Building on these and other studies, I argue that long-historical frameworks of spiritual, social, and political thought and practice have produced a set of common regional permutations of South Asian influences, among many others. Indian influences began to arrive around the first century A.D. and were added to existing local-regional beliefs and aesthetic forms. The attitudes and philosophies of representation constituted by the subsequent amalgamation of conventions and active historical remnants appears to have made an especially lasting impression on much of the region. The result, as we will see, was critical to how further waves of globalization were received and processed—especially those from the Middle East and Ottoman Empire beginning in the thirteenth century and Europe around three hundred years later. The interaction of these further shifts with extant layers produced the set of archipelagic aesthetics, approaches, and flourishes that I position as the basis from which Southeast Asian films have been constructed from the early twentieth century. Geography, and the region's preeminent bodies of water, have played an especially important role in this process of development.

MANDALAS, REGIONAL HISTORIES, AND ARCHIPELAGIC NATIONALISMS

In his classic *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, O. W. Wolters argues that in premodern times, the Indian Ocean functioned as the region's "single ocean" (1982:46), indicating its dominant importance as an arena of exchange—a status that would later shift to the Pacific as trade with other areas increased. Across its waters, Indian religions, literatures, and political and cultural concepts traveled into the archipelagic expanses of Southeast Asia and then on to landlocked areas. For Wolters, these new ideas and practices were critical to the region's historical development but were adapted without causing massive epistemic shifts. Indian influence—particularly the idea of the spherical *mandala* as an ideal political structure—added to existing tendencies in which authority was based on multiple, shifting loci of power that would form and re-form around the agency of formidable and charismatic leaders. Such leaders were believed to be spiritually powerful, a quality that followers held they could absorb and develop in themselves through association, loyal service, and close study (1982:18–19).

What Indian religions and political concepts crucially added to these extant structures, Wolters argues, was the concept of such spiritually based authority as broadly applicable beyond the limited spheres of the "men of prowess" whose domains dotted the archipelago at the time (given historical patterns of gender and power in the region, women of prowess would likely have emerged as well). Would-be leaders hence began to construct their paths to power by developing a "unique claim to 'universal' sovereignty" (1982:27). Yet at the same time, political authority in the region was divided among *mandalas*, "patchwork[s] of often overlapping . . . 'circles of kings,'" each of which held claim to power "derived from a single and indivisible divine authority" (27). In practice, each such circle of power

was also inherently mutable, including in terms of the geographic area/s over which its authority extended, which would "expand and contract in concertina-like fashion" (27) over time. This occurred as Indian and other ideas were moved, modified, and divided across a region comprising these multiple, competing political "centers"—an archipelagic array of mandalas, often composed of actual islands that dotted and defined the fluid expanse of water and land that would come to be known variously as Nanyang, Nusantara (especially the maritime parts), the East Indies, and later, during World War II, Southeast Asia.

Some of these loci were small and had a limited individual influence in the region as a whole. Victor Lieberman refers to semiautonomous, "self-replicating microcultures" that surrounded larger concentrations. These, he argues, helped ensure that attempts to impose a more homogeneous "standard imperial culture" would also normally face resistance and modification from multiple directions at once (2010:42). Especially in the oceanic areas most critical to the region's internal and external relations, the combination of archipelagic geography and mandalas, or "solar polities" as Lieberman calls them, helped to amplify and embed these patterns of political flux over time. In the transition to the early modern age of commerce, for example, Barbara and Leonard Andaya argue that "the nature of the Southeast Asian land and seascapes limited the growth of large empires, allowing for the proliferation of numerous small and largely independent polities" (2015:5) to continue.

Under certain conditions, however, a particular mandala or authority figure might also succeed in greatly expanding its influence. Wolters sees larger kingdoms such as the East Java–based Majapahit Empire (1293–1597) as examples of expanding and contracting mandala-type polities that attained a greater permanence, etching themselves more deeply into historical memory (1982:27–28). Such polities, with their storied abilities to negotiate difference, continued to be explicitly referenced, claimed, and appropriated into the spheres of authority that followed them, informing political structures and aesthetic conventions in direct and indirect ways. The strategic location of the region and its various mandalas along established and emergent trade routes also facilitated their growth as "active and dynamic participants" (Andaya and Andaya 2015:5) in the global spread of goods and technologies between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Wolters, modernizing Southeast Asian mandala societies would "expect the continuous flow of foreign merchandise but also . . . absorb the mondial perspectives" of successive global shifts like Buddhism, Arab-Muslim modernism, and subsequent transpacific waves of influence from Europe and then the U.S. (1982:47). As they strove to be constantly "up-to-date" and were unusually "accepting of new ideas," leaders and their mutable circles of power also showed a high degree of self-confidence and a "remarkable capacity to localize incoming influences" (Andaya and Andaya 2015:9).

As I show in various ways throughout this book, what emerges as most important in the context of these interlocking and mutating spheres of authority is the continuity of certain deeply embedded patterns that have retained a significant influence—in large part owing to the patterns' inherent flexibility and adaptability.

Observed over the course of decades or centuries, the work of such patterns outshines the seemingly transformative adoption of one specific religion, technology, or idea from a particular place outside the region or even from a single, especially powerful sphere of authority like Majapahit or Ayutthaya—any single one of which is outweighed by the collective archetype of the mandala itself. For Elmo Gonzaga, "the looseness of the *mandala* configuration" has continued to be expressed in "the contemporary form of archipelagic nations such as the Philippines." As in the rapid entrance of new languages, literatures, or other technologies of communication in the region's past, the inevitable appearance of novel and potentially "incongruent media modalities" among its present array of political economic loci remains unlikely to "entail sudden rupture or irreversible alteration" (2016:96–97). Alongside and within the more fixed political borders of contemporary modern nations, as this suggests, authority in the region continues to be divided among multiple, mandala-like spheres. Some have existed for centuries and practice "old" forms of politics and statecraft; others, like the urban media hubs that dot and inscribe their own networks of aesthetics and exchange across the region, combine local narratives and modes of expression with regional and global ones via the most current technologies of representation.

The historical prominence of subnational regions like West or Northern Sumatra and the influence of smaller, yet wealthy and powerful polities like Brunei and Singapore exemplify this regional-systemic continuity. Malaysia's status as a "federal constitutional elective monarchy" is perhaps especially clear in the continuing influence of multiple political loci, each corresponding to "universal" ideas of authority associated with different historical times. The country's thirteen states, nine of which are based on historical Malay kingdoms and ruled by unelected royalty, share power with the democratically elected prime minister and other centralized government officials. All have their own written constitution and a high degree of autonomy on certain matters, especially regarding religion. On a rotating basis, each ruler also sits as the nation's centralized king or Yang di-Pertuan Agong, serving as a balance and at times corrective force vis-à-vis the elected prime minister and ruling coalition. As in similar arrangements in Thailand and Indonesia (which has a number of "special regions" ruled by local royalty or subject to *sharia* law, among other things), the results of such power-sharing with ostensibly anachronous "premodern" modes of authority can be surprising.

In my own experience living in Malaysia during the Covid 19 pandemic (2020–23), frequent movement-control orders were exploited by party officials to temporarily do away with elections, resulting in the prime minister being replaced twice in three years. This appeared to most observers as a way to put things "back in order" after an opposition victory in 2018 upset the dominance of a conservative, ethnonationalist coalition (Barisan Nasional) that had been in power since 1957. Just when things had begun to look quite bleak, the Agong stepped in and ordered a stop to the ongoing government declarations of emergency powers (which he

had also previously approved), thereby severely reducing the shadowy, backroom political dealings that had characterized much of the pandemic in Malaysia. The result was the restoration of democracy, at least such as it had been during pre-Covid times. The potential for a much broader political crisis was averted and Anwar Ibrahim—an opposition candidate who, over a lengthy career, had been consistently blocked from the prime minister's seat and even jailed by opponents—was elected. Malaysia, like most other nations, remains rife with various problems. Yet this episode of political reality-drama brought into stark relief the ways in which decisions, despite the outward image of centralized and unified ethnic Malay authority, are in fact made via a tangled interplay of multiple spheres and "centers" of power operating within it. This process can at times lead to unexpected outcomes in national-level politics, while consistently offering spaces for varied interests and practices that operate beneath the homogeneous surface of official images and narratives.

In the past, as well, "precisely because the same texts and symbols meant different things to different people, negotiation and exchange" (Lieberman 2010:40)—in effect communication and various modes and technologies thereof—were strengthened and intensified by constant efforts to achieve consensus. As Wolters argues, high levels of regional communicativity and interactivity shaped the nature of authority. A regional king, queen, or "man of prowess," dependent on negotiation with various centers and peripheries was "not an autocrat; he was a mediator" (1982:18)—one with heightened sensitivity to information and changes happening along borders and arriving via waterways both near and far. For better and at times for worse, modern nationalist leaders have shown a similar level of self-assurance and ability to communicate with and mediate between multiple local and foreign entities at once. Indonesian president Soekarno's (r. 1945–66) famed skill at playing the Eastern and Western poles of the Cold War off each other while negotiating with myriad other, nonaligned points between is one example. As detailed in chapter 4, in the later years of Soekarno's rule and in successors like Soeharto or the Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos, however, these qualities can also be seen to ossify and fade. The result is the emergence of "strong men" who defy expectations and therefore are more likely to face power struggles, regular mass public demonstrations, and simultaneous attacks from urban centers and far-off peripheries with military force and other violent means.

For the Andayas, the enduring necessity for leaders to show a certain openness and flexibility was influenced not only by geographic factors per se but by the fickle, frequently deadly, behavior of nature in the region—a force that time and again carries massive political, economic, and social ramifications. Often further amplified by global patterns of climate change, this dynamic has continued into the modern present. Numerous active volcanoes dot the region's stormy seas; along with other perils like earthquakes and constant storms, these have impressed a deep, transhistorical respect for the particular features of Southeast

Asian *tanah air* on most peoples in the region. This has also produced strong, enduring modes of engagement with nature, including spiritual communion, in ways that influenced the reception and adaptation of various world religions. Reliance on the environment and natural resources, the Andayas argue, also "fostered a deep respect for the protective influences of the ancestors, which was reflected in indigenous cosmologies and incorporated into local understandings of incoming religious teachings" (2015:4–5). Considering the importance of spiritual and philosophical prowess for leaders, these beliefs and practices were then applied to associated political, economic, and social shifts and modes of exchange. In many cases, religious institutions or figures acquired a mandala status and influence that rivaled that of kings.

An example of how the regional entanglements of nature and geography with spirituality, communication, and politics have continued to be expressed in the era of nations is taken up in chapter 5, where I examine ongoing cinematic manifestations of the mythical Javanese spirit queen of the South Sea, Kanjeng Ratu Kidul. Often linked by scholars to older Hindu, Buddhist, and animist figures, she emerged most forcefully in the legends and royal historiographies of sixteenth-century Java. According to those narratives, in the late 1500s, the queen entered into an alliance with a prince who had high aspirations to establish a new sphere of influence with himself at its center. With the support of spirit armies and the forces of nature, over which she holds sway, the prince prevailed, launching a kingdom, now known as the Mataram Dynasty, that has lasted until the present. In the form of the Yogyakarta sultanate, the dynasty was a key participant in the nationalist movement and war for independence against Dutch rule (1945–49) and still holds political power over a large and influential "special region" in Java. In exchange for the mystical/religious support believed to have enabled this especially lengthy and influential mandalahood, the rebellious prince-turned-king and all his future heirs would enter into a spiritual "marriage" with the queen. An assortment of offerings continues to be brought once a year, with much ceremonial pomp, to a nearby gateway of her underwater realm, on the beach at Parangkusumo just south of Yogyakarta.

This persistent relationship between human authority figures, spirits, and nature points to another enduring aspect of how authority is understood and practiced in Southeast Asia, one that I take up in chapters 3, 4, and 5. The positioning of the queen, together with the lineage of kings and sultans spiritually pledged to her in perpetuity, expresses a basic symbolic pattern in which male and female signifiers or representatives are positioned to work, think, and act together. Each is associated with distinct qualities of roughly equal value that can at times be appropriated or deployed by either sex (and various genders). Mandalas and their structural-political descendants are typically constituted by amalgamations of differing religious, political, and historical aspects collectively populating a "multicentric landscape of 'universal' sovereigns'" (Wolters 1982:50) who maintain constant conversations with various borders and peripheries. Following from this, the

modern, generally Western, logic of a single basic reference or point of authority—whether masculine-phallic, epistemological, political, spiritual, or otherwise—can only loosely and problematically be applied. In this context, we might imagine Vatsyayan's regional aesthetic theory based on showing "a hierarchy of realities" using "the principle of suggestion through abstraction" (1971:26) holding sway. As I show throughout the book, various recent attempts at deploying a more singular masculine or "realist" perspective have encountered reflexive, systemic forms of resistance, even while in some cases succeeding in creating the appearance of universal, patriarchal rule.

As I argue in chapter 3, one of the factors that makes this the case is the continuity of traditions of matrifocality across the region. I contend that popular films and other media (along with ritual, spiritual, and other practices) help to reembed these traditions, in appropriately modified forms, in the changing circumstances of modern nationhood. Women's historical roles as controllers of household finances and as equal recipients of inheritance (and as subject to bride prices rather than dowries that elsewhere in Asia make female children a financial burden on families) have long facilitated their mobility outside the home. What Wolters calls the "relative unimportance of [genetic] lineage" (1982:18) throughout the region also dilutes or complicates the growth of customs like the centering of patrilineage and passing down of the "Name of the Father" in much of the West. Especially in middle and lower classes, Southeast Asian women are commonly positioned as partners and breadwinners working alongside, or at times in place of, male family members. While such power is often household-based, the mobility afforded by women's key economic roles, including buying and selling in local markets and beyond, radiates influence outside the home and into the social and inevitably political lives of communities and at times of regencies and states. Reading across studies of Southeast Asia, repeating patterns of women's agency in local societies frequently come to the fore in terms of what defines Southeast Asia as a region with certain basic commonalities.[5] In relation to this, in chapters 4, 5, and 6, I discuss how images of strong women in the films of the 1950s and 1960s contrast with the statistical dominance of men behind the camera at the time. But I contend that the transfer of historically embedded ideas of gender and power from traditional arts to commercial stages and onto regional screens prepared the way for the early entrance of a few influential female directors, writers, and producers. This development was followed by a far greater influx of gender diversity in the last three decades of filmmaking in Southeast Asia, in many cases rivaling or even exceeding what is found in the West.

Another regional commonality that I position as a key influence on modern patterns of representation is the understanding and expression of history. As I have mentioned, Southeast Asia's proto- and early states were made up of varied collections of conventions, religions, and styles of political authority that emerged in, and are associated with, distinct time periods. Older techniques and strategies

were combined with newer ones such that the newer ones were "fractured and restated and therefore drained of their original significance" (Wolters 1982:55). Yet at the same time, they often still bore a recognizable connection to something originating outside the region. The effect of these typical mixtures of divergent styles, philosophies of statecraft, and times produces a complicated picture of regional development, especially in how history is understood and narrated by Southeast Asian societies. This has in turn spawned confusion and speculation among early scholars of Southeast Asia, like historian C. C. Berg, who worked to "make [the] . . . continuity clear" in what he termed "queer" local modes of historiography, with their penchant for treating past and present events as simultaneous and constructing "imaginary genealogies" that were recorded as fact (1955:126–27, 123).[6]

The diverse layers of regional and world history combined in narratives produced by regional societies often gave the impression of Southeast Asians living in a present made up of multiple eras at once. Similar to the way film technologies are "hauled backward," it appeared to scholars like Berg that cultures and polities were also simultaneously moving backward and forward through time. Benedict Anderson (1983) and others have argued that while fluctuating ideas of time, space, and power held sway for centuries among polities based on islands like Java, the rise of Western-style nationalism in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulted in a formative epistemic break—one that altered how regional communities imagined themselves developing over time. The result, for Anderson, was a sense of consistent chronological progression in which time became "homogeneous," expressed along the regular intervals of modern calendars and the pages of daily and weekly newspapers.

Building on archipelagic and mandala-based perspectives, this book offers a somewhat different view of the expression and collective imagination of history and time during the years of anticolonial movements and rapid national development. On one hand, audiences for the periodicals and novels that Anderson and others analyze were mainly literate elite minorities. On the other hand, the regionally produced films that I examine (and the touring, supranational vernacular theaters that I position as a key influence on them) catered to lower-class viewers. While their wealthier counterparts preferred the clear chronological representations of time in Hollywood and European screen-fare, these far larger, poorer, and generally less-educated audiences delighted in a different view of modernity: images that revealed the national present filled with legends and conventions of the past, even as it was shot through with exciting, emergent technologies, ideas, and aesthetics from across the Pacific and elsewhere.

This book builds on this contemporary understanding of region, connecting it to what Vatsyayan positions as a longer, shared history of political, social, religious, and aesthetic multiplicity (1971:22). I investigate how the emergence of modern mass media in Southeast Asia functioned to challenge, rather than bolster, the violent and arbitrary imposition of national borders in the periods during and after

decolonization (or in some cases, the gradual reduction of Cold War–level imperial engagement with Western powers). Doing so has required close, long-term study of a sprawling array of audiovisual and other texts and contexts, searching them for fragments and traces of diverse and often radically distinct places and times. This process has in turn called for an open and variable set of methodologies. My years of research in Indonesia (2008–15) that provided the original basis for this book combined formal analysis, language study, archival work, and ethnographic observation and participation with considerable doses of theory, historiography, and literature. In expanding my scope to include as many other parts of the region as possible, the resulting chapters have been organized by combining particular topics, films, narratives, and historical periods around a theme. To best address these topics and themes, the methods that inform each chapter are mixed and at times differ from one chapter to the next. While allowing these constructive inconsistencies to determine important parts of the book's structure, I have also attempted to make the flow of information across the chapters as clear and engaging as possible. At the same time, I have endeavored to avoid reliance on a singular perspective, the imposition of a homogeneous chronology, or other similar conventions that might lead to a reductive picture of this complex, and at times convoluted, milieu.

As I show, the conditions that linked emergent regional cinemas to traditions of archipelagic representation retained a deep resonance throughout the twentieth century. I argue that current archipelagic attitudes and styles have been further amplified by global shifts and splits associated with the rise of digital media in the twenty-first century. Although I attempt to identify patterns that are valid throughout much of the region, I do not claim that these are absolute or universal in the context of Southeast Asia. Regional cinemas share numerous conventions, qualities, and approaches, but as one would expect, these do not constitute an "iron cage" that restrains filmmakers as if by force; numerous examples of films that do things differently can be found. It is also beyond the scope of this book to look in detail at the cinemas of every country in Southeast Asia. I have therefore focused mainly on Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. I hope that others will be inspired to expand on this study with further comparisons outside the regional locales that it covers.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 drops readers into Southeast Asia of the 1950s—a key formative period for much of the region's national cinemas—via a close analysis of the 1957 Indonesian film *Tiga Buronan* (*Three Fugitives*, dir. Nya Abbas Akup). The film's seemingly compelled, yet ultimately playful, repetition of global and local genres and tropes is underscored by its ironic inclusion of *latah*, a socioneurological condition in which