to make *nasi ulam*, which the writer Sri Owen calls a Malaysian version of the British-Indian kedgeree.

All throughout the region, of course, rice is the basis of cakes and other snacks. Glutinous rice cooked in coconut milk with sugar or salt, sparked by ginger, appears everywhere, bare in bamboo baskets; layered, varishaped, or colored; wrapped ingeniously in coconut fronds, banana leaves, or other leaves; and in fresh and artful native packaging designs. *Kue bugis* are Indonesian steamed-rice cakes filled with sweetened grated coconut and cooked in banana leaves. Malaysia has *kui wajek*, a pudding of glutinous rice, coconut milk, palm sugar, and knotted pandanus (screw pine) leaves and tapeh, fermented glutinous rice with sugar.

The word *suman* is used in the Philippines for many kinds of steamed, leaf-wrapped glutinous rice rolls eaten with grated coconut and sugar and sometimes with ripe mangoes. *Bibingka* is a flat, golden rice cake cooked with coals above and below, and *puto* refers to innumerable steamed cakes of rice flour, some small and round, others platter-sized or cylindrical. A traditional Christmas food is *puto bumbong*, a violet-colored rice (*pirurutong*) steamed upright in bamboo tubes.

Rice is also cooked soft as a porridge, congee, snack, or breakfast food. Filipinos, who inherited rice directly from Chinese traders and migrants, serve it with condiments, such as minced vegetables, shredded meat, chopped nuts, and century egg slices; plain, especially for children and the sick; or cooked with fish, chicken (*arroz caldo* or rice soup), or tripe (*goto*) and served sprinkled with browned garlic, green onions, fish sauce, and lime juice. In a dish learned from Mexico, rice is also cooked with chocolate (*champurrado*) and served with bits of salted fish or dried venison.

Malaysian *kai cheok* is a rice porridge with shredded chicken meat, crisp-fried shallots, a little oil, pepper, shredded ginger, spring onions, and light soy sauce. Indonesia has a chilled rice soup made from soft-cooked rice with fresh coconut milk and small slices of sweet papaya that is served for breakfast or as a cool summer refresher.

The main dishes range through the region's favored flavors, including the Indonesian *sambal goreng udang* of prawns or shrimp and rice; the Hainanese chicken rice of Singapore and Malaysia with its soup, rice steamed in broth, and sauces hot and otherwise; and the Philippine *bringhe* of glutinous rice, coconut milk, chicken, and Spanish chorizo. Rice as staff of life—food for principal meals and for snacks, food for rituals and celebrations, food that shapes tastes and dietary patterns—certainly is a common denominator in Southeast Asia.

## **The Coconut**

The "tree of life" is shared by Southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim. From Hawaii and Tahiti and all through mainland and island Southeast Asia, coconuts are grated, often on beautiful graters of folk design, and squeezed in water for the "first milk" or cream then again for the thinner milk, for which there are specific uses in dishes.

The milk is thick when used in *rendang*, the Minangkabau dish of buffalo meat or beef cooked long and spicy with shallots, garlic, ginger, turmeric, chilies, and *laos*. The dish can keep for months because the milk turns to oil in the course of cooking. The Malaysian *kambing korma* or lamb curry is mutton or lamb cooked in spices and thick coconut milk. The Javanese *pepes ikan*, on the other hand, is fish wrapped in banana leaves with herbs, spices, and desiccated coconut soaked in warm water for five minutes (not squeezed). The Philippine Bicol region is known for many dishes of meat (beef, chicken, pork), fish, shrimp, and vegetables (*santol* pulp, young jackfruit, chilies) cooked in coconut milk that is thick or thin or both.

Young coconut is also used. In Laguna province in Luzon it is cut in strips and sautéed like noodles or steamed with river shrimp in coconut water. In Iloilo Province in the Visayas it is cooked with chicken into a soup called *binacol*. Young and mature coconuts, including the "sport" coconut, called in Filipino *makapuno*, full, because it is flesh filled, make possible a stellar parade of candies and sweets, including the Philippine *bukayo* (coconut candy) and sweet *makapuno* (syrup, lime rind); the doughnut-like Malaysian *kuih keria* of sago, rice, and grated coconut; and the Indonesian *serikaya* (coconut custard) and *onde-onde* (small rice cakes rolled in grated coconut). The flavor of coconut at all its stages is savored throughout the region in recognizably compatible ways.

### Spices, Herbs, Relishes

Southeast Asian tables generally bear not only serving platters with dishes to be shared and individual plates or bowls but also little satellite dishes for dipping sauces, spices, chopped herbs, and relishes like shrimp paste and fish sauce. The meal may be prepared by great cooks or chefs, but each diner has the right and freedom to fine-tune the dish to his or her individual taste by dipping, pouring, mixing, and sprinkling and thus giving the dish its final grace.

Among the possibilities are the Indonesian *sambal* and *sambel*, hot and spicy relishes served with food. They feature red and green chilies, hot bird peppers, *terasi* (shrimp paste, which is made by salting and mashing tiny shrimp and allowing them to ferment), lemon, lime, soy sauce, shallots, chili powder, tamarind water, salted yellow beans, and more, depending on the dish they are to accompany. Others are *serundeng* (roasted grated coconut) and *goreng bawang* (crisp-fried onions) to sprinkle on particular dishes.

In the Philippines dipping sauces are called *sawsawan* and could be basic vinegar, soy sauce, *patis* (fish sauce, made by salting and fermenting small fish); *calamansi* (lime) juice; combined vinegar-soy or *patis-calamansi*; or enhanced with herbs and spices, such as crushed peppercorns, ginger, garlic, chili peppers or seeds, coriander leaves, pork or crackling bits, and salted black beans. *Achara*, such as pickled papaya, mangoes, heart of palm, and chilies, are accompaniments as well. These make it possible to satisfy individual palates or to make each mouthful a different delight.

Parallels exist in Malaysian and Singaporean cooking, including prawn and shrimp pastes (*blacan terasi* and the mild Chinese liquid *hei-ko*); dried anchovy and fish sauce; the *rempah* spice mixture of *sambal* and *achar* (mangoes, mixed vegetables); and *goreng bawang* (crisp-fried onions). The famous Hainanese chicken rice of Malaysia and Singapore may come with *sambal belacan* (red chilies, shrimp paste, limes) or at least three sauces, a fresh-made chili sauce, finely crushed ginger and oil, and soy sauce. *Nasi lemak*, the Nonya-Malay rice steamed in coconut milk, and its satellite dishes constitute the traditional festal dish for the twelfth day of a wedding. The accompaniments may include *sambal udang* (shrimp), *ikan kuning* (small fried fish), cucumber slices, and sliced red chilies.

The renowned Indonesian *rijsttafel* (rice table), although based on feasts of yore, has become largely a Dutch custom. Rice, the central dish, is surrounded with smaller dishes and relishes. Popular in Indonesia is a miniature *rijsttafel* called *nasi rames* with some seven side dishes, like *dendeng ragi* (beef and grated coconut), *sayur lodeh* (spicy vegetable stew), *rendang* (beef cooked in spices and coconut milk), *kering tempe* (crisp-fried *tempe*), *kelia ayam* (Sumatran chicken curry), *sambal bajak* (mixed spice relish), and *krupuk* (prawn crackers). Each spice-enhanced dish introduces a flavor or flavors to harmonize with the rest in a whole Asian experience.

The sauces include fish, oyster, *hoisin*, chili, plum, black bean, yellow bean, chili bean, red bean, shrimp paste, sesame paste, and soybean; the cooking fats and oils are peanut, rape seed, coconut, sesame seed, palm, and chili; and the vinegars are rice, coconut, palm, sugar cane, and fruit. Combining all with the *sambals* and other made-up cooked or mixed combinations creates a repertoire of unnumbered possibilities, all Asian or Southeast Asian, a kaleidoscope of flavors and flavor makers.

### Chinese and Other Foreign Influences

All three countries have significant Chinese populations, which even make up a full third of the population in Malaysia, that may or may not have integrated successfully in the cities and villages. Consequently all have strong Chinese dietary strains in their cuisines. Even during racial conflicts—riots in Malaysia, wars and ghetto burning in the Philippines, discrimination and segregation in Indonesia—the foods melded and the Chinese presence became a matter of fact, even of pride.

Nonya cooking in Malaysia originated among Chinese immigrants who settled in Malacca in the fifteenth century. Daughters of well-to-do Nonya women were trained in household and cooking skills from early childhood. The cuisine uses chilies, shrimp paste, coconut milk, and aromatic roots and leaves as in the Malaysian and Indonesian traditions but also retains pork and noodles from its Chinese past.

The *popiah* or spring roll is often served in its separate pieces—the wrapper pancakes; fillings, possibly including eggs, sausages, bean curd, bean sprouts, prawns, cucumber sticks, spring onions, lettuce leaves, pork, crab meat, bamboo shoots, and water chestnuts; and sauces and relishes—on a round table at which each diner creates a spring roll to taste. The Nonya pork *sate* is a compromise between a Muslim prohibition and a Chinese taste for pork. The resulting taste is Malay, with chilies, coconut milk, lemon grass, and coriander.

In the Philippines the first public eateries were Chinese establishments that served indigenized *comida China* (Chinese food) in restaurants called *carinderia*, a Spanish formulation from a native word *cari* or *kari*, cooked food. To accommodate the Spanish patrons, the food had Spanish names, such as *aletas de tiburón* (shark fins), *tortilla de cangrejo* (crab omelet), *camaron rebozado* (battercoated shrimps).

Widely popular and variegated is the *lumpia*, a vegetable or pork spring roll in a thin flour wrapper, the local edition of the Malay *popiah*. The noodle dishes, generically called *pansit* from the Hokkien word for that which is quickly cooked, vary from region to region, indeed family to family, cook to cook. *Char kway teow* is the most popular Malay-Singaporean noodle, but in the Philippines the most popular is *pancit palabok*, noodles shaken in water or broth and covered with a sauce of shrimp, pork, vegetables, bean curd, and sometimes squid, oysters, crumbled crackling, and flaked smoked fish. In Indonesia it may be *mie jawa*, which includes *bakmie goreng* (fried noodles) or *bakmie godog* (noodle soup), egg noodles with beef or pork, shrimp or prawns, carrots, bean sprouts, shallots, candlenuts, and other seasonings.

Each country's colonial and social histories left deep imprints on its cuisine, the roots of many regional differences. The Spanish-Mexican and American colonial regimes, building on the indigenous and Chinese food already in place, shaped what is now known as Philippine cooking. Native to the soil are dishes like *sinigang*, a sour stew of meats, crustaceans, fish, or fowl soured with tamarind, *bilimbi*, green mango, or other sour fruits and leaves. Sour broths are cooling to the skin, especially in tropical weather. Indigenous too are fresh meat, fish, and fowl, steamed, simmered, boiled, or roasted, and vegetables cooked in coconut milk or steamed and flavored with shrimp paste or fish sauce.

Filipinos indigenized Chinese, Spanish-Mexican, and American dishes through the use of native ingredients and cooking by native cooks with homegrown taste buds. Among those dishes are Spanish stews (*cocido*, *puchero*) with eggplant or squash relishes; the Mexican tamale transformed from a corn snack wrapped in corn husks into a rice snack wrapped in a banana leaf; a Chinese porridge cooked in the Philippines with chicken and *kasubha* (a saffronlike spice) or including unhatched eggs; beef hamburgers with soy and chopped onions; and steaks marinated in soy sauce and lime juice before grilling. The foreign food has been accepted but adapted to local tastes.

The colonial experience gives Philippine dishes a European-American dimension, just as British colonization colored Malay-Singapore food and Dutch domination redefined Indonesian cooking. Of the latter two, however, the Dutch influence is the lightest, because the colonizers were not too interested in changing the native culture of the colonized. However, Spanish colonization of the Philippines, which meant Christianization as well, was much more deeply engaged in culture change, as was American colonization, which made its impact through language and education. In Malaysia, the Indians, Chinese, immigrant elites from East and Southeast Asia, and Europeans influenced food more strongly than did the British.

### **Southeast Asian Cuisine in the Twenty-first Century**

Although it is logical and true to speak of the individual sister cuisines of Southeast Asia, they are variations on regional themes. A common repertoire of spices, rice, coconuts, vegetables, fish, fowl, and animals exists. The lands and waters and the trade and interaction have made that inevitable. Thus the cuisines have compatible attitudes, common practices, and recognizable similarities. However, the differences wrought by history, especially the colonial experiences and the strategies of survival; social forces, including war, peace, trade, and population; and the countries' cultures, that is, the way people think, work, survive, and express themselves, have resulted in the kaleidoscope of tastes and dishes in Southeast Asia.

The Indonesian *pisang goreng*, bananas mashed with sugar and flour, and the Philippine *linupak*, green bananas mashed with sugar and coconut, and *pinasugbu*, green banana slices dipped in molasses syrup, are variations on a theme. The Nonya pancake, a teatime snack filled with palm sugar and served with chocolate sauce, and the Philippine *piaya*, a flat cake filled with brown sugar and sprinkled with sesame seeds, are also variations. The similarities are clear, but regional circumstances gave them particular characteristics. On warm afternoons Indonesians enjoy *es cendol*, short strands of two kinds of flour sieved, flavored, and served with sugar syrup, coconut milk, and ice crushed or cubed. Malaysians have *bubor cha-cha* with yam and sweet potato cubes, tapioca, sweet coconut milk, and ice shavings. Filipinos serve instead *halo-halo* (literally mix-mix) with palm fruit, gelatin cubes, banana slices, sweetened coconut strands, milk, and crushed ice. The mixtures are analogous because the weather and the habits of refreshment are too.

The famous dishes of each cuisine may have tastes familiar and acceptable to the whole region, but they are different and make a rich repertoire. In Malaysia celebrations may include chili crab, *satays*, a steamboat, the Nonya *sambal sotong* (squid) or *sambal udang* (prawns), *bakwan kepiting*

(a Nonya must for Lunar New Year's and birthdays), the Hokkien-Nonya *ngoh hiang* (five-spice rolls with prawns, pork, and crab meat), *rebong masak lemak* (chicken and bamboo shoots), *sambal kim chiam* (a salad of banana buds), Indian-based vindaloo (chicken or duck), and clay pot dishes and soups of Chinese origin. Malaysians and Singaporeans consider many other dishes connected to their multicultural family feasts and traditions.

Philippine feasting often features colonial food, such as Spanish stews (*cocido*, *puchero*) with sausages (chorizo, *morcilla*); sugar-glazed Christmas hams (*jamon en dulce*); stuffed turkeys and capons (*pavo embuchado*, *capon rellenado*); and American salads, pies, and cakes, once considered elite and thus appropriate for celebrations. To these time and custom have added specialties of Chinese origin, especially noodles, roast duck, roast pig, steamed fish chosen live from a tank, bird's nest and shark fin soups, and delicate dumplings and buns. The indigenous rice cakes, rolls, and desserts; stews like *kari-kari* (oxtail); and special dishes like *lechon* (tamarind leaf–or lemon grass–stuffed suckling pig skewered and roasted on an open fire) are the local contribution to a cuisine that combines the indigenous, the indigenized, and even the imported.

Indonesia, with so many regional traditions, has one of the richest cuisines, and the Western world, which has sent more scholars to Indonesia than to any other Southeast Asian country, has explored it. The names sound rare and enticing, like the famous beef *rendang*; the hearty *gado-gado* salad of cooked vegetables; the different *gulai* (vegetables like *pako*, fiddlehead fern) cooked in coconut milk; fish and fish cakes; *sates* of lamb, beef, and chicken; *bebek dengan bumbu betutu* (duck breasts in Balinese spices); *bubur ayam* (rice porridge with spicy chicken soup); and sweets like *rujak* (a spiced fruit salad), *marabak kubang* (Sumatran stuffed pancakes), and *lapis legit* (spiced layered cake). Southeast Asian ingredients, spices, cooking methods, dishes traditional and new, meal patterns, and border-crossing food and foodways remind readers of cookbooks, menus, and travel, ethnographic, and anthropological accounts that the words are the merest keys to cultures deep and rich, starting points for meals, for cultural interactions, and for rich conversations with national identities, time, and traditions.

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#### SPICES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

The range, subtlety, intensity, melding, and reinvention of flavors are made possible by the spice table shared by almost all of Southeast Asia. Among the spices are:

English	Malaysian	Indonesian	Filipino
garlic	<i>bawang puteh</i>	<i>bawang-putih</i>	<i>bawang</i>
ginger	<i>haliya</i>	<i>acuga, jahe</i>	<i>luya</i>
galingale	<i>lengkuas</i>	<i>laos</i>	<i>langkawas</i>
chili	<i>chilli-api, chabai</i>	<i>lombok kecil</i>	<i>siling labuyo</i>
lemon grass	<i>serai</i>	<i>seri</i>	<i>tanglad</i>
Kaffir lime	<i>limau purut</i>	<i>jeruk purut</i>	
curry leaves	<i>daun kari</i>		
mint	<i>pohok</i>	<i>janggalat</i>	<i>yerba buena</i>
basil, holy	<i>sellaseh kemangi</i>	<i>kemangen</i>	<i>sulasi</i>
basil, sweet	<i>selaseh putih</i>	<i>selasih</i>	<i>balanoi</i>
coriander			
leaf cilantro	<i>ketumbar</i>	<i>katumber</i>	<i>wan soy</i>

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English	Malaysian	Indonesian	Filipino
coriander seed		<i>ketumbar</i>	<i>kulantra</i>
turmeric		<i>kunyit</i>	<i>dilao</i>
star anise		<i>bunga lawang</i>	<i>sangke</i>
cloves		<i>cengkeh</i>	<i>clavo</i>
cinnamon		<i>kayu manis padang</i>	
cumin		<i>jintan putih</i>	<i>jinten</i>
pepper		<i>merica</i>	<i>paminta</i>
parsley	<i>shelwri</i>	<i>patraseli, seledri</i>	<i>parsli</i>
mustard seed	<i>biji savi</i>		<i>mustasa</i>
nutmeg		<i>pala</i>	
tamarind	<i>asam</i>	<i>asam Java</i>	<i>sampalok</i>

## OTHER REGIONAL CUISINES

Most Southeast Asian societies have been in contact with each other and with other societies, such as India and China, for many centuries. Within Southeast Asia food serves as an ethnic and national marker, distinguishing one group from another. The region is characterized by a great diversity of cuisines that have been shaped by local geography, ecology, religion, and history. Despite the diversity, distinct commonalities exist. Ingredients like coconut milk, lemon grass, galingale, ginger, Asian basil, mint, fish sauce, and shrimp paste are used throughout the region. However, cooking techniques and the ways these ingredients are combined vary greatly and give each cuisine its distinctiveness.

### *Lao People's Democratic Republic*

Rice, especially the glutinous variety, is the staple for Lao meals. Other frequently used ingredients include fresh vegetables, freshwater fish, poultry, duck, pork, beef, or water buffalo. Lime juice, lemon, fresh coriander, and various fermented fish sauces give Lao food its characteristic flavor. *Pla daek*, a highly pungent fermented fish sauce, is often considered an ethnic marker. Additionally its heavy use throughout the country and the consumption of *laap* are indicators of the cultural and historical links with Northeast Thailand. Hot chilies, garlic, mint, ground peanuts, tamarind juice, ginger, and coconut milk are other seasonings that link Lao cuisine to others of the region. A soup, such as *kaeng nor mai* (bamboo shoot soup) or *kaeng het bot* (mushroom soup), is a common feature of Lao meals. One popular dish eaten by the Lao is *feu*, a noodle dish of Vietnamese origin. Another noodle dish, *klao poun*, is served cold with a variety of raw chopped vegetables and a flavored coconut milk sauce and is often a part of celebrations. *Or lam*, a regional dish in Luang Prabang, combines lemon grass, sweet basil, dried buffalo meat and skin, chilies, and eggplant.

### *Myanmar (Burma)*

Myanmar is a diamond-shaped country bounded by China, Laos, and Thailand in the east, by Bangladesh and India in the north, and by the Indian Ocean in the west and south. The landscape is mountainous, and only about one-sixth of the country is considered arable. Of the arable land, approximately one-tenth is irrigated, mostly for rice agriculture. The cuisine is considered a blend of Burman, Mon, Indian, and Chinese influences, and hot and spicy dishes particularly show the influence of Indian and other Southeast Asian cuisines. Rice, the core of most meals, is often eaten with curries of fish, chicken, or prawns, and noodles and vegetables are common local ingredients. Taste combinations of onion, ginger root, garlic, turmeric, and chili pepper give the cuisine its distinctive flavor. The curries in Myanmar are the mildest in Southeast Asia, but the heat level can be intensified by adding *balachaung*, a condiment made from chilies, tamarind paste, and dried shrimp, or *ngapi kyaw*, a hot and pungent shrimp paste fried in oil with garlic and onions.

### *Kampuchea (Cambodia)*

Kampuchea shares borders in the north with Laos and Thailand, in the east with Vietnam, and in the southwest with the Gulf of Thailand. Khmer is Cambodia's official language, and Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion. Fish, rice, coriander, and lemon grass are common dish ingredients. A Cambodian meal almost always includes a soup, which is eaten with the other dishes. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, freshwater fish is a mainstay. Some dishes reflect the influence of French cooking, as does the use of bread.

Ref.: <http://www.enotes.com/food-encyclopedia/indonesia-malaysia-philippines>