

Religions of Southeast Asia

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- **Hinduism**
- **Islam**
- **Buddhism**
- **Animism**
- **Christianity
(Catholicism)**
- **Confucianism**



Asian Religions



http://www.wadsworth.com/religion_d/special_features/popups/maps/maps_f.html

Birthplaces of Twelve Major Living Religions



✦ Origins of Hinduism

- ✦ Hinduism originated in India; spread to SEA, and other parts of the world (Australia, Europe, N. America, Africa, Caribbean)
- ✦ It is considered one of the oldest religions in the world and can be traced to the 2nd millennium BC
- ✦ Hinduism's origins are traced back through ancient religious hymns that were composed during this period
- ✦ In the 1st c. AD, Hinduism was spread throughout SEA by Indian traders who established marketing centers on their routes
- ✦ Brahman priests also instructed people on Hindu beliefs
- ✦ Some say that SEA was “Hinduized” or “Indianized” during this period

World Dispersion of the Hindu Community



http://www.wadsworth.com/religion_d/special_features/popups/maps/maps_f.html

Spread of Hinduism to Southeast Asia

- ✦ Hinduism spread to Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia via trade and Brahman priests
- ✦ Hinduism was the state religion for various SE Asian states from the 5th – 14th centuries
- ✦ During this time, Mahayana Buddhism coexisted with Hinduism in much of the region
- ✦ After the 14th c. Hinduism was replaced by Buddhism in most parts of SEA except for Bali, Indonesia
- ✦ Mayayana Buddhism's influence faded away as Hinduism's influence began to decline in the region

Lasting influence of Hinduism on Southeast Asia

- ✦ There are very few Hindu's left in SEA today apart from on the island of Bali, Indonesia
- ✦ Hinduism gave rise to famous political and religious centers at Angkor, near Siem Riep, Cambodia, and at Borobodur, Java, Indonesia
- ✦ Although the Hindu population in SEA is small, the influence of Hinduism is still found in their great literary epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata
- ✦ Many SEA cultures adopted these texts and made them their own by adapting them to their own cultures
- ✦ The Hindu principles of absolutism and hierarchy remain essential aspects of SEA politics today

Hinduism in Bali

- ✦ Hinduism came to Bali via Java which was exposed to a fairly direct influence from India through literature- Ramayana and Mahabharata (via traders and religious teachers)
- ✦ The *Ramayana* is a love story with moral and spiritual themes
- ✦ The *Mahabharata* is a poem describing a conversation between Arjuna and God Krishna



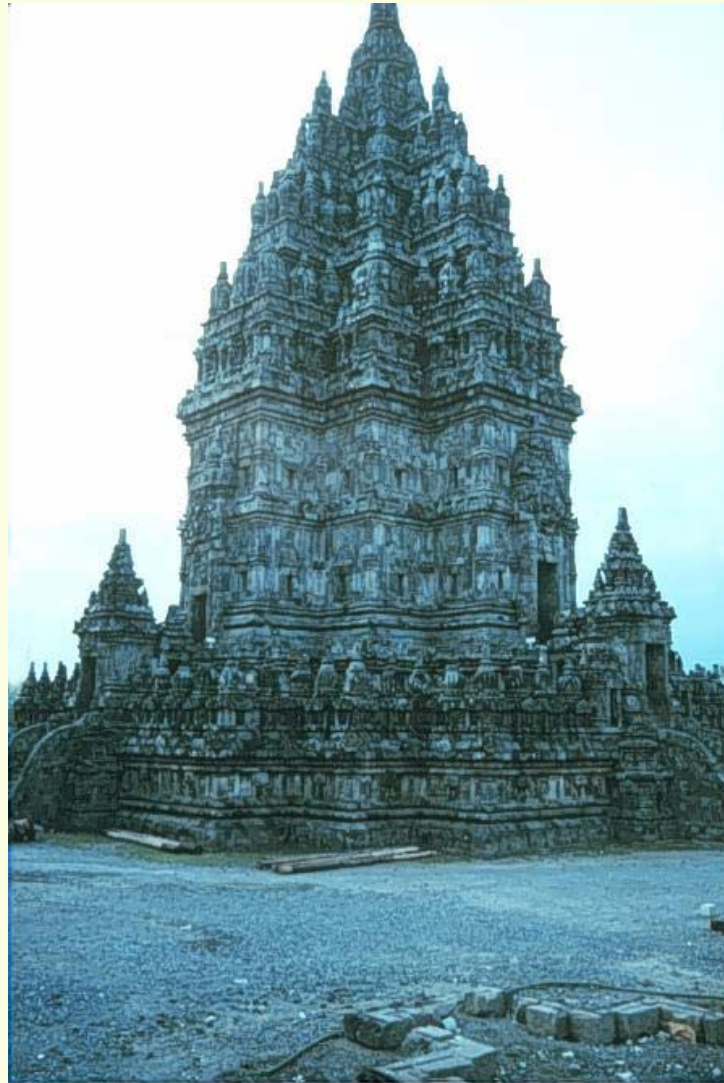
An entrance to a Balinese temple



Borobodur, Java



Upper levels, Borobodur temple, Central Java.



The Prambanan, a Hindu temple in Java.

Hinduism at Angkor Wat

- ✦ From the 9th to the 11th c., Angkor Wat was home to a great Hindu civilization
- ✦ In accordance with Hindu beliefs, the leaders at Angkor were god-kings, or *deva rajas*
- ✦ The political order was considered to be a microcosm of the cosmic order
- ✦ The king was to his kingdom as the god was to the cosmos



A panoramic view of Angkor Wat. (Kim Seang Poam)



Angkor Wat. (Rachel Rinaldo)



Man in the window at the top of Angkor Wat.
(Kim Seang Poam)

Decline of Hinduism in Southeast Asia

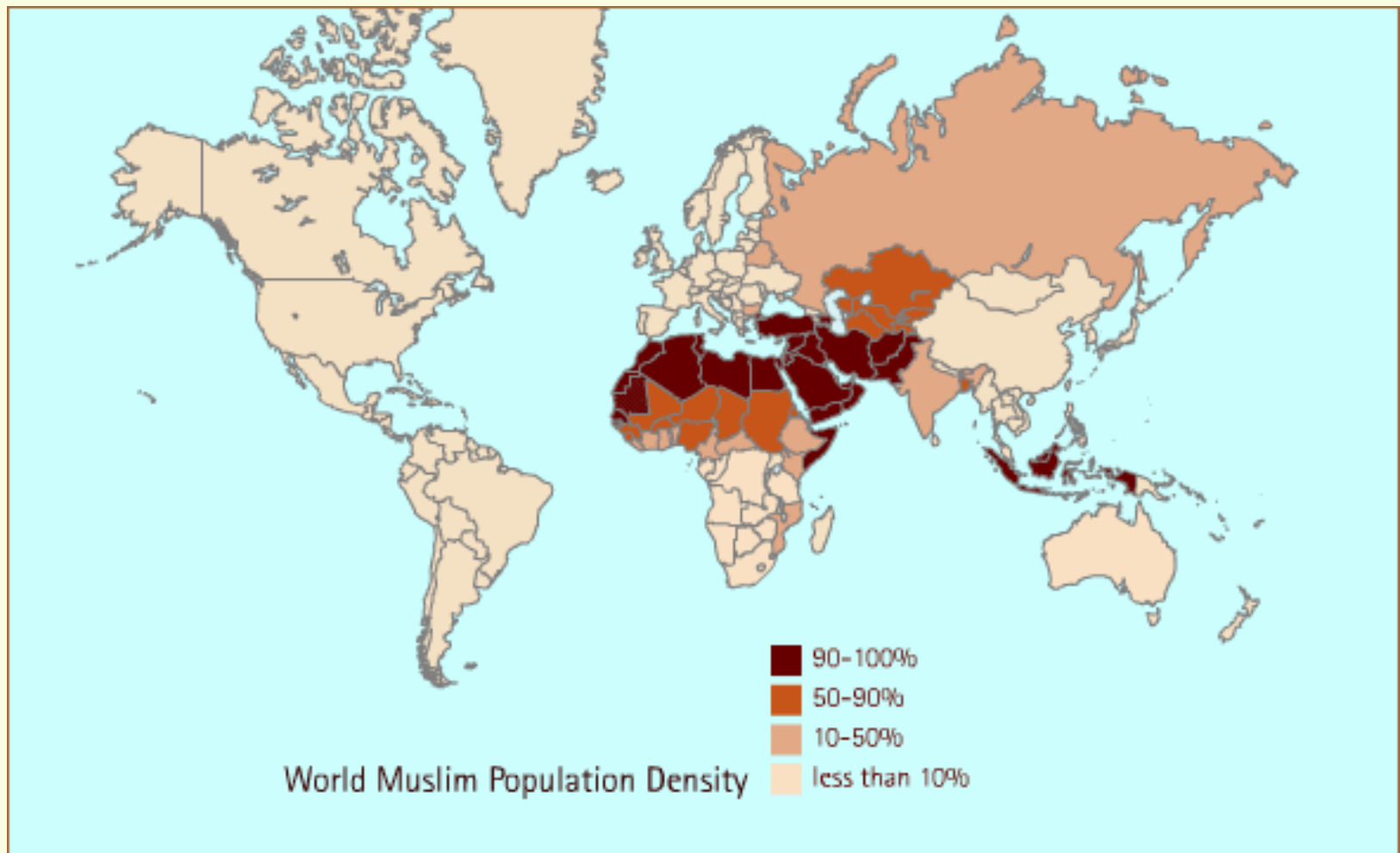
- ✦ Hinduism lost its influence in SEA during a period running roughly from the 1200s – 1400s AD
- ✦ Hinduism's influence in SEA declined because of its elitist doctrine based on the caste system
- ✦ Later religions including Buddhism, Islam and Christianity gained popularity because they put salvation in the hands of the individual
- ✦ And, because they were more egalitarian

❖ Origins of Islam in Southeast Asia

- ❖ Islam's roots in SEA are debated: some argue that Islam came directly from Arabia in the Middle East; some say Islam came from India via the Middle East; others claim Islam was brought to SEA through Muslim Chinese traders
- ❖ Islam arrived in SEA sometime in the 13th c. long after Hinduism, Animism and Buddhism
- ❖ It is believed that the *Walis* (Sufi mystics) brought Islam to Indonesia (the first entry point of Islam to SEA)
- ❖ Because SEAsian Islam came via India, and Indian Islam was influenced by the Turks modified Islam, by the time it got to SEA it was “softer” and mystical.
- ❖ When Islam got to Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, etc, there was already an Indianized culture of Hindu Buddhists
- ❖ On the island of Java in particular, this created a hybrid culture and an Islam that was very mystical and spiritual (Malaysia as well)
- ❖ There is great Islamic diversity throughout SEA due to the syncretic mix of assimilated religious traditions

Adoption of Islam by Southeast Asian cultures

- ❖ The Sufi Indians successfully spread Islam to Indonesia, Malaysia, Borneo and Philippines because of its mystic quality and its tolerance for coexistence with earlier animist, Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and rituals
- ❖ To win converts the Sufis allowed people in SEA to retain pre-Islamic beliefs and practices that were contrary to orthodox Islamic doctrine
 - ❖ For example, women retained very strong positions at home and in society; in many families, women are not obligated to cover their heads
 - ❖ Pre-Islamic religious beliefs and rituals became part of Muslim ceremonies (Javanese shadow puppet shows remained very popular)



<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/maps/muslimtext.html>

Southeast Asian Countries: Islam %

- ❖ Brunei: 63%
- ❖ Burma: 4%
- ❖ East Timor: 4%
- ❖ Indonesia: 88%
- ❖ Malaysia: majority, but great diversity
- ❖ Philippines: 5%
- ❖ Singapore: 16%
- ❖ Thailand: 4%
- ❖ Vietnam: small minority
- ❖ Cambodia, Laos: very small minority

Islam in Southeast Asia today

- ❖ Islam is the state religion in Malaysia and Brunei
- ❖ It is the majority religion of Indonesia (90%)
- ❖ Before the 20th c., Mindanao in the Southern Philippines was predominantly Muslim; it now has a large Christian population
- ❖ Southern Thailand is largely Muslim, and Muslim minorities exist in most Southeast Asian countries.

What Keeps Islam in Southeast Asia Alive?

- ❖ Scholars mention two major reasons:
 - ❖ *Ummah*: a concept that means all Muslims, all over the world, belong to the same community; when Muslims from all over the world go on the *Hajj* to Mecca their traditional beliefs in a world community of Muslims is reinforced. Modern communications and travel technology make it possible for thousands and thousands to travel to Mecca every year; this contributes to the evolution of Islam in SEA and helps sustain it
 - ❖ Education: Muslims schools keep Islam active and current in the local populations

Muslim Mosque in central Burma



Early Buddhism in Southeast Asia

- Buddhism is one of the important religions of mainland SEA
- Early Buddhism was founded in Northeast India ca. 6th c. BC by Siddhartha Gautama; After his “awakening” or enlightenment, he came to be called the Buddha (the awakened one)
- Main variants: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism
 - Theravada Buddhism: “the Way of the Elders” stressed respect for elders; in the 3rd c. BC Buddhist missionaries traveled throughout India to Sri Lanka and beyond to most of SEA. Buddhism dies out in India by the 13th c.
 - Mahayana Buddhism: beginning around the 2nd c. BC, evolved from other sub-traditions and in the 1st c. CE spread eastward across the central Asian trade routes to China.

Buddha's Birthplace and Dispersion of Buddhism to East Asia



Buddha's Early Teachings: 4 noble truths

- life is suffering
- suffering is caused by attachments
- to ease suffering one must let go of attachments
- lose attachments by following the Eight - fold path:

- Right understanding of 4 noble truths
- Right thinking
- Right speech
- Right action
- Right living
- Right effort
- Right mindfulness
- Right concentration

Spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia

- Like Hinduism, Buddhism spread to SEA via India through various separate streams
 - Theravada Buddhism spread to mainland SEA via India and Sri Lanka
 - By 500 AD Theravada Buddhism is established in Burma, and is spreading east across mainland SEA to Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos
 - It was introduced directly to the people (not indirectly through the ruling classes)

Mahayana Buddhism

- At the same time, Mahayana Buddhism reappears and spreads via China to Vietnam
- 19th c. Chinese Immigrants also brought Mahayana Buddhism to Singapore and other urban areas
- Mahayana Buddhism is more mystical than Theravada; they believe in Bodhisattvas (Buddhas-to-be)

Buddhism in Southeast Asia Today

- Buddha established the *sangha*, the order of Buddhist monks, that is still flourishing today in mainland SEA
- Virtually all male Buddhists enter the *sangha* to become monks for at least a short time during their lives; this provides merit for their parents
- The *sangha* continues to help spread and protect the Buddhist faith
- Buddhist monks are not supposed to get involved in politics, but in some cases, such as in Burma and Thailand they do
- Mainland SEA is still predominantly Buddhist; in all areas, Buddhism is mixed with elements of animist and Hindu beliefs



Buddha image in temple.

Burmese Buddhist temple (*paya*)





Bagan Buddha image.

Burmese monks



Burmese nuns



Animism in Southeast Asia

- All countries of SEA mix elements of animism or spirit worship with local religion
- During the height of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism in SEA, animism was an important alternative that appealed to ordinary people
- Spirits are believed to exist everywhere (but not in all things): rice fields, trees, homes, roads and buildings
- Spirits must be properly propitiated or it is believed that they can make you sick or ruin your harvest
- Animist spirits are often given a designated home, such as in a building or a simple shrine, so that they may be located and consulted before important events

Spirits...

- Ancestor spirits: people that were important in this life are considered powerful in the afterlife
- Spirits of the environment (genie of the soil): spirits in trees, along roads or in waterfalls keep must be propitiated with food or a shrine to keep these areas safe
- Spirits of natural phenomena: consulted as needed. Examples include sun, moon, storms, and earthquakes. They represent the uncertainty of the world.

Nat Statues in Burma



A rain *nat*



Shin-upagout, a famous miracle giving Nat that supposedly prevents rain during merit making celebrations.

† **Origins of Christianity in Southeast Asia**

- † There are only two predominantly Christian countries in SEA: the Philippines and East Timor
- † About 85% of Filipinos and 90% of Timorese are Roman Catholic
- † Catholicism came to the Philippines in the 16th c. with the arrival of the Spaniards and to East Timor with the arrival of the Portuguese Dominican Friars
- † How did a small number of Spaniards convert the bulk of the Filipinos to Catholicism?
 - † because there was no centralized power
 - † and because animist beliefs left them open to a more structured belief system offering salvation








Spanish style Roman Catholic church, Ilokos.



Christian Church in upper Burma

Confucianism in SE Asia

-  While most of mainland SEA was being Indianized, Chinese influence was spreading to Vietnam
-  With the Chinese came Confucianism: a belief system begun by the moral philosopher, Confucius (551 BC – 479 BC)
-  Confucianism is a complex set of beliefs emphasizing harmony, stability, consensus, hierarchy and authority
-  There is no priesthood and no formal ritual
-  Confucian ideas still have a profound effect in Vietnam, Singapore, and among Chinese in cities throughout the region

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