

RELIGION, VALUES
and
DEVELOPMENT
in Southeast Asia

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**RELIGION, VALUES
and
DEVELOPMENT
in Southeast Asia**

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and
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INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

Bruce Matthews

This monograph consists of selected papers initially presented at the Second International Conference of the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, in June 1982. They cover a wide range of issues pertinent to the non-Communist countries of Southeast Asia, and represent a diverse cross-section of research methods and aims. Most of the authors have expressed an interest in the various challenges associated with development in this traditional part of the world. Some have chosen to examine the impact of modernization on culture and religion. In this regard, Andreas Buss addresses the whole question of whether the Western free-enterprise economic model is appropriate to the Asian world-view. Using Max Weber and S.H. Alatas as theorists who have capably probed this problem before, Buss reflects on alternative definitions of progress that may be more viable for the East. Likewise, Lakshman Marasinghe shows how indigenous or customary law contributes to national and social cohesiveness, despite years of dominance by colonial or "foreign" laws in many Asian countries. He rightly argues that law should be a reflection of the spirit of a people, and that its role in development is therefore obvious and critical. It is something that must be re-examined and advanced by Third World societies. Elsewhere, Judith Nagata analyses the impact of the contemporary Islamic revival in Malaysia. She outlines the various fundamentalist groups which aspire to win the allegiance of both urban

and rural Muslims. Especially interesting are her reflections on how this kind of religious force fails to meet the needs of villagers and country people used to a much more liberal and practical kind of religious life.

Two papers that deal specifically with Buddhism centre on Burma and Thailand. Bruce Matthews first provides a review of different attitudes towards modernization in the Theravāda countries, showing how Buddhism can be used as an agency for nation-building and national identity. He then concentrates on the unique response of Burma. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh reviews the leadership role of the Buddhist monastic order in Thailand, as it seeks to strengthen and stabilize society. She does this by examining the educational system in Buddhist universities, and reveals interesting and important attitudes on the part of both monks and lay students to the place of religion in contemporary Thai society.

Other papers are more specifically aimed at sociological issues. Marie-Andrée Couillard offers an excellent study of men-women relationships in the Malay "world". She clears up some misunderstandings about male domination, and carefully shows how the role of women as chief agents in the production of food gives access to prestige goods and respect. Unlike some other societies, Malay women's housework is recognized and compensated, and the married pair is still perceived as the basic economic unit in the community, and as equals in the "business adventure" of life. In another paper, Pudjiwati Sajogyo examines the position of rural Indonesian women in the family and in the greater community. This is the result of a two-year survey of nearly five hundred selected households from villages in Java, Sumatra and Timor. It addresses such themes as the status of women, incomes and decision-making processes in the family. Raul Pertierra similarly investigates various responses of Philippine villagers to the technical and strategic choices made available to them. Arguing that sometimes the topic of "modernization" portrays peasant society as static and conservative, he goes on to point out that such a view fails to appreciate the often flexible way this element of society reacts to new forces and influences. Not infrequently, however, village institutions have imposed on them "rationalized" urban-based values (namely, in education and law) as a necessary pre-condition for modernization. Using J. Habermas as a primary source, Pertierra continues by pointing out the many ways in which peasant society may be said to exhibit useful and authentic degrees of "rationality".

Two final papers address historical and linguistic topics. Hélène Legendre discusses the meaning of Angkor Wat, concentrating on its traditional sacrificial focus, and tracing out some of the myths and theological themes identified by modern scholarship. She avers that

since 1975, the Khmer Rouge have broken away from any religious empathy or spiritual affection for Angkor, so that it is now deprived of a “living” cultural significance. Finally, James Placzek and Wilaiwan Kanittanan offer an interesting study on how a once-central psychological and theological concept is affected by an evolving cultural setting. They set down the several meanings associated with the Thai word *khwan* (“consciousness”), showing how it has traditionally been used as a definition of that which is reborn, and as a kind of energizing spirit in both animate and inanimate things. Among the remote Tai-speaking people in Southeast Asia, there has been little or no change in the way the word and concept is used. Elsewhere, however, *khwan* is lexically and culturally re-defined to be consistent with contemporary psychology, or simply ignored as an outdated word and concept. It is a good example of the stages involved in the secularization of a religious term.

It is our hope that these essays will provide both data and ideas worthy of further reflection. Given the crucial importance of the place of religion and tradition in Southeast Asian culture, any understanding of their ongoing role in this era of change and development is encouraged.

I want to thank in particular the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies for their help in the preparation of this manuscript, and my colleague Judith Nagata for her editorial assistance. Thanks are due also to Mrs Christine Hughes and Messrs Jess Boudreau and Bev Keddy for their work in word-processing. I also wish to acknowledge the generous outreach of Acadia University, which helped fund the initial steps of preparing this manuscript for publication.

Finally, it should be noted that the references and bibliographies in the assembled papers are not necessarily consistent in style. They are set down in the manner originally submitted by each author.