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**Ethnic Groups
across
National Boundaries
in
Mainland Southeast Asia**

The **Institute of Southeast Asian Studies** was established as an autonomous organization in 1968. It is a regional research centre for scholars and other specialists concerned with modern Southeast Asia, particularly the many-faceted problems of stability and security, economic development, and political and social change.

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Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia

edited by

Gehan Wijeyewardene

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Social Issues in Southeast Asia
INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Cover

*Yao elder from the village of Pulangka,
Chiangrai province, northern Thailand.
Photograph by courtesy of Douglas Miles*

Published by
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang Road
Singapore 0511

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Cataloguing in Publication Data

Ethnic groups across national boundaries in mainland Southeast Asia / edited by Gehan Wijeyewardene.

1. Ethnicity--Asia, Southeastern.
2. Ethnicity--Burma.
3. Ethnicity--Thailand.
4. Ethnicity--Laos.
5. Ethnicity--China--Yunnan.
6. Ethnicity--China--Guangdong.

I. Wijeyewardene, Gehan.

II. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore)

GN495.6 E841 1990 sls90-008778

ISBN 981-3035-57-9 (soft cover)

ISBN 981-3035-61-7 (hard cover)

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Printed in Singapore by Kin Keong Printing Co. Pte. Ltd.

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Foreword

Ethnic and religious issues have, in the last few decades, confounded many social analysts by refusing to disappear. The “liberal expectancy” among social analysts used to be that modernization would blur ethnic distinctions, achievement would replace ascription and particularistic criteria, and wide-ranging communication and education systems would homogenize populations. The “radical expectancy” was that differences in religions, languages, and culture would be swallowed up, perhaps even across national boundaries by emergent class consciousness. Instead, religion and ethnicity continue to cut across and envelop almost every facet of Southeast Asian life. Indeed, if anything, such divisions in many societies have become sharper, ethnic and religious interest groups more insistent, and opposition more politicized and strident. Much of this activity seems to be increasingly played on the urban stage — and this at a time when the pace of urbanization in Southeast Asia is increasing rapidly, to the extent that by the turn of the century, cities such as Manila, Bangkok, and Jakarta could have populations of more than ten million each. In these settings, Southeast Asian ethnic, religious, and linguistic complexities are likely to be even more challenging than in the past.

It was therefore only natural that among other aspects of the Southeast Asian social and cultural scene, the Institute should identify the study of contemporary religion as one of its key areas of interest. Southeast Asia is after all not only home to all the major religions of the world — Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism — but the geographical spread of these is such that the bonds that bind their adherents at one and the same time defy and accentuate political and territorial divides and boundaries. The case of Islam is especially striking in this respect, as its followers are present in significant numbers in almost every Southeast Asian country, and in several of these across constraining political borders. Acting on

this, a group of Southeast Asian scholars met in 1980 and proposed a project to increase our understanding of Islam in its regional context.

Towards this end, two clusters were identified. The first of these was centred on the nature of Islam in the region, Islam and societal change, and Islam and education. The second concentration was to be on Islam and problems of economic development.

The completion of the first cluster of research activities saw the publication of three volumes: *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia*; *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*; and *Muslim Society, Higher Education and Development in Southeast Asia*.

Building on the foregoing studies, work commenced on the second cluster of research, that is, “Islam and the Economic Development of Southeast Asia”. The research here too was in three phases, spread over three years. They were: Islamic banking; Islam and resource mobilization through the voluntary sector; and Islam and the role of the private sector in economic development.

The project on Islam stimulated considerable interest in not only other major religions in the region, but also issues relating to ethnicity and development, another of the Institute’s long-standing and primary areas of research. Moreover, the experience gained in managing the project on Islam proved valuable in terms of co-ordinating comparative research involving numerous scholars from diverse backgrounds and disciplines — with the result that the Institute was encouraged not only to plan parallel projects on Buddhism and Christianity in Southeast Asia, but also to think in terms of developing a longer-term *programme* of research that would encompass all its projects on contemporary religions, together with those that might grow out of the Institute’s interests in ethnicity, urbanism, and related areas.

To facilitate this, the Institute convened a meeting in 1985 of senior Southeast Asian social scientists to discuss issues of social change in Southeast Asia, in order to identify firm areas of research and a sharper focusing of such research and associated activities. The group were unanimous in their conclusion that it was “essential and desirable” to encourage research on social issues in Southeast Asia, in particular religion, ethnicity, urbanism, and population dynamics.

To allow for proper planning and incremental research, the group felt that work in these areas could be most effectively developed within the structure and support of a *programme*, rather than as *ad hoc* projects. Ac-

cordingly, it was proposed there be established a programme of research to be known as the “Social Issues in Southeast Asia (SISEA)” programme. This programme would address itself to the nature, persistence, and impact of religions, ethnicity, urbanism, and population change in terms of their intrinsic dynamism and potential for societal conflict, coexistence or cooperation in the context of development, stability, and nation-building.

SISEA would also allow for the consolidation of the various publications emanating from the Institute’s work in ethnicity, religion, urbanism, and population change within a single and integrated series, “Social Issues in Southeast Asia”.

Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia edited by Dr Gehan Wijeyewardene, who was a Research Fellow in the SISEA programme of the Institute in October 1989, is the latest addition to the series.

SISEA and the preparation of *Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia* have benefited greatly from the financial support provided by the Ford Foundation, and by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany. The Institute would like to record its appreciation of all such help and support and to express the wish that the various numbers of “Social Issues in Southeast Asia” will circulate widely amongst all concerned with the social dynamics of the region.

In wishing the volumes in the “Social Issues in Southeast Asia” series all the best it is clearly understood that responsibility for facts and opinions expressed in them rests exclusively with the individual authors, editors, and compilers, and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Institute or its supporters.

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Acknowledgements

All but two of the papers in this volume were specially prepared for the volume. The papers by Douglas Miles and Nicholas Tapp were written for other occasions, but because of their direct relevance to the theme of this book and because they fill an important part of its coverage, we are grateful that they have allowed us to use them. The original proposal for the volume was made at the Asian Studies Association of Australia conference held in Singapore in February 1989. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, facilitated publication of the book by granting the editor a Research Fellowship, in its Social Issues in Southeast Asia (SISEA) programme, to do the final editing in October 1989. The editor takes this opportunity to thank the Institute and the SISEA programme, particularly its Co-ordinator, Dr Ananda Rajah, as well as the Australian National University for its support of the Thai-Yunnan Project of which he is the Convenor.

Gehan Wijeyewardene