

## ASEAN Religion & Culture Management for Peaceful Living Together

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### Section 1:

#### Political Community and Cultural Movement in the Region

In those days, the period of foreign culture's incoming into this region, there were three main political communities as follows:

1. **Panom**: it was flourishing in BE. 600-1050, its stronghold located along Mekhong River Basin.

2. **Dvaravati**: it was flourishing in BE. 1050-1181, its stronghold located along Chaophraya River and Aravadi River Basins.

3. **Srivijaya**: it was flourishing in BE.1100-1200, its stronghold located along Tapi River Basin.

It was assumed that these political communities were settled down at the same period, but flourished at different age. The center of administration in those days was located in community which was prosperous; e.g. when Panom was prosperous, the center of administration was moved to it, when Dvaravati was prosperous, the center of administration was moved to it also. Of these ancient states, Panom was regarded as the lander, Dvaravadi was regarded as the canalman and Srivijaya was regarded as the seaman. In these regions there has been the crowds and colorful phenomena regarding the center of trading, propagation of various religions, exchange of consumer goods, academic and religious dialogues since then.

The noteworthy thing is that the story of circuit of merchandizing affair in the south sea and the connecting door between the East and West world. In ancient period there were two doors connecting the East and West (1) sea route commencing from Athens(Macedonia) passing through Arab, Persia, India, Sri Lanka, Indian Ocean, Malacca Pass, South China Sea and on shore at Guandong of China (2)silk route commencing from Athens(Macedonia)passing through Arab, Persia(Khyber Pass), Central Asia, Khotan Samarkand, Kansu and Xi'an.

Speaking only about the sea-route, even though the travelers might be face some obstacles such as the pirate and the storm, but it was still popular because the merchants can use the big junk(ship) to take the bigger lot of commodities.It is said that the Buddhist culture gives much contributions to merchandizing affair, it is the driving force of trading in this region.

The Faxian's records said "traveling by big junk in which there were more than 200 persons seated, after going east for two days the hailstone-storm arose, the merchants threw away the heavy goods into the sea to lighten the junk, I myself also did, but felt stinting to throw away the Tripitaka Scriptures and Buddhist Statues, so I beg for protection from Kuanyin ... on sea there were many pirates, after traveling for 90 days we reached Yepoti region where Brahmanism was popular meanwhile Buddhism was not so popular."

The Yijing's records said "from Kuangdong going by sailboat for 20 days getting to Jilifoshi(Srivijaya?), staying here for 6 months for studying all sciences ie. Sanskrit Grammar... King and leader of the islands in south sea were Buddhist and engaged in meritorious deeds, in Srivijaya located in south sea also there were more than 1,000 monks studying Buddhist tradition of Central India, Chinese monks who liked to go to India should study the disciplinary rules here at least 1 or 2 years".

### **The movement and exchange of religious culture:**

The eastern religions which moved into this region along with sharing of knowledge among each other are three main religions; (1) Brahma-Hindu (2) Buddhism and (3) Islam. In the beginning Brahma-Hindu and Buddhism came to this land side by side, whereas Islam came to the scene sometime. There were two ways of incoming of these into Southeast Asian Region:

Firstly, the Dhamma-Messengers were sent to propagate the doctrines e.g. King Asoka in collaboration with Moggalliputtatissa the Elder sent the monks named Sona and Uttara along with their staff to propagate the Buddha's Teachings in this region

Secondly, the merchants travelled to-and-fro to do business. This caused the exchange of religious culture along with merchandizing affairs to happen. Sometime religious sacred materials became valuable gifts for each other among merchants for the benefits of opening the door for doing business.

Another key factor of arising of multi-cultural society is the spreading the power of some emperor of Ming Dynasty such as the Emperor named Yong by setting up the caravan of junks and sending Zhen He to explore and to make a relationship with various countries in south sea and Indian Ocean along the ocean's coast upto south continent. In the caravan of junks, in each sailboat there was monk including priest of other religions to perform ceremony, to give suggestion and to be the spiritual leader in suffered period. This is the one factor of prosperity of Buddhism in this region.

The prevalence of Buddhism and other religions has been reflected in the forms of architecture and sculpture such as Panonrung Castle, Angor Wat and Angor Thom, Phrea Vihere Castle etc. the Buddhist Ruins located Bujung Bukit in Malaysia, Borobudur in Indonesia etc. these reflected the existence of many religions side by side in those days.

### **The mixture of religious culture and local culture:**

The spreading of religions in this region widely and quickly is not because of Dhamma-messengers working only, but because of traveling to-and-fro of those merchants and movement of the migrants from one place to another place. The people in those days migrated incessantly to find out the places where fabulous mines could be available easily especially the gold. It was assumed that this region was full of golden mine, that is the reason why it is named “Suvarnabhumi-Golden land.”

Looking back to 2500 years approximately, in about BE. 300 the Dhamma-messengers name bhikkhu Sona, bhikkhu Uttara and their staff were sent to propagate the Buddhist Doctrines in this land. The cultural-historical informations about Buddhism was available easily. It was agreed that Buddhism played a key role from this period upto the period of Panom, Dvaravati and Srivijaya. In later time, the Khom Empire was flourishing in about BE. 1345 during the reign of King Jayavoraman II and the reign of Suriyavoraman II in about BE. 1700. In this age Brahma-Hindu played a key role instead, in the meantime Mahayana Buddhism introduced by Dhamma-messengers sent by King Kanishaka was flourishing in this region also. Later on in about BE. 1800 LankavamsaTharavada played a key role. Whereas Islam came to the scene in this region later in the time when the merchants changed the route of traveling from Silk Road to sea road (via India, Srivijaya and Kuangdong).

In ancient time, the local religion in this region was animism. The people believed in spirits, worshiped snakes, frogs and dogs. Some passages were written in Buddhist Scripture that when bhikkhus named Sona, Uttara and their staff reached this region, they fought against the local beliefs e.g. the villagers believed that everytime the baby was born, the female demon(raksot) would come from the sea to the village and eat the new-born baby. The monks named Sona, Uttara and their staff had to fight with female demon always.

Another tradition which was prevail in this region was that the villagers liked to produce the bronze-drums for many purposes. These drums were regarded as the sacred signs. Once Brahma-Hindu, Buddhism of India and Islam of Persia moved from original land to this region, there was an intercourse between the new-comers religions and the local culture, as a result of this the specific forms of Brahma-Hindu, Buddhism and Islam arised which was different from the original form.

### **Incoming of western religious culture:**

It was assumed that Christianity came to this region in about BE.1798 in the time when Polo-Family traveled to China and took a tour around this region. Later on when the Western Empiresuch as Portuguese was spread into Asia since BE. 2043 onward, Christianity played a key role in the way of life of the people significantly. In conclusion there are four main religions in this region nowadays.

## **Section 2:**

### **Arising of Present Multi-Cultural Community**

#### **Background and present situation of ASEAN Community:**

Originally this region was named Panom, Dvaravati and Srivijaya as mentioned above. These three lands were united and full of multi-culture. Long time later the separation of land was made, the demarcation of each community was made as we have seen in the present. Therefore the policy to combine eachcommunity into one community in reality is like a going back to the original.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations=ASEAN was established in BE.2510. Having been united, the leaders of each country has the same resolution to develop further upto ASEAN Community=AC by BE.2563, and ASEAN Economic Community-AEC in BE.2558 under the frammeworks in three dimensions; (1)security (2)economic (3)society and culture.

Speaking only about social and cultural dimension specifically in Thailand, nowadays even though the year BE.2558 has not come yet, there have already been the big movement of the people from place to place especially the labors. This phenomena has happened since ten years back. The number of foreign labors migrating from their own country to Thailand increases every year.

In ASEAN Community, there are more than 609,086,329 peoples from 10 countries. Of these the population of country can be approximately figured out as follows ;Buddhist population is 51.42 percent, Islamic population is 23.60 percent., Christian population is 13.59 percent, Hindus population is 1.7 percent, the rest population is 9.69 percent.

The to-and-fro movement of those labors who belong to each religion causes multi-cultural community to happen inevitably. Will there be good or bad effects happening in this matter ?Both good and bad will happen.

The good side is that the people in each country have a chance to open their world-view and to learn from each other, the scope of communication will be opened widely etc. Meanwhile the bad side can happen also conditioning that there is no cross-cultural understanding among those peoples, they will not open their mind to each other, they will not accept cultural difference of each other. Then they will praise their own culture and at the same time look down other's culture. This will cause a conlict to happen. Without proper management the chaostic community will come into existence in this region.

### **Section 3:**

#### **Management of cultural diversity for living together peacefully**

Is cultural diversity tendentious to cause peacefulness more than violence to happen and vice versa ? In this matter there is no clear-cut

tend appearing. It depend upon how to manage. Therefore what the people in Southeast Asian Countries should realize together is the creation of ability for management of cultural diversity. The more important is that all the peoples should not let the idea “our culure is the best” happen. Otherwise the looking down of each others’ culture will follow, and then leading to violence finally.

The method of management may be divided into two:

### **1.violence method**

The people adherent to this method have firm faith; (1)violence is regarded as the means leading to success (2)violence is the warning for everyone that problematic unusuality is happening in their society, so everybody has to come and solve the problems and (3) violence may bring about unified feeling in community. Is this method proper for management of cultural diversity in ASEAN Community ?the answer is “No”.Then which one is proper ? The answer will be given in the next item.

### **2. peaceful means**

The people adherent to this method have firm faith that peaceful means is the bridge leading to the way out of the crisis, they believe further that this and only this peaceful means shall be the bridge leading to happiness and peacefulness in ASEAN mult-cultural Community. The peaceful means may be used in one of these e. g conversion, accommodation, nonviolent coercion. Whatever peaceful means can be accepted, the accommodation may be most proper.

Apart from these, the peaceful means presented by two prominent Buddhist Scholars; BuddhadasaBhikkhu and Most Venerable ThichNhatHanh, for management of cultural diversity is regarded as the good method.

BuddhadasaBhikkhu proposed that the followers of each religion could live together happily by practicing three ideal principles:

- (1) clearly understanding the essence of their own religion
- (2) clearly cross-religion understanding
- (3) coming out of material world

The Most Venerable ThichNhatHanh always use the key words in this matter such as “inter-faith, inter-being”, in instruction the followers, the Venerable proposes the fourteen precepts for living happily in multi-cultural community, some of those;

1. Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.

2. Do not think that the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth.

3. Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority.

4. Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world.

8. Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break.

10. Do not use your religious community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party.

Is it possible to establish the ASEAN religion, the Real One ASEAN religion ?it is hard to be possible, and this way should not be adopted. Which way should be the good one ? The way of creation of Religious Dialogue and Humanity Religion is the good. What does it mean ? This idea does not mean the dismantling the other religions and then promotion their own religion, but the establishment of the dialogue council where all the religious leaders come together and have dialogue to express the common ground.

The objectives of expression of the common ground is not to make a quick conclusion “ all the religions are one,” which is impossible. For

example whenever the Christian priests want to practice ZAZEN (mediation of Zen Buddhism), it does not mean that those Christian priests have to change their status into Rinzai Zen monk, the religious dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity does not mean the combination of selflessness-concept with the concept of God, but it means the compromising and coordination in flexible issues. The followers of each religion must realize that which one is flexible and which one is not flexible. Then the way of seeking Unity and conserving Diversity should be picked up to consider.

How is the seeking Unity and conserving Diversity ?

The doctrinal similarity of each religion can be seen publicly. The similarity does not mean the same thing. The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhists once said that Buddhism and Christianity (and other religions) share the common ground in many issues e.g the doctrine of Karma (Karma or Action), the idea “doing good, earning good” is taught in every religion.

Having considered some passages of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, it can be concluded that even though there is the doctrinal similarity, but those doctrines of those religion cannot be combined closely. The attempt to blend the doctrine of one religion with another religion is like a put the head of Yak (Jamari) into the body of sheep.

Finally, the proper method for management of multi-cultural community is the method presented by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, i.e. Religious Dialogue and Humanity Religion, seeking unity and conserving diversity. Only these are enough for living happily and peacefully in ASEAN Community.

