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Religions and religious movements in nation-making in ASEAN

Udomporn Teeraviriyakul

Abstract

Southeast Asia has nurtured the great world religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. These religions, and many more beliefs, coexist in peace and harmony. Religions were not brought with the sword, but adopted in association with the expansion of trade. These religions empowered elite leaders to rule their states and kingdoms during the pre-colonial period. Since the coming of western imperialism, modernization became a new standard for transforming Southeast Asian society to fit a new global cultural paradigm. This article examines the role and importance of religions and religious movements in Southeast Asia, and ways in which religions have been transformed by political, economic, and social changes, particularly in struggles for national independence and in the process of nation-making.

Introduction

In the earliest period, prior to the arrival of Indian civilization, the peoples in Southeast Asia believed in spirits existing in nature, that everywhere kept the cosmic order in balance. All peoples believed in some forms of spirit worships, or animism. These beliefs reassured them that their daily life would be secure if they propitiated the spirits with the respective worship. Most animist societies had shamans, specialists in communicating with the supernatural forces, who were often women. Later, when an agricultural society developed, and cities became centers for trade and government, religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity coming from outside the outside
region replaced, incorporated, or coexisted with animism and local gods (Lockard, 2009: 18-19).

Besides their personal and social roles, religions were also adopted to empower the leaders of the region’s countries. During the colonial period, reform movements set out to modernize religious practice and belief, for example in Buddhist and Islamic societies, to eliminate non-scientific knowledge and magical belief. Religions were also adopted as a means to create unity within modern nation-states.

**Indianization and Islamization**

**Indianization**

Strategically located between India and China, Southeast Asia has been a meeting point for elements of Indian and Chinese civilization. Buddhism and Hinduism underwrote the ideology and practice for empowering kingship during the classical period of Southeast Asia history. Religious ideology established the political power through symbolic systems expressed through art, architecture and city planning. At their height during the classical period, kingdoms such as Pagan, Angkor, and Ayutthaya in Mainland Southeast Asia were Hindu-Buddhist cultural centers. Meanwhile, Islam spread into the archipelago of this region during the thirteenth century, and subsequently became the cultural foundation of modern Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei.

Due to its location on strategic trade route, Southeast Asia was a point of exchange for commodities and culture between India and China for a long period. Except in Vietnam, India was the dominant source of cultural influence, Merchants and priests from ports in eastern India were swept by summer winds across the Bay of Bengal to Burma, the Malay Peninsula, and the Straits of Malacca. Some Indians settled in mainland and island states, where they married into or became advisors to influential families. At the same time, Southeast Asian sailors also visited India and returned with new ideas about religion and government. Particularly, during the Gupta era, India became a source of the modern knowledge for Southeast Asians in such areas as mathematics, medicine, astronomy, chemistry, technology, and political organization. (Lockard, 2009: 21)
As a result, Indian cultural influence, particularly strong in religion, spanned a wide area of Southeast Asia, and even today Indian elements can be identified in the languages and cultures of much of the region. In the Southeast Asia context, “Indianization” is a process of interaction and syncretism between local beliefs (animism) and concepts with those coming from India. Because of the similarity between Indian religion and local belief, Southeast Asian people adopted and adapted Indian culture in their own ways (Osborne, 1995: 16-22).

All of mainland Southeast Asia was Indianized to some degree, except the north of Vietnam. Meanwhile, the maritime Southeast Asia was more selective. Java and Bali were most heavily exposed to Indian culture. Indianization is a broad and complex phenomenon which touches many aspects of the Southeast Asian worldview. Hinduism and Buddhism were readily adopted among the upper class. Both of them flourished in this region and underwrote ideology, ritual practice, and hereditary social classes to empower elite leaders. The core was adoption of Indian religious practices, both the worship of Hindu deities and of the Buddha. Later, much of the Mainland was converted to the Theravada school of Buddhism influenced by Sri Lanka. The religious artifacts of Southeast Asia from the first millennium CE are almost completely Hindu and Buddhist, as is much of its most famous architecture (Ricklefs, 2010: 22-23).

However, Southeast Asia societies adopted and adapted the cultural influences from India. They took ideas that they wanted from outsiders and adapted them to their own use, creating in the process a distinctive synthesis. Animism was often incorporated into or coexisted easily with Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other imported religions. Seemingly incompatible elements were blended into a cultural unity. Rulers and their courts adopted Buddhism and Hinduism, meanwhile animism remained influential among the peasantry (Lockard, 2009: 35).

Islamization

Southeast Asia was connected to South India through Arab traders in Indian Ocean trade networks, especially between the Malabar Coast and Maritime Southeast Asia. Arabs had traded on the Malabar Coast since pre-Islamic times and reached Southeast Asia as early as the 7th century in search of spices and drugs. In the mid-8th century, Muslim
merchants traveled to Sumatran ports. By the 9th century, both historical records and archaeological evidence demonstrate that Arab trade crystallized into distinct networks, and permanent Arab-Muslim trading communities spread to the Malabar Coast, Southeast Asia, and along the southern coast of China (Prange, 2009: 28-29).

By the 11th century, there is evidence that Islam had been established in China, Java, and Champa. From this century, a marked increase in Arab interest in Southeast Asia is visible in the sources. In particular, trade between Southern Arabia and Kwangchow was increasing. Also, it has been noted that the most prosperous merchants in Kwangchow were Muslims, both of Chinese and foreign origin. As a result of this growing interchange between the western and eastern Indian Ocean and the seasonal nature of monsoon navigation, South India became “a new international commercial hub, as the strategic intermediary between the Middle East and Southeast Asia.” By the thirteenth century, there emerged a “thirteenth-century world system” as commercial expansion in the Indian Ocean attracted increasing numbers of merchants from South India and the Middle East to Southeast Asia’s trading centers (Prange, 2009: 30). Certainly, there were settlements of Muslim merchants in these trading centers.

The earliest evidence so far known of a local Islamic community being founded comes from the northern part of Sumatra. The Venetian traveler Marco Polo visited north Sumatra in 1292 and noted that the town-dwellers of nearby Perlak had been converted to Islam by Muslim merchants (Prange, 2009: 35). The Moroccan visitor Ibn Battuta visited Samudra in 1345-6 and reported that the ruler followed the Shafi’i school of Islamic law, which remains the dominant school throughout Southeast Asia today (Ricklefs, 2010: 79) Apart from the records of travelers, there is archeological evidence of the influence of Islam in Java, Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, and the Philippines. Possibly the prosperity of the Muslim merchants (hailing from the Middle East, India, and China) who dominated these trade networks encouraged conversion, not least through intermarriage.

Therefore, we should note that two processes took place in the early stages of Islamization in Southeast Asia. Firstly, foreign Muslims settled down in this region so that they and their descendants became locals; Islamization by settlement. In particular, Islam was spread into this region by Muslim merchants from Gujarat who settled down
and married with local women. Some were able to marry daughters of prominent merchant-rulers and rose to become rulers of that state. With this superior status, they could encourage the spread of Islam by offering better terms of trade to Muslims in the region and inspired the local rulers to convert to their faith. This was Islamization by conversion (Ricklefs, 2010: 79; SarDesai, 2010: 56). More importantly, there is no evidence of any armed force from outside Southeast Asia imposing a new faith in the region, as happened in many parts of the Middle East, Africa, and Central and South Asia (Ryan, 1983: 21).

**Modernization in the colonial period**

In the 19th century, Asia changed significantly both in terms of political and economic systems. The change that occurred in Asia and the rest of the world was influenced by the world economy. The growth and expansion of industry in Europe created new demand for raw materials and, subsequently, markets for the distribution of manufactured goods from many industrial countries in Europe. This demand motivated the European countries, especially Britain as the centre of the Western world economy, to expand its activities in the Far East intensively. From the beginning of the 19th century, the expansion came first through country traders, and later through government missions carrying the flag of liberalism. Military might was used to realize this goal, such as in the case of China with the Opium War of 1842 (Mead, 1997). Southeast Asian countries were included in this world system because they could be potential markets for collecting materials and distributing manufactured products between Europe and Asia, and thus, many countries in Southeast Asia were connected into the new world economy.

The Western heritage that impacted on the indigenous religious culture of Southeast Asia is rationality and modernity. Much that was seen as “indigenous” was perceived as inappropriate to the context of “modernization.” For this reason, religions, particularly Buddhism and Islam, were reformed, often through campaigns against “superstitious” beliefs and practices that were perceived as obstacles to economic and technological development. For example, in Thailand a movement against superstition was initiated by King Mongkut in the 1830s. In Vietnam, a campaign against superstition was part of the agenda of
young nationalists in the early 20th century (Byrne, 2011: 7).

In Thailand, not only a favorable geopolitical position but also Buddhist reform enabled the country to escape many of the divisive effects of colonial rule elsewhere (Ricklefs, 2010: 167). Therefore, Buddhism in Thailand has played a somewhat different role in defining and legitimating national identity in the context of “modernization” (Swearer, 2010: 120). Buddhist reform helped shape an image of a modernizing nation becoming a modern state on the Western model.

Prince Mongkut, who later became King Rama IV of the Chakri Dynasty (r. 1851-1868), was a prominent leader undertaking reforms inspired by his own understanding of the Western challenge. Prior to ascending the throne, the prince had been in the Buddhist monkhood for 27 years through the reign of his predecessor. In this time, he maintained his ties to court culture while simultaneously devoting himself to the study of Buddhism. The prince paid attention to extending the frontiers of his own knowledge, both religious and secular.

Proficient in English and Latin as well as several Asian languages, the king developed a powerful intellectual curiosity about Western culture and ideas, extending his knowledge into modern sciences, geography, history, and mathematics, especially astronomy, which was his favorite subject (Waugh, 1987: 49). His interest in Western knowledge was known among foreigners both inside and outside Siam. An article published in *The Straits Times* dated 8 July 1851 described his ability in modern sciences:

...while in the priesthood he made himself somewhat popular abroad by his free intercourse with foreigners, his creditable progress in the English language, and his attention to some of the modern sciences...he adopted the Copernican system of astronomy to introduce the true sciences and improvement, and as a consequence throw off some of the superstitions of Buddhism. (Anon., 1851: 5)

Due to the acceptance of Western culture as the mode of the day, King Mongkut started to push his country closer to Westernization. At first, the king mobilized Siam on both civilizing and modernizing fronts, aiming to build a modern country by the “adopt-adapt” parallel in order to preserve some ancient traditions as an identity (Wyatt, 1984: 185-6). The king abolished old customs which the Westerners
looked upon as “uncivilized” to fit with international standards of civilization (Piyanart, 2007: 39). Thus, the king and his bureaucratic reformers wanted to transform Siam to be a civilized country like Western countries. That is why the reforming project in the cultural and intellectual realms launched in Bangkok looked outward to the West (Pattana, 2005: 22).

The prince even tried to eliminate some of the magic and superstition from the Siamese Buddhism of the day (Cady, 1964: 304). Particularly, he established a new Buddhist sect, the Dhammayut, which emphasized personal devotion and meditation (Steinberg, 1987: 117). This new reformist sect eliminated more “superstitious” and less “rational” Buddhist practices, and adopted a more intellectual approach to religion. He was not only a leading scholar in Buddhism, but was also interested in studying worldly knowledge, especially from the West. Wat Bowon Niwet, the temple where he was an abbot, became a center of Western learning.

“Western civilization” during the colonial period also meant “progress” and Christianity. The American missionary Dan Beach Bradley discussed the idea of civilization with King Mongkut. Bradley pointed out that if Siam wanted to be renowned among the countries as more enlightened and strong, it must construct better roads and convert to Christianity. The king accepted all the things which were judged to be “siwilai” (civilized) in terms of Western meaning, except Christianity (Charnvit, 1996: 6). The king firmly affirmed that Buddhism was part of the identity of Siam. Though Siamese who studied overseas brought back elements of Western intellectual currents of various kinds, their spirituality generally remained Buddhist. For many Siamese, “siwilai” was defined most prominently in terms of material culture, especially adopting many cultural elements of an upper-class Western lifestyle (Peleggi, 2002: 29-31).

Later, when a centralized modern state was constructed during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-2010), the Buddhist sangha was also organized along national lines and governed by a Supreme Patriarch (sangha-raja). Besides, the king promoted the first program of national education via the network of Buddhist monasteries throughout the country. Subsequently, King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925) strengthened the Thai identity with Buddhism. He blended the concepts of “nation, religion and king” into a governing ideology for modern Thailand. He
promoted a civic religion in which “nation” competed with “religion” and the “monarchy” as marks of Thai identity. Since that time, governments have revision the legal code governing the monastic order several times, but the integration of Buddhism into a national, bureaucratic system under the control of the central government has not changed (Swearer, 2010: 120).

In Burma, during the colonial period, Buddhism became a root of Burmese nationalism. Buddhist schools were established in the big cities in British Burma. These schools modeled a curriculum from missionary and English schools. Meanwhile, they sought to discuss issues of modernity through Buddhist idioms. In 1906 students founded the Young Men's Buddhist Association, clearly reflecting the model of the Young Men's Christian Association, founded in London in 1844. The YMBA was originally interested in discussing religion, but its interests soon expanded to local cultural and political issues (Ricklefs, 2010: 214).

Burmese students educated in the Western style saw the preservation of Burmese cultural forms as a way to forge new identities. Literature, poetry, and theatre in particular took on a semi-autonomous history in this period, seemingly detached from narratives of the colonial economy and state. Much of Burmese literature had its roots in court traditions that were deeply influenced by Buddhist forms, symbols, and themes. By the later nineteenth century, pya-zat—a term that refers back to earlier plays focusing on the Jataka tales—companies were touring throughout what remained of the independent kingdom and even within the newly annexed territories of British Lower Burma. Puppet shows, musical performances, and other forms of entertainment contributed to the cultural integration that had been on-going for centuries, slowly evolving into a set of ideas that would be associated with being “Burmese.”

In Muslim societies, there was a sort of competition between alternate forms of globalization—that offered by reformed, universalist Islam and that offered by the West. In Indonesia, administrative elites working with the colonialists found Western-style reforms more attractive than Islam’s offerings, while religious elites embraced Islamic reformism and almost invariably disliked Western “Christian” rule, even if that rule was fundamentally secular in nature. Thereby another form of cultural division was strengthened.
The arrival of European naval fleets and trading missions disrupted the process of Islamization in Southeast Asia. The Portuguese conquest and capture of Malacca in 1511, which was a strategic port for Islamization, disrupted the unity of the Muslim-dominated trading states. Later, the Dutch in particular came to dominate the largest portion of the archipelago (Gross, 2007: 236). However, after European imperialism was established in this region, the influence of Islam still remained in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. Meanwhile, some Muslim groups survived in some parts of Mainland countries and the Philippines.

In the 19th century, it was not only European modernity and Western styles that were embraced, an elite inspired by Islam also grew stronger. In Indonesia, the “Liberal Policy” launched in 1870 encouraged the development of wage labor and a Javanese commercial middle class. This group often had connections with Arab trading communities in the coastal cities. The Arabs included supporters of Middle Eastern Islamic reform movements. Also, this Javanese middle class could afford the pilgrimage to Mecca and there encountered reformism first-hand. In the outer islands, commercial opportunities allowed the growth of an indigenous Islamic middle class. Pilgrimage traffic from Indonesia to the Middle East grew dramatically from mid-century, facilitated by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the spread of steam shipping around the same time, making travel to the Arabian Peninsula easier and faster. Many hajis returned home with reformist ideas and thus sparked a movement for more fastidious observation of Islam’s requirements. This reform movement challenged the Islamic leaders to reform the traditional educational system to be appropriate for the modern world. Many schools promoted reform and condemned local practices that had long been part of Indonesian Islamic life. However, Islamic reform did not affect all Indonesians, but mainly those following a bureaucratic career and living in major cities. Western modernity was more attractive for these elites than the sober pieties of Middle East reform movements (Ricklefs, 2010: 222).

Besides the reform trend, another more radical Islamic movement arose among those who desired to protect Islam through “holy war.” Pan-Islamic sentiments were promoted among Muslims. A few months after the outbreak of World War I, Turkey joined in on the side of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Later, Sultan
Mehmed V proclaimed a holy war and called on all Muslims to join. Even in the Netherlands Indies, the *jihad* proclamation caused anxiety among Dutch residents. The “Jihad Document” of November 1914 called upon the forty million Muslims in the Netherlands Indies to free themselves from the colonial yoke, and to kill or chase away the semi-civilized Dutch; this was an appeal which was later rectified after Dutch protests (Dijk, 2009: 109,112).

In the Malay Sultanate States, the Malay rulers and the Sultan of Brunei spoke out in support of Great Britain. The rulers of the Federated Malay States, consisting of Perak, Selangor, Pahang, and Negeri Sembilan, signed a joint statement forbidding the inhabitants of their states from rendering any assistance whatever to Turkey and also issued a statement in support of the British colonial administration. These Malay rulers supported and praised the British government because the British reformed the administration and assisted them to remain in power, especially by controlling custom and religion. For example, the Sultan of Pahang issued a statement praising the British colonial administration and reminding the inhabitants of Pahang that they enjoyed abundant prosperity, happiness, and freedom since Pahang came under British protection. The rulers of the Unfederated States, Kelantan, Jahor and Trengganu, issued expressions of their loyalty to the British Crown in the same way (Dijk, 2009: 114-5).

Making the nation-state with religious and cultural movements

Buddhism for integrating the nation: Myanmar and Thailand

Myanmar is one of the newly independent countries that combined Buddhism and socialism. During the colonial period, the nationalist movement in Myanmar promoted Buddhism as a political ideology to struggle for independence from the British colonizer. Buddhism helped to build a sense of the nation and unify people to fight the British. Buddhism became an important state ideology of the emergent Burmese nation.

After independence, U Nu, the first prime minister of the newly independent government, attempted to propagate Buddhism as a state ideology and part of the identity of the Burmese nation. He believed that a national community would emerge only if the indi-
individual members were able to overcome their selfish interests. He also explained that material goods were not meant to be used for individual comfort but for the necessities of life in the journey to nibbana. He adopted a “Buddhist Socialism” that blended Buddhism and socialism as a political ideology. In 1950, he created a Buddhist Sasana Council whose purpose was to spread Buddhism and supervise monks. He also propagated Buddhism in the national educational system as a means to assimilate other ethnic minorities to become Burmese citizens. Both non-Burmese minorities and non-Buddhists resisted this policy, tipping Burma into a civil war. It seemed that his policies could not solve the political, economic, and social problems. When the AFPFL Union Party led by U Nu 1960 overcame the Stable AFPFL Party in the election of 1960, U Nu established Buddhism as the national religion on 26 August 1961 (Swearer, 2010: 110-2). This was the immediate cause of an insurrection against the government by non-Buddhism communities and other ethnic minorities, especially Shan and Kachin (Mong, 2007: 263). U Nu's attempt to unite people by Buddhism failed. Soon after, he was overthrown by General Ne Win in 1962.

After the unsuccessful “Buddhist Socialism” of U Nu, General Ne Win formed a “Burma Socialist Program Party” (BSPP) that proposed to create a secular, socialist state that would dismantle Buddhist institutions within the state's superstructure. In particular, the Burmese Socialist Program called for freedom of religion. In the face of the rising economic and political problems, the government shored up their legitimacy through the unification and purification of the sangha in the closing years of the 1970s. At this point, it seemed that Myanmar's military government was attempting to control Buddhism in a manner far more encompassing and systematically repressive than that of U Nu. The BSPP turned Burma into one of the world's most impoverished countries. The agricultural sector declined, and the country's transportation and communications infrastructure deteriorated. Also, basic freedoms of speech, assembly, and the press were greatly restricted. Rising economic problems prompted mass demonstrations culminating in “Uprising 8888” and a national election in 1990. Yet, the military refused to honor their overwhelming electoral defeat in that election, killing or jailing many opposition leaders, including Buddhist monks who had joined in the protest.
Buddhist monks participated in these political movements. In fact, the government attempted to intensify Buddhist civic religion by linking Buddhism, the people, and the state as three strands of a single rope. The government controlled the role of Buddhism and tried to keep it separate from politics. For example, in 1980 the government restricted the *sangha* in an effort to exercise greater control and to secure the support of senior monastic leaders. In April of that year, more than a thousand *sangha* representatives from each township attended a national assembly in Yangon. Many national, regional, and local monastic organizations were created; numerous regulations were passed to enforce both monastic discipline and state control of the monastic order, including issuance of identification papers “to provide for the scrutiny of individuals entering the monkhood and to systematically control and supervise members after their admission into the monkhood.” Moreover, the state sponsored countryside lecture tours by renowned religious teachers, and the government promoted missions to propagate Buddhism among non-Buddhist populations in the six states and divisions of the country (Swearer, 2010: 113).

Yet, the attempts to promote a contemporary Buddhist civic religion in support of a repressive military regime failed to decrease tension between the monastic order and the government. These tensions boiled over in August and September of 2007, when monks led anti-regime demonstrations in Yangon and other cities in what has been called the “saffron revolution.” According to news reports, over ten thousand monks led marches in Yangon, not only protesting economic hardships caused by inflated fuel prices, but also demanding support for democratic reforms and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. The demonstrations erupted in 25 cities across the country, leading to a harsh government crackdown on Buddhist monasteries, including the street protest for demanding lower commodity prices and the release of political prisoners of monks in Pakokku (Swearer, 2010: 116).

In Thailand, the absolute monarchy was changed to a constitutional and democratic government through the Revolution of 1932, but the Buddhist religion was still used as an instrument of integration and identity creation. Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat (prime minister, 1957-63) promoted national integration through Thammathut and Thammacharik programs under the control of government agencies. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Thammathut program promoted rural
development in areas of the country threatened by political unrest, while the Thammacharik program sent monks to work among the animistic hill peoples of northern Thailand. Propagating Buddhism among non-Thai peoples with limited loyalty to the national government was seen as the principal means of their integration into the Thai nation-state (Swearer, 2010: 121).

Religious traditions are constantly evolving and responding to social, economic, and political change. They challenge foreign ideologies and in that engagement are influenced by them. Since the end of World War II, Southeast Asia had experienced rapid changes abetted by war, political revolution, the demise of colonially shaped governments, the impact of the world market economy, and the erosion of many traditional institutions and cultural practices. Cambodia is an extreme case. Under Pol Pot’s regime, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) sought to eliminate the residue of the colonial past and traditional heritage, including Buddhism. Between 1975 and 1979, the CPK wanted to overthrow the traditional roots and immediately change the society to be “socialist.” As a result, over a million Cambodians were killed and over half a million fled the country. Many monasteries and temples were destroyed. Buddhist monks were either killed or forced to disrobe and return to lay life. It appeared that Buddhism as an institution had been effectively eliminated. However, when the Vietnamese established the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) in 1979, the situation of Buddhism improved. The government restored the Buddhist sangha and Norodom Sihanouk was reestablished as king of Cambodia in 1992. In Laos, although the Pathet Lao, which came to power in 1975, restricted and regulated the Buddhism sangha, the Laotian government did not seek to destroy Buddhism in the same way (Swearer, 2010: 129-130).

Islam and identity

Interestingly, the term “Muslim” in Southeast Asia also means Malay. In Indonesia, populated by a large number of ethnic groups, the process of Islamization in the region has also been perceived as a process of Malayization. In the early period of Islamization, the Malay language served as the lingua franca of the loose confederation of trading sultanates that firmly established Islam in the region. This process was reinforced by the Dutch that promoted the use of
Malay throughout the islands. Nowadays, Bahasa Indonesia, the formally adopted national language of Indonesia, is a variant of the Malay language spoken in Malaysia (Bahasa Malaysia). Similarly, both the Muslim minorities in Thailand’s five southernmost provinces of Pattani, Songkhla, Satun, Yala and Narathiwat and the Philippine’s two substantially Muslim-populated southwestern regions identify themselves as Malays rather than as Thais or Filipinos. Even the Cham Muslims of Cambodia and Vietnam identify themselves as being of Malay origin. Only the thoroughly Sinicized Hui Muslims of central China lack such a Malay identity, although no doubt some of their original numbers were of Malay origin. Therefore, to be Muslim in this region, carries an ethnic as well as a religious identity and make adherence to Islam all the more relevant politically (Gross, 2007: 2).

Muslims are a majority of the whole population in this region. There have been attempts to create an Islamic state or “State of Malay-Muslims” since the colonial era ended. Firstly, the contemporary militant Islamist group in the region, Jemaah Islamiyah, has a goal of unifying Muslim Malay peoples into a single Islamic state, comprising not only Indonesia and Malaysia, but also the southern Thai and Philippine provinces (Gross, 2007: 2-3). Secondly, Sukarno propagated the concept of a “Greater Indonesia.” Politically, he hoped to unify the entire Malay world, from Pattani in southern Thailand to Mindanao in the southwest Philippines, into a single Muslim Malay state under his own leadership (Gross, 2007: 19). Yet within Indonesia, Sukarno did not wish to create an Islamic state governed by Islamic law, yet promoted the nationalist Pancasila Doctrine. Ironically, Malaysia with a population that is 60.4 percent Muslim as of 2013 is “officially” an Islamic state, whereas Indonesia as the world’s most populous Muslim-majority country is not.

In Malaya during the colonial period, the British supported the Malay Sultans as leaders of custom and religion. The Malay elite, therefore, had a positive attitude to the British. Meanwhile, the British helped to develop the Chinese to become the most powerful ethnic group in the Malayan economy, resulting in a strong anti-Chinese sentiment among radical Malays. After World War II ended, ethnic-based parties and political movements emerged. UMNO, the vehicle of the Malay elites, dominated Malaysian policies after independence in 1957, and implemented the concept of Bumiputera, especially after
the 13 May Incident in 1969. Chinese-Malaysians were excluded from full political engagement and felt disadvantaged, especially under an Islamic state of Malaysia.

In Indonesia, by contrast, Pancasila prevented the political mobilization of Islam, but allowed people to be engaged politically and to struggle to “uphold and implement the basic principles of Islam within the framework of the Pancasila state.” In the late 1980s and early 1990s, due to the growing impact of neo-modernist Muslim groups, the Suharto government undertook a number of steps to make Islamic values central to Indonesian political life, legitimacy, educational system and the government also had financial supporting to Islam. (Gross, 2007: 91-92).

The Malay in southern Thailand and Moro in the Philippines have been more problematic in the context of the unified nation-state. As a result of government policies for unifying and assimilating all ethnics to become one nation, a portion of Muslims in both countries have been becoming “indigenous minorities.” They have their own identities which set them apart from the “majority group,” either Buddhist or Catholic. As a result of this cultural alienation, since the 1960s in southern Thailand and the 1970s in the southwest Philippines, there have been long-term insurgencies aimed at demonstrating to the ruling governments the difficulty of ruling a restive population that rejects the authority of “foreign” rule (Gross, 2007: 241).

**Conclusion**

The coming of modernization at the hands of imperial colonizers had consequences for indigenous religions in Southeast Asia. The responses to this cultural attack were varied. Reformist religious movements adopted elements of Western modernity to reform and eliminate “the non-sciences and antiquated knowledge” which was not appropriate to the modern world of that day. These religions were thus able to strengthen their role as centers of the “indigenous soul” to resist the colonial system. Meanwhile, other groups called for a holy war to seize independence from foreign rulers. After colonial rule ended, however, these reformed religions became means for national governments to integrate and unify their people into the nation-state.

Since the end of World War II, the religious cultures of the region
have responded to political, economic and social changes. Religions have a distinctive role in many countries. They are part of the process of making a nation and building that nation's identity.

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