

**Religious Dimensions to Southeast Asian Conflicts Panel**  
**EUROSEAS Conference, University of Gothenburg, 26-28 August 2010**  
**ABSTRACT**

*Buddhism as an Element in Cambodian Political Conflict:  
the Overthrow of Norodom Sihanouk*

Ian Harris

Despite the paradigmatic nature of Asokan kingship anti-monarchical currents may be found in the earliest strata of Theravāda Buddhist literature. They also form a significant part of the *Jātaka* corpus. Their afterlife in modern Southeast Asia has varied from place to place. In its current hyper-monarchical condition simply acknowledging the existence of such sources in Thailand is tantamount to *lèse-majesté*. In Burma, by contrast, they were employed in U Hpo Hlaing's famous argument against royal absolutism (*Raza-dhamma-thingaha-kyàn* (*Companion of Dhamma for Royalty*), 1878). But only in Cambodia have they been used as part of a concerted campaign to extinguish kingship as an institution deemed fundamentally incompatible with the teachings of the Buddha.

At the centre of the web sit two Buddhist monk activists, Hem Chieu and Khieu Chum. The former had been arrested by the French on charges of sedition in July 1942 and he died the following year on a prison island. His political testament, recently recovered in the Archives de la Justice Militaire, sheds an intriguing light on the extent to which members of Phnom Penh's Buddhist intelligentsia were prepared to go in their struggle for freedom from colonial rule.

Khieu Chum had been a student of Hem Chieu. He rose to prominence after Cambodia had achieved independence in 1953 and can be considered one of the country's more significant political thinkers. In his writings he kept alive the flame ignited by Hem Chieu. Basing himself on the old Theravada anti-monarchical tradition invigorated with elements from premodern Khmer vernacular sources he provided both intellectual and practical support for the overthrow of Sihanouk in March 1970. He subsequently wrote the anthem and the constitution of the Khmer Republic.

This paper discusses the historical and political background in which Cambodian Buddhism operated during the period 1940-70. It also seeks to show how Khieu Chum, although a long-time associate of Lon Nol, would in due course distance himself from the notion of an anti-communist and anti-Vietnamese "holy war" as it had been articulated in the latter's 1970 pamphlet *Chambang Sasana* (Religious War).

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*Seeds of Violence: Missionaries, Contested Identities and Kachin Nationalism in Burma*  
Dr. Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn

Wars have ravaged Burma/Myanmar since the end of the Second World War. The central government has neither been able to consolidate its sovereignty in the remote border areas nor to guarantee cultural, economic or political autonomy to the peoples living in these areas.

The present military regime negotiated ceasefire with several armed ethnic minority groups. Ceasefire groups have been offered to become 'Border Guard Forces', which many groups have rejected. One of those ceasefire groups is the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). Besides the KIA, there are also other Kachin armed groups with complex military-economic relations with the central government.

Kachins are regarded as a 'super-ethnic category' or a 'multi-group ethnic category' as the group 'Kachin' consists of at least six different ethno-linguistic subgroups. What unites the subgroups is Christianity and the Romanized writing system in Jinghpaw created by a Swedish-American missionary Dr. Ola Hanson. The Kachin Christians are divided into Baptist, Roman Catholic and various Evangelical Protestant churches.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the contested Kachin Christian identity, identity politics and the Christian ideologies, which provide the Kachin elites justification for their cause. The paper looks into the Kachin diaspora's discourse carried out through various Kachin websites, where terms like 'chosen people' or 'people of God' are invoked. The paper also looks into the different Christian denominations among the Kachin, and their role in the discourse on Kachin identity.

*Keywords:* Kachin, Jinghpaw, Border Guard Forces, Evangelical Christians, chosen people.

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*History for Religious Violence: The Story of Southern Thailand*  
Michael Jerryson

The dissemination of a particular history is a subtle, yet powerful dimension of the violence in southern Thailand. Although the recent violence began in January of 2004, it is a chapter in a much more extended history of conflict and tension. The conflict is multi-dimensional, and involves environmental, economic, political and religious agents and factors, none of these mutual exclusive in themselves. This paper will examine one of the identity-formation processes within the religious dimension to the conflict; more specifically, the coterminous relationship between identity and history that is accentuated in a conflict zone.

Buddhist and Islamic sentiments are embedded within the competing histories of southern Thailand, working to justify either the Thai State's or Malay Muslim's rights to the area. A historian's construction of a narrative is a production of knowledge, or as Michel Foucault puts it, an attempt to memorialize the monuments of the past in documents. In this manner historians galvanize a narrative behind a conceptual model, calling into attention specific instances, causations, actors and artifacts. These conceptual models compose the skeletal structure of the narrative. In this scheme, models contain a method of periodization and teleology that affects the way readers understand the past. This historical focus on justifying social movements has traditionally become prominent during times of war, wherein opposing political factions need to justify and inspire the populace through calls to nationalism.

In the end we find that competing Buddhist and Islamic historical narratives justify, and at times enhance the violence in southern Thailand.

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*Religious Dimension of Conflicts in South Vietnam during French and US order*  
Prof. Vladimir N. Kolotov

Before and during colonization the French policy vis-à-vis local population in South Vietnam prescribed its total catholicization. But the Catholicism was not compatible to traditional Vietnamese religions and beliefs. Faced with large oppositions the French started to organize religious sects (Cao Dai and Hoa Hao) as counter-balance to local national liberation movement, controlled from Moscow.

The only way to save colonial regime was organization of controlled local conflict on regional level. Thus colonial war was transformed into civil war. Only this strategy allowed stifling communist movement in South Vietnam. There has been a long tradition to describe the famous three South Vietnamese sects as anti-French nationalist organizations with independent private armies. Actually they were supplementary forces of the French with a very well done advertising, where they were described as anti-French nationalist groups. This advertising campaign was organized by the French Deuxième Bureau (Military Intelligence). So their anti-French orientation was only a kind of camouflage. Such policy allowed the French to attract the most active part of anti-French population into the sects and to use them under the French control in the struggle against communists (another part of anti-French forces). Thus the power of the French regime depended on regional control system, which I call Conflict Management System (CMS). After II WW the French order in Cochinchine was built on regional controlled destabilization.

By 1954 the religious sects Cao Dai and Hoa Hao and the criminal organization Binh Xuyen were the most important parts of a CMS set up by the French to neutralize the Viet Minh movement in South Vietnam. These groups were incorporated into the system of colonial rule with their own political parties and armed forces. More than one third of the Cochinchinese population was under their combined control. The armed forces of these groupings numbered tens of thousands of well-trained fanatics who confronted all areas controlled by the Viet Minh. Their main targets were areas of strategic importance, which became the strongholds of the French in their struggle against the Viet Minh. The French military command considered the military units of these organizations to be supplementary to their own armed forces (les forces suppletives). With their help, the colonial administration could influence the religious and political situations in the areas they controlled. Under the French colonial order the field commanders had to fight against Viet Minh for self-preservation purposes. They soon learned that the French was the only power could recognize them and their autonomous fiefs. This made the creation of religious groups instead of political parties a rational solution. It was a new technology, which could neutralize liberation movement and rule the colonies.

In conditions of growing liberation movement the French decided to change Vietnamese religious identities in order to preserve the colonial regime. The Catholicism was not compatible to traditional Vietnamese religions and beliefs, so the French created and implanted religious sects into local society (Cao Dai and Hoa Hao) as counter-balance to local national liberation movement. It was rational solution. The French order in Cochinchine was built on regional controlled destabilization, the core of new order in regional level was CMS. Its main elements were converts of local religious sects. In the mid of 1950s the US didn't appreciate true value of the French social technology in Cochinchina. In 1955 the US destroyed the "pro-French" CMS. This combined with the rude enforcement of Catholicism in South Vietnam allowed the Viet Minh to rebuild their forces and reanimate the base areas in the late 1950s - early 1960s. The US failed in theirs attempts to carry out the social reconstruction of South Vietnamese society. Many US pacification programs such as "strategic hamlets", special war, local war and vietnamization of war were expensive and ineffective. "The Final Days" of 1975 and "the Fall of Saigon" were the logical and inevitable consequences of destroying CMS in 1955.

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*The Role of Islam in Southern Thailand's 'Continuum of Violence'*  
Till Moeller

This paper's aim is to shed some light on the role Islam plays in the current conflict in Thailand's southernmost provinces Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and Songkhla. Even though there is an abundance of scientific literature on the conflict, due to the fact that there is no organisation or single group of people taking responsibility for the violence, it has remained enigmatic in many aspects. Many studies focus on the ethnic divide between Thais and Malays, examine Thai policies or deal with socio-economic factors, rather than highlighting the conflict's religious dimension. There is a possibility that scholars unwillingly underestimate the role of Islam in this conflict not only due to the differences between the Southern Thailand insurgency's methods and goals to those of groups like Al Qaeda, but also because nationalism is widely considered to be intrinsically linked to ethnicity.

Due to the fact that historically speaking most ethnic/separatist conflicts had nationalist undertones, while religious conflicts tended to transcend the concepts of state and nation, alluding instead to a more global - if not cosmic - struggle, the intuitive choice is to accentuate the ethnic dimension and disregard the role of religion as mere rhetoric. However tempting this might be, it should not distract anyone from the fact that for Southern Thailand's insurgents religion in the form of Islam, inextricably linked to separatist ideas invoking the "glorious past" of the Sultanate of Patani, has come to replace ethnicity as the most important marker for group identity. The obvious danger lies in the possibility that this protracted, yet regionally limited conflict, in which religion is only one of many factors that sustain the violence, might be exploited by international Islamist terror organisations in order to turn it into a new front in a worldwide jihad.

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*The Limits of Buddhist Moral Authority in the Secular State*  
Juliane Schober

In September 2007, the world watched as tens of thousands of Buddhist monks marched in daily defiance of Myanmar's military rule. The "Saffron Revolution," as it came to be called in exile media, was the most recent iteration within a genealogy of Buddhist resistance to the secular state. Despite its designation as a "revolution," the revolt did not achieve its promised transformation of the political order. This paper locates the events of September 2007 within a broader struggle for political legitimacy in which the *sangha* enacted once again its potential to mobilize its social networks of lay supporters. This struggle reveals conflicting visions of moral authority held by each of the competing factions, the *sangha* and the military regime.

The notion of Buddhism as other-worldly validates the view that political engagement of monks was not authentic. Such perspectives are rooted in a colonial discourse and reflect an orientalist reading of the *vinaya* that privileges some modern Buddhist interlocutors at the exclusion of other voices within the tradition. This paper examines the colonial discourse about violence and non-violence in Buddhist settings and the role of so-called "political" monks that enveloped the engagement of the *sangha* as a field of merit in *samsara*. It begins with a focus on the political and academic rhetoric concerning the designation of "political monks" and the construction of ethical ideals in the Buddhist tradition, such as world renunciation and the engagement of socially engaged Buddhists with issues of social and economic justice.

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*Religious Dimensions of Conflict in Indonesian-Papua*  
Christian Warta

Since its disputed annexation by Indonesia in 1969 Papua is Indonesia's easternmost conflict region. Today, over a decade after the fall of former president Suharto, the now two provinces of Papua and Westpapua are still a heavily contested territory. Although special autonomy status was given by the central government in Jakarta to prevent the further growth of Papuan nationalism seeking independence from Indonesia, an end of the conflict is a distant prospect. An initially mainly political affair developed into a complex multidimensional conflict scenario, containing ethnic, economic, social, environmental and lately also religious dimensions. The latter indicate an alarming polarization between the predominantly Christian Papuan groups and the largely Muslim transmigrates from various other parts of Indonesia.

In this paper I argue that one of the most influential developments that accompany the long lasting conflict in Papua can be seen in the remaking of Papuan identities through religion. Although the approximately 250 heterogeneous ethnic groups from coastal, inland and highland regions have never shown any form of broader unification or commonness, a kind of common Papuaness is gaining in importance.

For an integrating Papuan identity the concept of 'memoria passionis' is crucial. This concept of shared suffering which was introduced by the Catholic Church stands for the traumatic experiences within several decades of state violence, discrimination, suppression, dehumanization and human rights abuses and forms a key element in Papuan identity building. It refers to the continuous experience of existential threat manifested in the collective memory of the Papuans. The articulation of societal trauma by various churches (not only the Catholic one) made Christian institutions into important players in Papuan civil society. Having the churches to speak on behalf of Papuans creates thus intersections where Christianity and Papuaness meets in the remaking of identities, feeding into a form of Papuan nationalism which is not necessarily to be seen synonymous to separatism. Papuan nationalism in this sense also implies Christian interpretations of salvation. In this context the end of suffering becomes the most prevailing aspect, emphasizing spiritual relief over concrete political strategies.

By pointing out the important role of religion in the remaking of Papuan identities this paper also tries to make apparent prevailing anxieties of Islamization and Christianization, leading to the question how religion informs the conflict.