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Politico-Cultural-Religious Milieu of South East Asia: An Examination of Pre-Islamic Structures of Authority and Syncretic Practices

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Abstract. This paper analyses the structure of authorities and syncretic practices among the people in South East Asia before the spread of Islam in the region. The influence of South Asian tradition and culture in South East Asia was evident especially in the social and political spheres. Practices of South East Asian empires originated from the South Asian continent. In order to understand those influences, this study analyses available materials related to the development of socio-political and cultural-religious environment in South East Asia prior to the advancement of Islam in the region. This study concludes that early kingdoms in South East Asia adopted the doctrines of *devaraja* and *bodhisattva* as the model of governance. This doctrine provides the rulers with everlasting loyalty from their subjects. At the same time, religious life among the people in South East Asia highlights a unique practice. The syncretic practices of the people in South East Asia at that time prove that they did not follow blindly religious practices presented to them from the South Asian traditions. They adopt and adapt those practices to suit their own needs at that time.

Keywords and phrases: South East Asia, *devaraja*, *bodhisattva*, syncretism, Hindu-Buddhist

Introduction

Geographically, South East Asia is located to the east of India and south of China. It includes the mainland, as well as thousands of islands. Almost a quarter of a billion people inhabit this region. Burma (Myanmar), Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam

and Thailand are located on the mainland, while Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei, Singapore and Timor-Leste are islands. Malaysia is also considered as a country of the islands of South East Asia, although it occupies, in addition to parts of Borneo, a peninsula that is attached to the predominantly non-Muslim mainland of South East Asia. Since physically, most of the territory of this country is surrounded by South East Asia, it is justifiable to consider Malaysia as part of the islands of South East Asia.

Within the islands of South East Asia, there is one common, shared characteristic among its people – almost all speak languages belonging to the same linguistic family. Most languages on the islands of South East Asia belong to the Western Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian linguistic family. Hence the term Malay world, which refers to those countries (islands) of South East Asia – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, South Thailand, Timor-Leste and the Philippines – all speak closely related languages of which Malay for centuries, has been the most important one in terms of commerce, religious and secular education, as well as diplomacy. In contrast, the language of mainland South East Asia belongs to several unrelated language families, such as the Austro-Asiatic, the Tibeto-Burman and the Thai language families.

This paper analyses the structure of authorities and syncretic practices among the people in South East Asia before the spread of Islam in the region. The simplest meaning of the word syncretism refers to "the fusion of different beliefs or practices" (Goh 2009, 5). The influence of South Asian tradition and culture in South East Asia was evident especially in the social and political spheres. Practices of South East Asia empires originated from the South Asian continent. In order to understand those influences, this study analyses available materials related to the development of socio-political and cultural-religious environment in South East Asia prior to the advancement of Islam in the region. The main focus will be on the model of governance adopted by the early kingdoms in South East Asia. The understanding of model of governance will later on provide better understanding on the structure of authorities. Subsequently, explaining the role of religions and the model of religious practices at that time in South East Asia.

International Relation and South East Asia Structure of Authority

The early kingdoms of mainland and island of South East Asia were bound together by their geographic and economic ties. The close distance between the island and mainland kingdoms makes this relationship possible. They were involved in trade,

exchanging goods between kingdoms. Moreover, this region was known for its richness in highly desirable spices, precious woods and gems, and is also a land of other natural resources such as gold (Andaya 2010, 1–3).

The strategic location of early South East Asian kingdoms already encouraged and enhanced foreign contact, most certainly before the 1st century CE. The first recorded initiatives to explore the richness of South East Asian kingdoms were taken by people from South Asia when merchants started to sail to the coast of Burma and the islands of South East Asia. Trade with the Chinese is said to have begun some time during the 3rd century CE (Wolters 1967, 34–37).

A factor which had considerable impact on the rise of trade and commerce during the early period in South East Asia was the occasional disruption of the traditional land routes between India and China. The South East Asia route connecting the west and the far east became the best possible means for merchants to continue their trade after the disruption of the central Asian caravan routes in the 2nd century CE (Hall 1985, 20). Moreover, the development of shipping technology by the people from South Asia and the Chinese at that time as well as navigational skills among local South East Asia men, also contributed to an increase in active contact by people via South East Asia routes.

It must be stressed that the people of South East Asia were not only recipients of foreign contributions, especially from South Asian civilisation, but also actively took part in the exchange with foreign lands. Although this issue has not been studied very much, this was clearly the case. One great example is the construction of a Buddhist monastery in Nalanda, India by the Srivijayan Empire (Wolters 1970, 134). This monastery was used as a place of worship, as well as a shelter, especially for citizens of Srivijaya, when they came and visited Nalanda. The ability of this early South East Asian empire to build a religious building in the birthplace of the South Asian religions, and maintain a monastery, provides the best evidence of the intensity and reciprocity of the contacts.

As a result of active trade between the local people and foreign merchants, many local coastal kingdoms established themselves over the centuries, such as Srivijaya, Majapahit, and many other smaller ports and kingdoms. Undoubtedly, among these early coastal kingdoms, Srivijaya became the foremost commercial power as early as the 7th century CE and by the end of this 7th century CE, it had become a great empire in Western Indonesia (Wolters 1967, 238). By then, Srivijaya had expanded its sphere of influence and gained support from the Chinese emperor.

Foreign merchants also brought with them their cultures and traditions. Thus, the trade relationship became the first means of contact between the people of South East Asia with South Asian civilisation. The process of Indianisation began with the adoption of South Asian religions and traditions by local rulers. According to Wolters, the adoption of South Asian religions and traditions came at the request of the rulers themselves, in order to further their political and commercial interests (1967, 286). As a result, the people of most early kingdoms in South East Asia were exposed to South Asian religions and cultures, which manifested themselves at their courts. The South Asian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism were the choice of the court at that time, and in particular, the cult of *devaraja,* which had a home in both Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism, and also in many local traditions.

The international relations between the kingdoms of South East Asia and other countries had a very deep impact on these kingdoms. These early kingdoms were subjected to influences in terms of their structure of authority, as well as their political and social environments. In relation to the structure of authority, the South Asian model was adopted, in order to ensure the prosperity of the kingdom and make kingship an essential prerequisite of good governance. The ruler was regarded as the source of prosperity, as he was the representative of god.

The Early Kingdoms in South East Asia

The early history of South East Asia was marked by the manifestation of South Asian religions and cultural traditions (Pearn 1963, 10). This is why when we look at the literature about the history of South East Asia, most writers begin their explanations by focusing on the South Asian influence in the early period of the kingdoms in South East Asia (Coedes 1968, see chapters 1, 2 and 3; Hall 1985, 48–77; Pearn 1963, 9–11; Quaritch Wales 1974, 25–31). Since South Asian cultures and traditions developed during the early history of kingdoms in South East Asia had a formative influence on later development and in particular the period and topic of this paper, we propose to provide a brief historical outline of the major South East Asia kingdoms of the time and then discuss their political environment and religious situation in further detail. These kingdoms are very important to the study of the development of cultural-religious and socio-political environment in the history of the early period of South East Asia.

The Early Mainland Kingdoms

There were a number of early mainland kingdoms in South East Asia, such as Dvaravati, Srikshetra, Funan, Champa, Chenla, Angkor and other small Indianised

kingdoms. However, for the purpose of analysing the degree and nature of South Asian influence on the early kingdoms of South East Asia, it will be best to focus on the most significant kingdoms, namely Funan, Champa, Chenla and Angkor, before moving to the islands of South East Asia. Moreover, the information about these kingdoms is well-documented, and one may assume that other Indianised states showed a similar pattern.

Funan

Funan is considered by historians as the first important early kingdom in mainland South East Asia (Coedes 1968, 38; Hall 1985, 62). This is the first kingdom in South East Asia to have a direct relationship with the Indian subcontinent. Its founder, Kaundinya was said to have been a Brahman from India who had come to Funan in the 1st century CE, married a local woman and established himself locally as a ruler. According to Coedes (1968, 36) the centre of his kingdom was located on the lower course and delta of the Mekong. In the 3rd century CE, Funan reached its peak of economic power and became a great empire that ruled over other small kingdoms. It had established relationships with the great empires of that time in India and China.

As the name "Funan" itself was derived from the Khmer *Phnom* (*bnam*) or "mountain", its rulers were also known as the "kings of the mountain". The mountain referred to here is a sacred mountain, on top of which there would be a temple wherein god Siva resides. It was very important symbolism in the Brahmanic god-king (*devaraja*) doctrine, which manifested in the establishment of kingdoms surround a designated sacred mountain. In order to symbolise the supernatural power and heavenly descendent bestowed upon them, this doctrine was adopted by the Funan rulers that made them a sole representative of god on earth.

In the 5th century CE, a major political transformation occurred in Funan's history when the kingdom was taken over by another South Asian Brahman leader of South Asian descent, known as the "second Kaundinya". He made significant changes in the kingdom's administrative affairs, such as introducing Sanskrit as the official language, following the South Asian dating system, systematically implementing the worship of the South Asian deities of Siva and Vishnu, adding the Sanskrit honorific title "*varman*" to the name of rulers and also trying to construct an official genealogy of Funan's royal line to its first founder, Kaundinya (Hall 1985, 69). Eventually, Funan was fully transformed into an Indianised kingdom. At the end of 5th century CE, Funan's role as a great empire began to decline due to its failure to cope with the changing scenario of maritime trade at that time (Hall 1985, 75).

By the mid-6th century CE, internal power struggles had further weakened the power and authority of Funan's rulers. Others seized this opportunity to assume power in Funan, and it was finally taken over by its neighbour, Chenla.

Although Sivaism was the dominant doctrine at that time, Buddhism was also practiced by the Funanese. During the reign of King Rudravarman in the 6th century CE, Buddhism reached its peak in Funan and was regarded as a centre of Buddhist learning and faith. Coedes (1968, 60) suggests that the emperor of China requested King Rudravarman to send Buddhist teachers to China.

Champa

Little is known about this kingdom especially with regard to its rulers and religious inclination (Coedes 1968, 42–44) except that Champa was founded at the end of 2nd century CE. Chinese records identified Champa as Lin-Yi, situated in the present-day south and central Vietnam (Coedes 1968, 42). The 9th century CE inscriptions suggested that the rulers of Champa descended from the dynasty of the Bhargavas and the religion of the court at the early period was the cult of Siva-Uma, a form of Hinduism (Coedes 1968, 44–49). In 875 CE, King Indravarman II built a great Buddhist monument, which marks the existence of Mahayana Buddhism in Champa (Coedes 1968, 123).

The political scenario of Champa was coloured by attempts of its ruler to expand their territory, and rule over other regions since they were powerful warriors taking advantage of the ruggedness of their mountainous region. They were locked in a constant struggle with the Chinese and the Funanese, who wanted to invade and take control of its important coastal area. However, nothing significant has been recorded by historians about the structure of its political entity, except by revealing the names of rulers and their efforts, either to conquer other territories or build religious-oriented sites throughout their ruling period. The Cham communities still exist in contemporary Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand.

Chenla

In the 6th century CE, after the kingdom of Funan had been taken over by the Khmer, Chenla built itself up as an independent kingdom and emerged as a superior kingdom in mainland South East Asia. In Chenla, unlike Sivaism that enjoyed royal favour and was enshrined as state religion by its ruler, Bhavarman, Buddhism was neglected and destroyed. This event was recorded by a Chinese traveller, I-Ching, at the end of 7th century CE, who stated that Buddhism was

destroyed by the ruler of Chenla, and that there were no more Buddhist monks in the kingdom (Coedes 1968, 67).

After the invasion of Funan, unity was the most difficult task to be handled by the ruler of Chenla. As a result of disunity between the Khmer of Chenla and the Funanese in the early 8th century CE, Chenla was split into two. The area to the north was known as "Land Chenla", and to the south as "Water Chenla". This disunity further weakened its authority until it even became a tributary kingdom to the Javanese Sailendra. The people of Chenla were also known as the Khmer, and more recently, as Cambodians.

Angkor

The history of Angkor is important for the study of the religious development in the early period of South East Asia. Angkor presents a new model of political structure at that time and was taken as a model by many kingdoms thereafter. The religious-political doctrine of *devaraja* (god-king) was adopted and was clearly manifested by a great ruler of this ancient kingdom, known as Jayavarman II. He is considered as the founder of the kingdom of Angkor in the 8th century CE for liberating Chenla from the Sailendra occupation, and established a new, strong kingdom in present day Cambodia. According to Pearn (1963, 14), King Jayavarman II was responsible for reuniting the two split kingdoms of Chenla in the newly founded kingdom of Angkor. He chose Mount Mahendra as the capital for his kingdom. The roles of the ruler, the sovereignty of the kingdom, as well as the structure of the government, were well-defined in the political system of Angkor (Kulke 1978, 29–36). This shows that Angkor has a highly developed administrative system, which benefited considerably from South Asian cultures and traditions.

As communication between god and the ruler was conducted through the medium of priest, King Jayavarman II established himself as the incarnation of god on earth through the Brahman scholar, Sivakaivalya, the priest of the new cult of *devaraja* (Coedes 1968, 97–101).

The *devaraja* cult continued to be the dominant religious doctrine in Angkor for several centuries until King Suryavarman I (1002–1050 CE) came to power and promoted Buddhism at the Angkor court. During his reign, Buddhism was given priority over Sivaism. However, Sivaism did not disappear, and continued to be practiced. There were two schools of Buddhism, namely Mahayana and Sthavira (Coedes 1968, 107). Buddhism in Angkor flourished, particularly during the reign of King Jayavarman VII (1181–1218 CE). He claimed himself to be the *bodhisattva* (the future Buddha), a doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism (Pearn 1963, 15).

In short, the kingdoms of mainland South East Asia share several features. Important among them is the influence of the two South Asian religions – Hinduism and Buddhism – in shaping the political and religious landscape of these kingdoms at the time. Religion seems to have been an important tool for these rulers to exercise and maintain power. Politics and religions were inseparable in enforcing the rule of the god-king.

The Early Island Kingdoms

We know of very few early kingdoms in the island of South East Asia. These early kingdoms centred in the coastal areas of the main islands, namely Sumatra and Java. Also, it must be said that some of the earliest witnesses of South Asian culture can be found in Kutai, in the north east of Borneo as well as in Lembah Bujang, in the north west of Peninsula Malaysia. The kingdom of Srivijaya, Mataram and Majapahit are the most significant island kingdoms due to their influence and power throughout the region at that time. It is worth looking at each of these island kingdoms, in order to understand the pattern of cultural-religious and socio-political development there.

Srivijaya

The political landscape in the early period of the island of South East Asia was shaped by the emergence of the powerful kingdom of Srivijaya, located in the south east of the Sumatran Island. Its strategic location, at the centre of an important trade route between India and China contributed significantly to the growth of Srivijaya as a great empire in 7th century CE, and especially in the second half of the 8th century CE. The protection of the Chinese empire sought by the Srivijayan kingdom was effective in protecting its business interests in the region. Traders from India and China made a compulsory stop at Srivijaya's port in Palembang, before continuing their voyages to intended destinations. They spent months in Palembang on business while waiting for the monsoon to change. Wolters concluded that Palembang, the capital city of Srivijaya, was the most important cultural centre for Buddhism that existed at the Straits of Malacca (1967, 237).

The name "Srivijaya" was introduced by Coedes in 1918 CE, after he had successfully transliterated the Chinese name *Shih-li-fo-shih* as Srivijaya (Nik Hassan Shuhaimi 1990, 61). Srivijaya, as a kingdom in South East Asia, was known to the Chinese as *Kan-t'o-li* as early as 441 CE. It was I-Ching who had mentioned Srivijaya in his travelogue when he called at its capital city, Palembang in 671 CE. I-Ching, at that time, was on his way to perform a pilgrimage in India from China. His notes on Srivijaya became one of the most important sources of information about Srivijaya.

During his stay in Srivijaya, he studied Sanskrit for six months. I-Ching gives testimony to the greatness of Srivijaya as an established centre of Buddhist learning (Reichle 2007, 15–16; Takakusu 1896, xxxiv). He suggested to the Chinese priests who wished to study the original Buddhist texts that they should spend one or two years in Srivijaya before continuing their journey to South Asia (Takakusu 1896, xxxiv). This clearly indicated that Buddhism, particularly Mahayana Buddhism, was long established in Srivijaya. In 683 CE, Chinese envoys visited Srivijaya to mark a formal relationship between both kingdoms (Wolters 1967, 237). It was rare for the Chinese kingdom to send a mission abroad, except for a very special and important kingdom, and in this case, it was Srivijaya.

The prosperity of Srivijaya lasted for two centuries before it began to decline. By the end of the 11th century CE, its capital moved to Jambi. By that time, Srivijaya was considered as less important to the Chinese empire. There was a change in the commercial environment during that time in which a single, dominant port was no longer indispensable to the region (Wolters 1970, 4). By the second half of the 14th century CE, Srivijaya had disappeared from the history of the Malay maritime kingdom.

Mataram

Mataram is located in central Java. The kingdom was ruled by the Sailendras, who overran their neighbouring kingdoms and proclaimed a ruler in the late 7th century CE. It has been said that initially, they worshipped Siva, but later they converted to Mahayana Buddhism (Pearn 1963, 22). This was made manifest through the presence of a famous Buddhist temple built at Borobudur, in Central Java, during the 8th century CE. There was an abrupt rise of Buddhism in Central Java during this period, under the leadership of the Sailendras (Coedes 1968, 89).

Although Mataram was considered to be the last Buddhist kingdom in Java, Hinduism was also practiced there, and the two religions existed side by side in the island (Coedes 1968, 126). There was a reciprocal tolerance between these two South Asian religions. This may well be the first evidence of the syncretic tradition in Java, which later became an important religious identity.

The reign of the Sailendras in Mataram was not lengthy. They began to decline in the 9th century CE together with the decline of Mahayana Buddhism, especially at the royal court. Consequently, Sivaism began to flourish once again in Central Java. The political power in Central Java was taken over by a rival dynasty, which worshiped Siva.

Majapahit

Majapahit, a kingdom located in the eastern part of Java, was founded by Kertanaga in 13th century CE. He made a concerted effort to stabilise his kingdom, having faced a period of political uncertainty before that. Majapahit started to rise as a great kingdom, when Gajah Mada was appointed as its Prime Minister in the early part of the 14th century CE and controlled vast territories in the Malay world (Pearn 1963, 27).

Gajah Mada also managed to establish Majapahit as a major centre of international commerce. The port of Majapahit gathered local products of the archipelago such as pepper, spices, sandalwood and others in exchange for porcelain, jade and silk from China and textiles from India. Trade also flourished in Majapahit, because of the skills possessed by the coastal Javanese people as shipbuilders, as well as South East Asiamen. Majapahit is also known for its Hindu-Javanese religion, a blended element of Hinduism and local Javanese beliefs and traditions.

Unfortunately, internal factors such as rivalries for the throne and the threat from the Thai kingdom of Ayuthia, as well as the spread of Islam in the archipelago were factors which eventually contributed to the fall of Majapahit. By the early 16th century CE, Majapahit had ceased to be a major power in the archipelago. A large number of its people, especially those who followed Hinduism, moved east, and to Bali. As such, Hindu-Javanese religion still exists on this island until today, although Indonesia is predominantly a Muslim country.

Fertile lands located in almost all parts of the island make it very important for any ruler who took control of Java to ensure that they were well-protected and secured. The sound economic success contributed to the flourish of religious activities in this area. Furthermore, early mainland kingdoms of South East Asia were popularly known as the birthplace of an important religious doctrine which regarded rulers as heavenly descended representatives of god. The Hindu cult of *devaraja*, and the Mahayana Buddhism's doctrine of *bodhisattva*, was successfully introduced by those early rulers, with assistance from the clergy. There were very few mentions of its economic activities. Strong ties between politics and religion are the main and important feature of these mainland kingdoms at that time.

The Influences of *Devaraja* and *Bodhisattva* in Politics of South East Asia

The political environment of the early kingdoms of South East Asia was largely shaped by South Asian ideas and concepts, beginning with the South Asian Kaundinya, who established Funan in the 1st century CE. This marks the beginning of the South Asian influence in South East Asia. Further evidence of such an influence can be seen in the adaptation of the South Asian kingship doctrine, which embraced the concept of Hindu *devaraja* doctrine, as well as the *bodhisattva* of Mahayana Buddhism.

The Hindu doctrine of *devaraja* began in Funan, and later developed and flourished during the reign of the Angkor kingdom on the mainland South East Asia. The *devaraja* cult includes worship of the symbol of power of god Siva known as the *Linga*. God Siva is taken as the defender and actual bearer of the hereditary royal power (Soebadio 1978, 74). As such, the *devaraja* doctrine maintains that the ruler has a direct relationship with divine authority, i.e., god himself. In other words, the ruler of a kingdom is considered as the representative and manifestation of god on earth. Whenever an individual is proclaimed as the ruler of a particular kingdom who adopted this belief, he will then undergo a ritual to honour him as a living god-king, the representative and part of divine cosmic rule. This ritual was performed during the proclamation of King Jayavarman II as the ruler of Angkor.

In addition to a specific *devaraja* ritual which is conducted by a Brahman priest, the ruler will choose a particular mountain as his sacred mountain. In this belief, the mountain represents a symbolic structure, indicating the city of god on its summit (Heine-Geldren 1942, 17–18). By having this sacred mountain, the ruler can claim himself as the universal monarch – a ruler who adopted the imperial ideology with cosmic responsibility (Kulke 2001, 289). A temple will then be built, and the ruler will communicate with god inside the temple through the medium of a Brahman priest. The ruler will also conduct a human sacrifice in this temple to honour the divine power. This will serve to strengthen the authority of the ruler over his subordinates, as well as to justify his desire to expand his territories beyond the border of his kingdom.

Mahayana Buddhism's doctrine of *bodhisattva* was adopted by another ruler of Angkor, King Jayavarman VII. The structure of authority under this doctrine is similar to the *devaraja*. The ruler is considered to have a close relationship with divine power; the only difference is the absence of a symbolic sacred mountain. In Mahayana Buddhism, the *bodhisattva* will be the future Buddha. As a *bodhisattva*, that person, and in this case, the ruler himself is said to be on his way to experience the enlightenment. This is the path experienced by Buddha himself, on his way

to achieve nirvana, where the soul will no longer be subjected to another painful cycle of rebirth. As such, the ruler will enjoy undivided support and respect from his people, and thus be able to maintain his authority and power to rule.

The doctrines of *devaraja* and *bodhisattva* have a significant impact on the structure of the authority of a particular kingdom. Since everything will be centred towards the ruler, he will be able to demand absolute loyalty from his subordinates. No one will dare to question the authority of a ruler, when he relates his authority to divine power. This is the reason why many early rulers in the kingdom of South East Asia were inclined towards these doctrines, since it provided them with the legal means for maintaining power.

Syncretism and Other: The Belief Systems in South East Asia

Religions in South East Asia have always been treated syncretically (Gottowik 2014, 7). For example, Hinduism and Buddhism were widely practiced side-by-side in South East Asia. They did not, however, eradicate pagan and ancestral worship. Sivaism, one of the cults in Hinduism which worships god Siva, became the dominant form of court Hinduism in South East Asia at that time, while Mahayana Buddhism, and later on Theravada Buddhism, also caught the attention of the people and gained a huge following during those days.

The practice of traditional belief systems in South East Asia

Hinduism and Buddhism were not the first religions of the peoples in the Malay world. Before the coming and spread of these two South Asian religions, the Malays already had their own belief systems. A study on Malay folk beliefs has suggested that animistic beliefs are the core of "Old Indonesian civilisation", a term used to refer to the traditional belief systems in the Malay world (Mohd Taib 1989, 23). Mohd Taib has highlighted the views of another scholar, Ralph Linton (1955, 176 as cited in Mohd Taib 1989, 24) that ancestor-worship was the most important theme in the religious system of Neolothic South East Asia, a view which was also upheld by Vlekke (1989, 15 as cited in Mohd Taib 1989, 24). In other words, such religious observance was dominant and commonly practiced in the Malay world and throughout the region in general.

Apart from ancestor-worship, the worship of nature deities is another form of animistic belief practiced by the early peoples in the Malay world (Mohd Taib 1989, 23). This is because they relied on nature to live, such as hunting animals and collecting wild fruits in the jungles. As such, they believe that there are spiritual elements such as the notion of a "Supreme Being", which can affect their

food supply, and thus, these elements must be respected and worshipped. When life became more settled and they turned to agriculture to acquire food besides hunting, an extended form of worship of these nature deities emerged with the beliefs in "Father Sky" and "Mother Earth" and fertility cults. Together with the previous ancestor-worship these were believed to ensure the fertility of soil and bountiful crops (Mohd Taib 1989, 23).

The above examples describe a pattern of individual relationship of the early people in the Malay world in particular, with other unseen worlds. They have also developed a pattern of authority in the community, specifically to deal with supernatural powers in the form of shamanism. Besides the village heads who were chosen to govern the affairs of the peoples in their own localities, these shamans who were known locally as *pawang* and *bomoh* also became part of an important authority in the local community, especially in dealing with unseen spiritual worlds. For instance, this authority of *pawang* and *bomoh* was called to recover lost property and to cure illness (Mohd Taib 1989, 25; Winstedt 1982, 23). Skeat has elaborated extensively on the role and authority of *pawang* and *bomoh* in the Malay world, as well as other traditional beliefs such as the *keramat* and the nature of rites, which indicates the main elements in traditional belief systems in the archipelago (Skeat 1967, 56–82).

The popularity of Sivaism and Mahayana Buddhism in South East Asia

Elsewhere in this paper, the religions of the early kingdoms in South East Asia were discussed. It had been highlighted before this that Sivaism was the most popular Hindu sect in the region. There are many monuments and inscriptions suggesting this. For example, the Angkor Wat in Angkor, the Sivaite temple complex of Prambanan, which is also known as Candi Loro Jonggrang, the Canggal inscription in 732 CE and many more. Furthermore, the followers of the *devaraja* cult in Funan, and in Angkor, clearly indicated their preference and sole devotion towards god Siva. This doctrine is centred around god Siva, who plays a role as guardian of the state, and also represents might and power. The establishment of a strong relationship between those rulers and god Siva were very important, especially with a view to the masses, in order to gain their loyalty and undivided support from them and also to strengthen the ruler's grip on power.

Unlike Sivaism, there are very few narrations attributed to the worship of god Vishnu in the early period of South East Asian kingdoms. Soebadio highlighted briefly the tribute to god Vishnu in the East and West Java by their respective local rulers namely King Sindok in the east and King Purnavarman in the west. God Vishnu was taken as a symbol of generation and fertility. The rulers who adopted

this attribute were concerned with rainfall to ensure the growth of crops in their kingdoms. This is to make sure that the people can live peacefully with enough food for daily consumption (Soebadio 1978, 83).

The two main Buddhist Schools of Theravada and Mahayana were also present in South East Asia during its early period. The merchants who were responsible for the process of Indianisation brought these two schools of Buddhism, and Hinduism to South East Asia. Evidence suggests that these two schools of Buddhism were in South East Asia during its early period especially at the beginning of the 1st century CE.

However, of these two schools, the Mahayana school was more popular and was adopted by the early kingdoms of South East Asia. The reason was simply that the teachings and interpretations of the concept of Buddha and *bodhisattva* propagated by this school. The Theravada or "Lesser Vehicle" school is considered as retaining the elements of early Buddhism (Ridgeon 2003, 112). They never allow any form of new interpretation of those teachings and follow exactly the path taken by Buddha to attain enlightenment. It is a private affair of an individual whereby he is responsible to himself in his journey to achieve enlightenment. No one can be of help for him to achieve the status of the enlightened person, except through his own merits and good conduct throughout his life.

In contrast, the Mahayana Buddhism is a "Greater Vehicle" towards salvation (Smart 1989, 80). It allows for a new interpretation of the teachings of Buddha. This school introduced the concept of *bodhisattva* or the Buddha-to-be. The *bodhisattva* symbolises the concept of compassion and of assisting others to salvation (Hall 1985, 37). The role of *bodhisattva*, according to the Mahayana school is to ensure that the path to salvation or enlightenment can be shared and guided by a person who has experienced it. This was the point which attracted the early rulers of South East Asia to adopt Mahayana Buddhism.

Generally, these rulers declared themselves as *bodhisattvas*, who have been entrusted with responsibilities as spiritual guides for their people. They have been bestowed with sacred religious responsibilities to lead people to attain enlightenment and get rid of the vicious circle of rebirths. By carrying such an honourable title, these rulers obtained respect and undivided loyalty from their subordinates. They were thus able to maintain themselves in power as long as this title is not being challenged by someone else. Therefore, the relationship between the religious title and power makes this school of Buddhism popular during the early period in South East Asia.

It is interesting to note that the teaching of the Mahayana Buddhism did not last long in South East Asia, especially in the mainland. The decline of the early kingdoms also meant the decline of this school. Theravada Buddhism began to spread once again in this area and grew rapidly between the 11th and 15th centuries CE (Steinberg 1971, 39). In fact, this school managed to influence most countries in the mainland of South East Asia except Vietnam. Today, people of Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia are known to practice Theravada Buddhism.

Localising the Beliefs by the South East Asians

Despite strong adherence to pagan and ancestral worship, the syncretic practices of Hinduism and Buddhism were the dominant religious expressions at the courts of South East Asia prior to the arrival of Islam. Thus, it is worth discussing the extent of influence of each sect of the South Asian religions in South East Asia, and to highlight the modifications made by local people to match these religious practices with their life.

Sivaite Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism

The practice of these two South Asian religions was common among the early imperial courts and in upper class society. The Hindu doctrine of *devaraja* as well as the *bodhisattva* of Mahayana Buddhism gave absolute power and authority to the ruler and his court and at the same time, demanded loyalty and respect from the masses. This is the reason why most early rulers of the South East Asian kingdoms especially Funan, Angkor, Mataram and Majapahit, adopted these two South Asian doctrines.

The rulers erected buildings and temples in their territories in honour of the deities of Siva and Vishnu. On the other hand, the images of Buddha were also erected by rulers who devoted themselves to Mahayana Buddhism. Evidence of the existence of these monuments can be found in many parts of South East Asia. Among the most famous of these religious monuments are the Sivaite temple complex of Prambanan and the Buddhist Borobudur in Central Java, the syncretic Angkor Wat in Angkor, Cambodia as well as Lembah Bujang in Kedah.

Other than enhancing the position and power of the ruler, there is also a view that Hinduism, or more specifically Sivaism, was adopted by the common people, especially in Central Java, because Sivaism was more adaptable to their traditional beliefs rather than, say, Mahayana Buddhism. This is the view of the Dutch scholar N.J. Krom (Soebadio 1978, 67).

Therevada Buddhism and indigenous beliefs

Theravada Buddhism came rather late to South East Asia. I-Ching mentioned in his travelogue that Mulasarvastivada, a great sect of Theravada Buddhism was almost universally adopted in Srivijaya in the 7th century CE (Coedes 1968, 84). However, it has been well accepted and received enormous support from the people. The practice of Theravada Buddhism came from Ceylon, via Burma to Cambodia during the reign of King Jayavarman VII (Pearn 1963, 17). Theravada Buddhism, in its teaching, rejected the concept of *bodhisattva* and preached the strict teachings of Buddha and like Islam later on, was averse to the deification of individual human beings.

One of the reasons cited by Pearn for the acceptance of Theravada Buddhism by the people was the conduct of the monks who brought this new creed to the peoples of South East Asia especially on the mainland (1963, 17). They lived and worked with the people and made this creed, a creed for all men and women. This attracted people who had been subject for years to rulers who claimed to be a *bodhisattva* of Mahayana Buddhism.

The shift of belief from Mahayana to Theravada Buddhism in mainland South East Asia had a serious impact on the political affairs of the mainland kingdoms. The authority of the Khmer rulers, who adopted Mahayana Buddhism, began to decline. The masses ceased to regard the rulers as divine and consequently the court lost its unique position. The fall of the kingdom of Angkor was due to this factor, as well as other external factors (Pearn 1963, 17–18). From then on, Theravada Buddhism became more and more dominant in mainland South East Asia to date.

Apart from Theravada Buddhism, indigenous beliefs such as ancestral worship were also dominant among the common people. These indigenous beliefs were not completely replaced by the imported South Asian religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. In Java, for example, a new form of Hindu religion known as Hindu-Javanese religion began to develop. This religion is a mixture of Hinduism and traditional Javanese beliefs and practices. In other words, local beliefs are still deeply rooted in the community and especially among people who are living at the interior parts of the Island, who have less interaction with the outside world. These South Asian religions have been localised to suit the needs of the community at that time. In other parts of the Malay world, Hinduism and Buddhism were less conspicuous in their presence but equally pervasive than in Java and that evidence of exposure to these religions can be found in unexpected places.

Syncretism in the islands of South East Asia

Unlike other parts of South East Asia, Java offers a unique form of religious practice. The early Javanese kingdoms seem to break the tradition of adhering to one single form of religious practice. Instead, they combined both traditions and introduced a hybrid form known as the Hindu-Buddhist religion.

The syncretic practices of Hinduism and Buddhism were prevalent with the emergence of the Hindu-Buddhist tradition of kingship in the 7th century CE (Steinberg 1971, 59). Many early kingdoms adopted this doctrine especially in Java. Hinduism and Buddhism were practiced side by side for a very long period in Central Java and then moved to East Java especially during the reign of Majapahit. The followers of the Sivaite cult of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism were able to live peacefully, although the former was considered as the indigenous religion of Java Island while the latter as the immigrant religion brought by the conquering dynasty of Sailendra (Soebadio 1978, 67–68).

The evidence of the peaceful coexistence of these two religions in Central Java could be seen in the presence of their monuments, inscriptions and temples. The inscriptions of Kalasan of 778 CE, the Kelurak inscription of 782 CE, the Candi Sari and Candi Sewu as well as the famous Candi Borobudur, are all examples of the manifestations of Buddhism or more specifically Mahayana Buddhism in Central Java. While, the Canggal inscription of 732 CE, the Ratu Baka inscription of 856 CE, the famous Sivaite temple complex of Prambanan or known as Candi Loro Jonggrang, and also the Dinaya inscription which was found in East Java in 760 CE were dedicated to the teaching of Hinduism and the glorification of god Siva.

Later, in 930 CE, the practice of Hindu-Buddhist tradition moved to East Java. In 13th century CE, there was evidence of this practice found at the rulers' cremation temples. The divine statues used to represent the royal features were in the images of Siva and also Mahayana Buddhist deities (Soebadio 1978, 81). Another important event which marked syncretism in the East Java Island was a ceremony in honour of King Airlangga's ancestor, King Sindok. It has been recorded that this occasion was attended by three types of priests representing different religions, namely the *brahmana*, *sivaite* and *buddhist* priests (Soebadio 1978, 83). After the formation of the great East Java kingdom of Majapahit in 1292 CE, there was also evidence of religious syncretism there. For example, the founder ruler of Majapahit, King Kartanagara, after his death, was buried and revered as Siva-Buddha.

Continuing influences of Hindu-Buddhist traditions on the life of local communities

The fact is that Hindu-Buddhist culture did contribute to the beliefs of the local people in South East Asia. The coming of these South Asian religions added to the richness of the religious and cultural diversification of South East Asia despite the fact that neither Hinduism nor Buddhism, are missionary religions. In order to get rid of the painful cycle of rebirth, Hinduism promoted "many paths to the same truth". As such it does not confine to one religion but accepts any form of beliefs and traditions of others. Since Buddhism does not dwell strongly on the concept of god, it concentrates more on the morals and values that promotes individual duties and responsibilities of the human being in this peaceful world. Human beings should live according to the rules and principles of life set by Gautama Buddha, who himself had escaped the cycle and had attained enlightenment.

The influence of the two main South Asian religions; Sivaite Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism and their teachings at an early period of South East Asia was seen frequently at people of the royal courts that include the ruler himself. In the case of Hinduism, for example, this has always been an aristocratic religion, and not designed for the common people (Coedes 1968, 33). This is why common people were more easily influenced by new religions of South East Asia – Theravada Buddhism and Islam. These new religions were very much involved in the people's life as they addressed the welfare of the individual. The propagators of these two religions lived together and worked closely with the people by spreading information about elements of equality among all human beings regardless of their social status. This is the reason of the success of the two new religions of South East Asia to influence the majority of its people. To date, the mainland of South East Asia is dominated by Theravada Buddhism, while Islam gained its popularity on over most of the islands of South East Asia.

However, common people adopted these religions in a more subtle manner. They were not directly concerned with rituals but related more to their culture and lifestyle. Early South East Asian communities chose to adopt South Asian's culture and lifestyle in their daily lives. They benefited greatly from the modern culture and lifestyle introduced to them by the people from South Asia. For example, they made their own scripts based on elements of Sanskrit scripts. Similarity between Sanskrit and the script of the Javanese, Batak and Makasarese prove this fact. The same goes to other aspects such as adopting the vocabulary, the lunar-calendar system, the great epic themes of the Ramayana and the Puranas, certain artistic formulas, the administrative and legal framework and many more (Coedes 1968, 33–34).

Conclusion

The cultural-religious milieu during the beginning of the Common Era of South East Asians people was diverse. The mix between the South Asian religions especially Hinduism and Buddhism with local pagan and ancestral worship, created a new religious identity for the people. A unique practice representing a mixture of cultural and religious diversification was known as the syncretism of Hindu-Buddhist religions.

Very little information is known about syncretic actual practices of Buddhism and Sivaism among the common people except that it was found at the court of the kingdom of Mataram and kingdom of Airlangga of Java. Unlike the syncretic tradition of these two kingdoms, the trend of other areas such as mainland South East Asia was to adhere to a single religious belief. In the case of Java, it represents a unique mixture of religious identity, which began with Mahayana Buddhism during the reign of the Mataram kingdom but subsequently changed to Hinduism. Later, the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit transformed the island into Hinduism until the advent of Islam. Other area such as Sumatra was known as a centre of Mahayana Buddhism during the rule of Srivijaya Empire as evident from the record of I-Ching (Takakusu 1896, xxxiv). The same goes to Kedah in the Malay Peninsula simply followed the beliefs and practices of the master kingdom, Srivijaya.

In terms of the socio-political milieu, the early history of South East Asia was marked by the emergence of kingdoms which followed the South Asian model of royal administration. The early rulers were regarded as divinely inspired and the sacred manifestation of god on earth. As such, these rulers would receive considerable loyalty and respect from the people since the latter believed that the former were sent by god for their salvation. In order to justify their divine authority, the most popular religious doctrines adopted by them were either the *devaraja* of Hinduism or the *bodhisattva* of Mahayana Buddhism. These practices could be found in almost all early kingdoms in South East Asia such as the early kingdoms of Funan, Angkor, Mataram, Mahapahit and many more.

The early political environment in South East Asia witnessed politics and religion is inseparable to the extent that some of the religious doctrines became tools for early rulers to remain in power. As such these traditions only revolved around the upper classes, while the majority of people did not participate directly in the rituals of newly imported South Asian religions. Since their obedience to the rulers did not require them to give up their old praxis as long as they did not contravene the decree, they remained with their traditional beliefs. They accepted new forms of religious rituals imposed on them by the rulers as mere act of compliance and avoidance of punishment of the new rules.

These religious attitudes played important roles for the Malays in accepting other religion later on, such as Islam. These attitudes contributed to the gradual end of Hindu-Buddhist religion in the region after the introduction of Islam in the Malay world. The Malays were introduced to the religious forms and symbolism by these two great religions previously. However, due to the nature of these religions which were used by the courts to maintain power and left little room of involvement of ordinary people, the arrival of Islam gave them freedom of choice in religious rituals. Their loyalty and obedience were not only meant and directed to the rulers, but to the One and Only God, Allah to whom the formers should also be held accountable. It is a matter of fact that when Islam arrived in the Malay world, the people were ready to accept Islam that propagated freedom of choice and peaceful life.

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