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The making of Buddhism in modern Indonesia: South and Southeast Asian networks and agencies, 1900-1959

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Chapter 5

Performing Buddhism: Vesak

> In recent years, it has become custom in Central Java, that on the day of the full moon in May, Vesak Day, some members of the NITV's Jogja lodge go to Mendoet and the Borobodur in the late afternoon just before evening to commemorate this feast and to join in the celebrations, as much as the latter was within their abilities.[1]

This is an excerpt from a letter written in 1929 by L. Mangelaar Meertens describing celebrations of Vesak that had been held during recent years in Central Java. The Nederlandsche Indische Theosofische Vereeniging (NITV) in Yogyakarta confirmed Meertens' observation that Vesak had been commemorated in the past. However, the Mendoet temple and the Borobudur temple was the venue for the 1929 observance of Vesak for the first time.

Vesak commemorates three important occasions in the Buddha's life -- his birth, attainment of knowledge and passing away -- and usually takes place during the full moon of the fifth lunar month. The word, Vesak, is a generic term derived from Vaisakha, the name of the second month in the Indian national calendar. Buddhist scholars claim that Vesak is historically rooted in

1 *Theosofie in Nederlandsch-Indië = Theosophie di Tanah Hindia Nederland: Officieel Orgaan van de Nederlandsch-Indische Theosofische Vereeniging*, 7/8 (July/August 1929), 307-08.

the Southern/Theravada Buddhist tradition. Donald K. Swearer, a scholar of Southeast Asian Buddhism, sees Vesak as a historical tradition that marks the most sacred occasion of Theravada Buddhism's yearly celebrations.[2]

Taking Aronson-Lehavi's notion of religious performativity as a starting point[3], this chapter shows that Vesak emerged from a set of complex historical events particular to Buddhist communities in colonial South and Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rather than from beliefs, values or practices inherent to Buddhism. Understanding Vesak as an invented tradition explains why notions of modern Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia differed from Western scholars' notions of Modern Buddhism such as those put forth by Heinz Bechert, a German Indologist who is well known for his work titled *The World of Buddhism*.

Bechert understood modern Buddhism as constructing and living in a minimalist and demythologized world. However, South and Southeast Asian Buddhists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries understood modern Buddhism as constructing and living in a maximalist and ritualized world of tradition. Modern Buddhists' invention of Vesak first in Sri Lanka and then elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia reflects what Eric Hobsbawm, a British historian and social theorist, and Terence Ranger, an African historian, define as the invention of tradition -- "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to calculate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies the continuity of the past."[4]

The two points above raise a question about how the understanding modern Buddhism as constructing and living in a maximalist and ritualized world of tradition led a reinvented celebration of Vesak. This chapter suggests that exploring religious -- in this case, Buddhist -- performativity provides a response to this question. Investigating religious performativity involves analysing the contexts in which religious activities occur and comparing these

2 D.K. Swearer, *Buddhism and Society in Southeast Asia* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Book, 1981), 43.

3 Aronson-Lehavi's area of research includes late medieval and performance and religious theatre. See S. Aronson-Lehavi, "Transformation of Religious Performativity: Sacrificial Figures in Modern Experimental Theatre," *Performance and Spirituality* 3, 1 (2012), 60.

4 E. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Tradition," in E. Hobsbawm and E.T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

activities for evidence of similar features. This chapter presents evidence that the ceremonies and rituals associated with Vesak in Indonesia during the early twentieth century first appeared during the late nineteenth century in celebrations of Vesak in South Asian Buddhist communities, which followed Theravada Buddhism. These innovated Theravada Buddhist ceremonies and rituals were introduced via various international Buddhist channels and networks to colonial Indonesian Buddhist communities which then adopted these ceremonies and rituals for their celebrations of Vesak. The Indonesian Peranakan Chinese Buddhists, who traditionally followed Northern/Mahayana Buddhism, appropriated these innovated Southern/Theravada Buddhist ceremonies and rituals for their celebrations of Vesak in a way that maintained their community's allegiance to Buddhism; however, it also transformed their understanding of Buddhism.[5]

5.1. VESAK AS A GLOBAL MODERN PERFORMANCE

The ceremonies and rituals of Vesak underwent a considerable change in Sri Lanka at the end of the nineteenth century as part of a movement against colonial authority, Christian dominance and later as a symbol of Asian modernity.[6] How the ceremonies and rituals of Vesak were changed in colonial Sri Lanka is perhaps one of the most researched aspects of Buddhism in Asia. Although Vesak was widely celebrated by Asian Buddhists, it also provided powerful symbols for mobilizing support for the Buddhists' successful anti-colonial movement and Asian modernity.[7] Vesak became a symbol of the Buddhists' successful anti-colonial movement in predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka after the colonial government's recognition of Christmas as a public holiday. This sparked Buddhists' resistance to what they saw as the growing, government-supported dominance of Christianity. In 1888 Henry Steel Olcott, a prominent Theosophist and new convert to Buddhism, petitioned the government to also recognize Vesak as a public holiday to commemorate

5 D. Turpie, *Wesak and the Recreation of Buddhist Tradition* (PhD Dissertation, McGill University, 2002), 6.

6 J. Snodgrass, "Performing Buddhist Modernity: The Lumbini Festival, Tokyo 1925," *Journal of Religious History* 33, 2 (2009), 145.

7 Ibid., 145.

the Buddha's birthday so that the Vesak (Buddha's birthday) would officially recognized as equal to Christmas (Jesus Christ's birthday). The colonial authorities eventually made Vesak a public holiday.

A number of researchers have referred to Asian Buddhist revivalist movements as the Protestant Buddhism Movement.[8] This designation highlights the fact that Buddhist activists began to emulate aspects of Christian religious practices. Aside from advancing Vesak as an officially recognized festival, Buddhists also used Christian missionary practices, Sunday school instruction, wedding ceremonies and print publications to propagate Buddhism.[9]

The presence of Protestant Buddhists in colonial Sri Lanka is demonstrated by a special edition on Vesak in *The Buddhist* published in 1937:

> The festival we are celebrating, today, is the greatest of our year. Our Christian friends celebrate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of their leader on as many different days, but in our case all is concentrated in this one great occasion -- the Full-Moon Day of Vesak -- on which we commemorate at once the birth of our Lord, his attainment of Buddhahood, and his departure from the world whose misery he did so much to alleviate.[10]

The passage above frames Vesak as superior to the Christians' Christmas. Furthermore, it claims that no other festival can approach Vesak in importance.[11] It frames Vesak as superior to Christmas with the implication that Buddhism is a match to Christianity despite Christianity's dominance as the favoured religion of the colonial state.

Resistance to colonialism as well as concern about the Christian missionaries' success at winning converts prompted Buddhist communities in colonial territories beyond Sri Lanka to adopt Christian missionaries' practices in an effort to propagate Buddhism. Part of this effort involved introducing new Vesak ceremonial rituals from colonial Sri Lanka in their celebrations

8 R. Gombrich and G. Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 205; S. Prothero, "Henry Steel Olcott and 'Protestant Buddhism,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIII/2 (1995), 289; H. Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas: The Buddha's Birthday Festival in Colonial Korea (1928-1945)," *Journal of Korean Religions* 2 (2011), 51.

9 Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas," 51.

10 D. B. Jayatileke and V. de Silva, "Vesak 1937", *The Buddhist,* vol. 8, no. 1 (May 1937), n. pag.

11 Ibid., n.pag.

of Vesak. However, aside from resisting colonialism and the incursions of Christian missionaries, a new spirit of union throughout the whole Buddhist world seems to have energized a desire to revitalize Buddhism. Another passage from the journal quoted above called for the union of the Buddhist world through Vesak celebrations:

> ...it is right and well that Buddhists all over the world should combine in the joyous celebration of Vesak -- that it should be a time when all differences are forgotten, all quarrels are made up -- when scattered members of the family meet together once more, and with one heart join in laying their pure and lovely flower offerings on the holy shrines of the Great Teacher.[12]

The quotation reveals that Vesak had come to symbolize a modern Pan-Buddhism spirit Buddhism capable of resisting Christianity for Buddhist activists and intellectuals.

In the early twentieth century, Vesak was beginning to be celebrated in parts of East Asia. Hwansoo Kim, a scholar on Korean Buddhism and culture, notes that the celebration of Vesak in colonial Korea as early as 1928. He refers to Vesak as a "Buddhist Christmas" and argues that the new practice was instituted as the culmination of a joint Asian Buddhist effort between Japanese and Korean Buddhists to respond to modernity, nationalism, colonialism and Christian missions. Kim points out that this reconfiguration of the Buddha's birthday was parallel to the reinvention of Christmas in the modern world and in colonial Korea and that it was intended to symbolically define the Buddhists' religious identity and power.[13] More specifically, Kim explains that the Buddha's reconfigured birthday in colonial Korea was a product of interaction, complex negotiation and collaboration between Japanese and Korean Buddhists, which served to announce that neither Japanese nor Korean Buddhists were puppets of Japan's colonial ambitions.[14] Kim's analysis not only demonstrates the role of Buddhism as an emerging counterforce to colonialism in East Asia but it also demonstrates a transnational connection involved in the process of the invention of a new practice. It also suggests the possibility that the rethinking of Vesak practices in South and Southeast Asia could have been part of emerging anti-colonialism and anti-Christian sentiments that were spread by contacts and interconnections not only among Asian Buddhists but also between Buddhists from the East and the West.

12 Ibid., n. pag..

13 Kim, "A Buddhist Christmas," 47.

14 Ibid., 49.

Another important research relevant to this discussion is Judith Snodgrass' work on Vesak in 1920s Japan. Snodgrass argues that Vesak became a tool for performing modernity in Japan during the 1920s after Japanese Buddhists transformed the traditional Buddhist festival of Hana Matsuri[15] into Vesak, which they celebrated as the Lumbini Festival during the 1920s -- a modern international celebration of the birth of the historical Sakyamuni Buddha. Snodgrass emphasizes that "it was a modern event in its association with the centres of consumer culture, the department stores; in its calculated use of mass communications both broadcast and print, and most particularly in the public nature of the performance..."[16] She adds it was modern because the event used the latest technology and made the Japanese being part of the international community.[17] Snodgrass shows how Japanese Buddhists, along with changing the festival's name from Hana Matsuri to the Lumbini Festival, also changed the space in which the festival took place. The Hana Matsuri festival was typically held in the local temples and involved a simple ritual act of ladling sweet tea over a Buddha image. Around 1925, the observance became more public and festive.[18] As the years progressed, the celebration started to be held in large public spaces and public institutions in Tokyo.[19]

Vesak was not simply one of the few festivals shared by Buddhists of various schools and cultural backgrounds; it was also already a potent symbol of Asian modernity and successful anti-colonial protest.[20] Snodgrass continues by comparing what happened in Japan to what happened in regions of South Asia such as colonial Sri Lanka where proposing Vesak as a public holiday became a symbolic act protesting Christianity dominance. She claims that the decision to celebrate Vesak publicly also symbolized Buddhist modernity because "it reinforced the Orientalist scholarship of the time, which against Buddhist traditions, emphasized the historical humanity of the Buddha as founder of the religion, the basic premise of modern humanist Buddhism."[21] Snodgrass emphasizes that to Buddhists in Japan, performing Vesak allowed

15 The Japan had been observing *Hana Matsuri* (Flower Festival), a festival equated to Vesak since the reign of Empress Suiko (circa 606 CE).

16 Snodgrass, "Performing Buddhist Modernity," 135.

17 Ibid., 135-36

18 Snodgrass, "Performing Buddhist Modernity," 134.

19 Ibid., 134

20 Ibid., 145.

21 Ibid., 145-46.

them to feel Japanese, Buddhist, modern and a part of an international community all at the same time.[22]

Donald K. Swearer, whose work focuses on Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, explains that Vesak originated from a "festival cycle of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia has two closely connected patterns, one agro-economic, the other Buddhist," so as a result Vesak was never inherently Buddhist.[23] Changes in the place where Vesak was celebrated reflect the beginning of Vesak as a performance of Buddhist modernity. Swearer points out that regions such as colonial Sri Lanka, Burma, Laos and other Southeast Asian regions traditionally observed Vesak within the monastery. The celebration of Vesak was private and carried out by monks. When Vesak began to be used to celebrate Buddhist modernity, Vesak became more celebrative in nature, took place beyond the monastery and involved both monks and laypeople.[24]

In regions where Buddhism was predominant, the changeover from a closed, private celebration to an open, public celebration is easily seen. For instance, in the case of Sri Lanka, the traditional Vesak celebration involved various monastic activities, such as reaffirming one's commitment to Buddhist tradition by affirming the five precepts and taking refuge in the Triple Gems (Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha). Such monastic-based activities marked the Vesak celebration as being private in nature or what Snodgrass called a private festival.[25]

Vesak became an open, public celebration in colonial Sri Lanka before Korea and Japan. Buddhism was regarded as more equal to Christianity after Vesak was declared as a public holiday in 1885. It is most likely that Sri Lankan Buddhists were the first to gain legal recognition of their right to celebrate Vesak in the colonialized regions South Asia. This success inspired neighbouring Buddhist regions and communities to do the same.

In colonial Singapore, an identical movement took place in the early twentieth century. The Ceylonese Buddhist in Singapore also attempted to obtain legal recognition for their religious practices. Ann Blackburn, an American historian on Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, points out that

22 Ibid., 136.

23 Swearer, *Buddhism and Society*, 17-18; D.K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 47.

24 Ibid., 47.

25 Snodgrass, "Performing Buddhist Modernity," 135.

the birthday of the Sakyamuni Buddha first became an officially recognized Buddhist festival in Singapore known as Buddhist New Year, and in 1924 it was officially designated as the National Day of the Sinhalese of Singapore.[26] Blackburn explains that the success of the Sinhalese Buddhists enlarged the ritual space for Buddhists in Singapore. The festival on Serangoon Road, where the Sinhalese Buddhists held the Vesak festival, allowed all Buddhists, regardless of their ethnic and nationality backgrounds, to join the event. The festival in turn made Buddhist practices and customs known to a wider Singaporean audience.[27]

Blackburn also highlights a crucial aspect of Vesak in colonial Singapore that offers an insight into understanding the development of Vesak in colonial Indonesia. She notes the festival became a point of contact between the Chinese Mahayana Buddhists and Ceylonese Buddhists in Singapore, which led the two groups to cooperate with each other. For example, in 1904 the Shuang Lin temple became the centre of Vesak rituals in which Chinese and Sinhalese Buddhists performed together.[28] A second example comes from an announcement in *The Straits Times* newspaper: "[A] special service will also be held at the new Chinese Buddhist Temple at Balestier Range. This temple has been specially decorated by B.P. D'Silva in honour of Lord Buddha."[29]

There was not only interaction between Chinese and Ceylonese Buddhists but also between European, Japanese and Eurasian Buddhists in Singapore. Buddhists in general followed instructions by the Buddhist Mission, such as the following instruction for Vesak Day: ...all Buddhists, both European and native, will illuminate their houses on Saturday night."[30] Acts of charity were carried out across ethnic and socio-economic divides regardless of the particular Buddhist school one followed. For example, B.P. D'Silva gave food to about three thousand poor people.[31] Hence, the Vesak festival appeared to function in colonial Singapore both as a religious ritual as well as an occasion to draw followers of different Buddhist schools together.

26 A. Blackburn, "Ceylonese Buddhism in Colonial Singapore: New Ritual Spaces and Specialists, 1895-1935," *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* 184 (2012), 13.

27 Blackburn, "Ceylonese Buddhism in Colonial Singapore," 14.

28 Ibid., 8.

29 *The Straits Times*, (28 April 1904).

30 Blackburn, "Ceylonese Buddhism in Colonial Singapore," 8.

31 Ibid., 8.

The above section has described a common pattern of celebrating Vesak in different regions of East and South Asia and offers the notion of "performance" as a starting point for looking at similar Buddhist activities in colonial Indonesia or as Catherin Bells, whose studies focused on Chinese religions and rituals, puts it -- the power of "not being told or shown something so much as [being] led to experience something."[32] The next section looks at Vesak in terms of theatrical performances designed to lead Buddhists to new religious experiences, for example the recitation of the Buddhist Pali canon and Buddhist liturgy.

5.2. PERFORMING VESAK

The coming of Vesak to colonial Indonesia was the result of crisscrossed relations between Buddhist schools; intellectuals' interest in Buddhism; resistance to the Christian missionaries' efforts to convert Indonesian Buddhists; and the Peranakan Chinese's efforts to return to their ancestor's traditions.

The introduction of Vesak as a new Buddhist practice in colonial Indonesia was initially led by laypeople who became involved in modernizing Buddhism due to the lack of Buddhist monks in Indonesia. This is obviously different from the case in colonial Sri Lanka as well as in the Straits Settlements, where Buddhist monks led the modernization of Buddhism and initiated changes to Vesak.

In order to fully understand the nature of Vesak performativity in early twentieth century Indonesia, this section describes three sites where Vesak ceremonies were carried out -- the Theosophical Society Lodge, the Borobudur and the Chinese klenteng. The details of how Vesak's new rituals were staged at each site were described in sources such as newspapers, the Theosophical Society's journal and Peranakan Chinese magazines, such as *Sam Kauw Gwat Po* and *Moestika Dharma*. Among the Peranakan Chinese, Vesak is found to be celebrated along with other existing Chinese ritual practices such as Tjapgomeh and Sin Tjia. This, in turn, marks Vesak as a new emerging practice within the Peranakan Chinese Buddhist community.

32 C.M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford and NYC: Oxford University Press, 1997), 160.

5.2.1. Vesak at the Theosophical Society Lodge

The Theosophical Society was the first organization to hold Vesak in colonial Indonesia. In Chapter Two, the Theosophical Society's connections with Buddhism were explained. One goal of the Society was to spread Buddhism by publicly celebrating Vesak. This goal mirrors the Theosophists' role in the campaign to promote Vesak as a public holiday in colonial Sri Lanka. The Theosophists' successful campaign resulted in the British governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, declaring Vesak as a public holiday in Sri Lanka on 27 March 1885. The declaration of Vesak as a national holiday was then followed by the raising of the Buddhist flag in the country. The success story in colonial Sri Lanka later inspired Ceylonese Buddhists in Singapore to promote a similar cause with success. The introduction of Vesak in colonial Indonesia proved central to the efforts to modernize Buddhism in Indonesia, colonial Sri Lanka and colonial Singapore.

Kwee Tek Hoay noted that the Theosophical Society was one of the organizations that routinely performed Vesak rituals.[33] The celebration in this organization was held in conjunction with Lotus Day, a day to commemorate the passing of H. P. Blavatsky the founder of the organization. Sources indicate that there were several centres performing Vesak. The *Jaarverslag* hinted that the Giri Lojo lodge in Bandung consistently included Vesak in its annual agenda.[34] Other centres, such as that on Blavatsky Park Street, in Batavia also held a similar event.[35] Outside Batavia and Bandung, the centres in Solo, Yogyakarta and Malang were also cited as performing Vesak.

The first Vesak celebration held by the Theosophical Society was in late 1920s. In 1929, a Vesak service was held at Giri Lojo centre in Bandung. A Javanese man named Sastrowirjo gave a sermon about Vesak Valley and also led the ceremony. That year, twenty-three Boemiputra and nine Chinese out of the forty-one members of the centre attended the event.[36] Although

33 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Omong-omong tentang Agama Buddha: Hari-hari raja Buddhist (dari golongan Hinayana)", *Moestika Dharma; Maandblad Tentang Agama, Kabatinan dan Philosofie*, 111 (June 1941), 208-10.

34 *Theosofie in Nederlandsch-Indië = Theosophie di Tanah Hindia Nederland*, (April 1929), 179.

35 *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indi*ë, (4 May 1931).

36 Ibid. Also see *Theosofie in Nederlandsch-Indië = Theosophie di Tanah Hindia Nederland*, (March 1930), 150.

no European members are recorded to have attended the celebration, the event still demonstrates the presence of different ethnic groups at the Vesak celebration. This parallels Blackburn's observation that in colonial Singapore the Vesak performance brought together followers of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism.

In the 1930s, more reports on Vesak were published in the *Sam Kauw Gwat Po*. The Giri Lojo lodge led by Ong Soe Aan held Vesak which included a *kampvuur* (campfire), speeches and rituals. Sastrowirjo delivered a speech, and Hwesio Nio Thong Ie from Klenteng Bandoeng conducted religious prayers.[37] The Batavia lodge also appeared to have held a Vesak celebration with a ritual that was described as impressive yet serene. The ritual was started at 5.30 in the evening. All participants were invited to take off their shoes and to enter what was called Esoterische Kamer (Esoteric Room), where cushions were provided and arranged on the floor. People were free to choose either to sit on the cushions or chairs. The attendees then turned their faces towards the wall facing towards a picture of the Buddha, which is similar to the one in the Borobudur temple. It is the one which shows him teaching mudra. Flowers and incense were placed in front of the picture as offerings. After the audience was seated, the president of the Theosophical Society of Batavia lodge, Mrs. Gonggrijp, delivered a speech about the importance of the celebration which was then followed by meditation. The celebration was attended by people of different ethnic groups, namely five Chinese, five Boemiputra and many Europeans of both genders.[38]

The Vesak ritual practices at the Theosophical Society lodge seem to have been less elaborate than those performed at the Chinese klenteng. The Theosophists' Vesak rituals also seem to have been distinguished by a meditation session and by the Theosophists' omission of a recitation of Tisarana and Pancasila Buddhist during the ritual. The recitation of Tisarana and Pancasila Buddhist was a regular feature of Vesak celebrations organized by the Batavia Buddhist Association. The Tisarana and Pancasila Buddhist, as explained in an earlier chapter, was a distinctive feature of the Southern tradition. Skipping these two verses suggests that the Vesak performed at the Theosophical Society was not exclusively intended for Buddhists because these

37 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Kabar kerajaan Buddhis: Kerajaan Wezak", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 9 (June 1935), 37.

38 Ibid., 33.

verses were recited only by Buddhists to affirm their faith. Thus, the Vesak commemoration at the Theosophical Society lodges interestingly did not go the full length of an exclusively Buddhist ceremony.

5.2.2. Vesak at the Borobudur Temple

As mentioned in Chapter One, the Borobudur was an important Dutch archaeological project in the early twentieth century. The Borobudur temple underwent its first restoration between 1907 and 1911 under Theodoor van Erp, the Dutch engineer who was in charge of this restoration.[39] In 1929, Dutch Theosophists publicly celebrated Vesak in the Mendoet temple near Borobudur for the first time in 1929 and at the Borobudur temple in 1930. [40]

The performance of Vesak in the Medut and Borobudur temples was more exclusively Buddhist oriented than the celebrations in the Theosophical Society lodges because of L. Mangelaar Meertens, a Buddhist leader and a member of hoofdbestuur of the Nederlands Indische Theosofische Vereeniging (NITV). He staged the Borobudur Vesak celebration as a specifically Buddhist ceremony.

The Vesak performance in the Borobudur was part of an effort by Meertens to revive the sanctity of Buddhist temples throughout the Indonesian archipelago, but particularly the temples in Borobudur and Mendoet. This effort was driven by three goals: (1) to commemorate Buddhist events such as Vesak at the Borobudur temple since it was larger and could accommodate more participants,[41] (2) to transfer the management of both temples to the Buddhists once they became able to do so; and (3) to establish rest houses (ashram) for those who wanted to pursue a spiritual quest.[42]

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39 M. Bloembergen and M. Eickhoff, "Decolonizing Borobudur: Moral Engagements and the Fear of Loss. The Netherlands, Japan and (Post) Colonial Heritage Politics in Indonesia," in S. Legêne, B. Purwanto and H.S. Nordholt (eds), *Sites, Bodies and Stories: Imagining Indonesian History* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press), 34.

40 M. Bloembergen, "Borobudur in the Light of Asia: Scholars, Pilgrims, and Knowledge Networks of Greater India," in M.F. Laffan, (ed.), *Belonging Across the Bay of Bengal: Religious Rites, Colonial Migrations, National Rights* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 39.

41 *Theosofie in Nederlandsch-Indië = Theosophie di tanah Hindia Nederland*, 4 (April 1930), 209-10.

42 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Toedjoean jang tetep", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan*

From 1930 onwards, Vesak was held at the Borobudur and Mendoet temples. Ong Soe Aan reported in *Moestika Dharma* that people of different ethnic backgrounds attended Vesak celebration held at the two temples on 20 May 1932.[43] Ong noted that there were three statues of *Sampo*[44] in Mendoet. He described the atmosphere as serene and peaceful. Having finished the program in Mendoet, people proceeded to Borobudur where they climbed to the top of the upper level of the temple there and discussed Bishop Leadbeater's book titled *De Meester en het Pad* (The Master and the Path*)*.

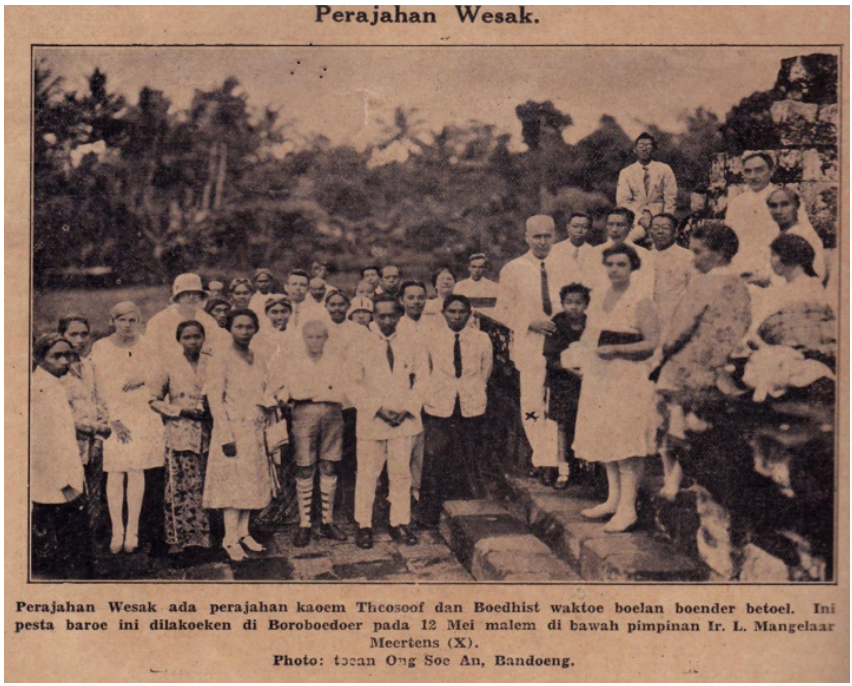

Figure 5.1. Vesak performance organized by Theosophists and Buddhists at the Borobudur on 12 May 1930. (Photo: Ong Soe Aan). Source: *Sin Po,* June 1930.[45]

dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong, 46 (July1938), 4.

43 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Perhoeboengan Buddha Gautama dengan Doenia II. Keraja'an Wesak", *Moestika Dharma; Maandblad Tentang Agama, Kabatinan dan Philosofie*, 3 (June 1932), 101.

44 It was not clear what the word, *Sampo*, refers to.

45 I would like to especially thank Muhammad Ryski Wiryawan for his generosity

As the highlight of the program, they interlocked hands with one another and performed a clockwise circumambulation (*pradakshina)* around the topmost level of the Borobudur stupa. The gesture of handholding, as Ong described, symbolized world brotherhood (*persoedaraan sadoenia*). Furthermore, Ong felt that the experience was mystical and likened the atmosphere to *swarga* (heaven) that brought peace to the human mind. For him the experience of circumambulation was incomparable.

The circumambulation ritual was intended to connect the Borobudur Vesak celebrations to the ritual depicted by the ancient Buddhist art of India. Susan Huntington, who studied early Buddhist art in India, points out that the circumambulation ritual is often seen in ancient reliefs carved into Buddhist stupas in Madhya Pradesh, India.[46] Depictions of the circumambulation ritual is the earliest surviving example of Buddhist narrative art. Clockwise circumambulation is a clear marker of the Buddhist ritual, while the counter-clockwise circumambulation is a clear marker of the Hindu ritual. The object around which veneration is performed varies. In a relief carving from Bharhut in India, a building that contains a wheel *(cakra)* is the object of veneration. In another relief, the object of veneration is a Buddhist stupa (a monument or pillar).[47] The antiquity and great number of circumambulation relief carvings suggest Buddhists have long regarded this ritual as a fundamental expression of what is important in their religion. This point is underscored by the fact that the practice of circumambulation was integrated into the circular design of Borobudur monuments.[48]

In 1935, another Vesak celebration was held at the same site.[49] The ritual activities listed in the program were similar to those listed in past programs. The circumambulation was one of the core activities of the 1935 celebration, followed by a speech by C.C.W. Ganswyck, the Dutch Theosophical Society

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in giving me permission to use his collection of pictures for this dissertation.

46 S.L. Huntington, *Lay Ritual in the Early Buddhist Art of India: More Evidence Against the Aniconic Theory* (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academie van Wetenschappen 2012), 13.

47 Ibid., 14-15.

48 Ibid., 15.

49 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Perajaan di Boroboedoer. Verslag dari saorang jang hadir", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 9 (June 1935), 38-40.

leader.[50] There were approximately 120 people who attended the event, among whom were forty-eight Chinese, mostly from Temanggung and Magelang. There are no further details concerning the social background of the attendees.

In 1938, the Vesak celebration was more elaborate and centralized at the Borobudur. Oei Thiam An wrote that on 14 May people from different places, such as Yogyakarta, Magelang, Temanggung and Grabag, gathered at the temple complex. There was a large number of Javanese but only a few Europeans and Chinese. The ceremony started at six o'clock in the evening and was led by Meertens, the Buddhist leader in Malang. At the centre of the site for the ritual was an altar decorated with candles, jasmine flowers and roses. The air was filled with the fragrance of burning incense on the altar adding to the serene, tranquil, unruffled atmosphere. After the chanting of the scriptural recitation, which is done to review the teachings of the Buddha, lectures followed. One lecture was given in Dutch by Meertens, and another lecture in the Javanese language was given by Mangoen Soekarso, a Javanese Buddhist as well as a teacher from Taman Siswa school.[51]

Approximately 150 people attended the event.[52] The Vesak ceremony was then concluded by the circumambulation ritual at the biggest stupa at 10.30 pm. Like previous Vesak celebrations at the Borobudur, the 1938 Vesak was an exercise in signifying the Borobudur celebration as different from those held in other places.

Vesak at Borobudur has shown interesting finding. Being held at the temple complex, it has been demonstrated that there were Javanese people attended the occasion. The use of the Javanese language as the second medium after Dutch language supported the report about Javanese participants on the occasion. In this respect the Vesak in Borobudur also became a means to answer the question about the presence of Javanese society in the new Buddhist community which otherwise relatively unseen in Batavia.

Meertens was apparently not involved in the 1939 Borobudur Vesak celebration. Nevertheless, the celebration was held with mentions of Van

50 The talk in Vesak 1935 was given by C.C.W. Ganswyck. It was about Buddha, Buddhism, karma, reincarnation and Nirvana which was translated into Malay by Soepono.

51 Oei Thiam An, "Kerajaan Wezak di Boroboedoer", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 45 (June 1938), 30.

52 Ibid., 32.

Ganswijk, who was the secretary of the Veereniging Voor Boeddhisme (Association for Buddhism), which was established in Yogyakarta in 1935. Van Ganswijk lived in Yogyakarta and later moved to Bandung. Some other people who were also reportedly in the crowd were Raden Mas Koesoemodihardjo, Lim Tik Liang from Solo and Soejatiman from Yogyakarta. In replacement of Meertens, Van Ganswijk delivered a brief Vesak message about the life of the Buddha and his teachings, with a focus on the non-existence of God and non-self. [53]

The Vesak celebration at the temple complex was halted in 1940 due to the German invasion of the Netherlands. Although Vesak celebrations at the klenteng and the Theosophical Society lodges continued, Meertens could not obtain permission from the colonial government for the outdoor Borobudur celebration.[54] Instead, all Vesak celebrations were to be held indoors. A similar situation again occurred in the following year, when Vesak was only celebrated in the klenteng and Theosophical Society lodges. The year 1939 marked the last Borobudur Vesak celebrations until the 1950s.

In conclusion, Vesak was held at Borobudur for about seven times during 1930s, which resulted in a new but enduring Buddhist tradition and which was arguably a significant contribution to the spread of Buddhism. Furthermore, the Borobudur Vesak celebrations also resulted in the introduction of old Buddhist rituals, such as the circumambulation, which were adapted for performance in the Borobudur temple complexes but which were not performed in other venues. These rituals became part of a new tradition that was initiated by members of an international organization -- the Theosophical Society -- and participated in by Javanese, Peranakan Chinese and other Buddhists from the areas surrounding Borobudur.

5.2.3. Vesak at the Klenteng

In addition to Theosophy lodges and to the Borobudur, the Chinese klenteng was another venue where Vesak was celebrated. In this section, this study

53 Oei Thiam An, "Peraja'an Wezak di Tjandi Boroboedoer", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 56 (May 1939), 37.

54 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Keraja'an Wezak di Boroboedoer dibatalken", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 69 (June 1940), 37.

argues that the performance of Vesak in the klenteng was new phenomenon and a significant feature of the Peranakan Chinese acceptance of a new Buddhist tradition, the South (Theravada Buddhism). As discussed in Chapter Three the klenteng was considered to be a cultural site as well as a crucial site for the Peranakan Chinese religion. Similarly, the celebration of Vesak at the klenteng can be said to demonstrate the Peranakan Chinese acceptance of Vesak. This chapter argues that the inclusion of Vesak into the klenteng program strengthened the bond between the two Buddhist traditions, the Northern and Southern Buddhism. As the performance of Vesak included a set of rituals and recitation of Buddhist verses, the community of the klenteng also began to include the use of Pali-language and more Southern Buddhist resources. Therefore, it may be said that Vesak at the klenteng is another proof of the impact of Southern Buddhist networks, as represented by members of the Theosophical Society and Southern Buddhist agents, such as Josias van Dienst, E.E. Power and Bhikkhu Narada.

To begin with, during late colonial times, four religious festivals were formally acknowledged by the colonial government; one of them was the festival of the Chinese religion.[55] Although there is no indication that Vesak was formally recognized by the colonial government, this festival had been observed by the Chinese society. Vesak was celebrated by the Chinese Buddhist at Klenteng Kwan Im Tong located in Prinselaan Batavia in the 1930s. In collaboration with the Sam Kauw Hwee (SKH), the Batavia Buddhist Association (BBA) and the Java Buddhist Association (JBA) collaborated in organizing the event in 1934; [56] however, there is little information about the Vesak performance in that year. Nevertheless, the available information does indicate that different organizations were involved in the implementation of newly invented traditions. During this Vesak celebration, Josias van Dienst was invited to lead the ceremony as a manifestation of the harmonious relationship between the BBA and the JBA. As Kwee points out, the BBA was designed for all Chinese religions followers to have equal access to each other's program, including Vesak celebrated by Buddhist at the klenteng.[57] In this regard, the

55 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Kerajaan Wezak", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 79 (April 1941), 38.

56 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Pergerakan kaoem Buddhist di Batavia", *Moestika Dharma; Maandblad Tentang Agama, Kabatinan dan Philosofie*, 27 (June 1934), 1014.

57 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Kenapatah moesti berdiriken Sam Kauw Hwe", *Sam Kauw*

Vesak at the klenteng in Batavia was religiously more diverse; it was attended by followers of other religions as well as people from different social backgrounds.

There is more extensive information on the commemoration of Vesak in the following year. It was initiated by the BBA and it took place at the Klenteng Kwan Im Tong on 18 May 1935. This event was attended by more people from different associations and ethnic backgrounds than in the previous year. Among them were Mrs. Gonggrijp, the president of the Batavia Theosophical Society and Egmond from Vrij Katholiek Kerk. Some Javanese were also seen in the venue such as Poerbatjaraka, Soetardjo, Soekirlan and Kadiroen Mangoenpoernomo; some Sinhalese, Hindus and Sikhs; and about forty Chinese men and women.[58]

As described in the *Sam Kauw Gwat Po* magazine, the celebration was a formal and sacred event. It involved a set of expressions, ritual gestures and formal speech, such as the recitation of Pali verses. Unlike in Borobudur where the event involved only laypeople, Vesak at the klenteng was formally opened by Hwesio Lin Feng Fei., the Mahayana Buddhist monk who was the abbot of the Klenteng Kwan Im Tong in Batavia. This was followed by a speech of the BBA president and then the recitation of Pali verses to salute the Buddha *(oetjapan dowa-dowa peodjian pada Buddha).* The verses were translated into various languages for the benefit of the heterogenous audience. E.D. Simon recited the verses in the Pali language; the Chinese translation was recited by Tjoa Hin Hoeij; the Javanese translation was recited by Soetardjo; the Dutch translation was recited by H.F. N. Boussard; and finally, the Malay language was recited by Tjiong Kie Koan.[59] During the verse recitation, the Javanese sat cross-legged on the floor, while the Chinese knelt.

After the above recitation of the Pali verses, lectures were delivered by four people. Their names and lecture topics are listed below:

- B.L. Simon -- The meaning and purpose of Vesak (in English);[60]
- Soekirlan -- *Kerajaan Vesak Ballei dan laen-laen* (Vesak Valley celebration

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Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong, 2 (November 1934), 3.

58 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Keraja'an di Klenteng Kwan Im Tong", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 9 (June 1935), 34.

59 Ibid., 36.

60 Visakha Gunadharma translated his lecture, *The Meaning and Purpose of Vesak*, into Malay language, *Maksoed dan Toedjoeannja Wezak*.

and other things) (in Malay);

- Kadiroen Mangoen Poernomo -- *Orang-orang Buddhist jang soedah naik ka dalem tingkatan soetji jang terdiri dari beberapa grad* (Buddhists who have achieved various degrees of enlightenment) (in Malay); and
- Visakha Gunadharma -- *Penawar jang Buddha sediaken boeat semboehin manoesia peonja segala kesakitan* (The antidote for human suffering by the Buddha).[61]

A similar program of activities was followed in the Vesak celebration the next year, 1936.[62] The BBA continued to be the main organizer and it received support from the SKH and the Theosophy Lodge Djekarta (Batavia). The audience grew larger, reaching about two hundred people. Unlike the celebration in the previous year, however, E. E. Power, the vice-president of the JBA introduced a crucial Buddhist element to the event, the recitation of the Pali Buddhist liturgy in the ritual. After three Mahayana monks opened the Vesak ritual, Power proceeded with the recitation of the Tisarana and the Pancasila. The verses were recited in their original language, Pali, and then translated into English. They were also recited in the Javanese language (by Soetardjo), Chinese (by Tjoa Hin Hoeij), Dutch language (by H.F.N. Boussard) and Malay (by Visakha Gunadharma).

Tisarana:

Buddham saranam gacchami
(I take refuge to the Buddha.)

Dhammam saranam gacchami
(I take refuge to the Dhamma.)

Sangham saranam gacchami
(I take refuge to the Sangha.)

Dutiyampi Buddham Saranam gacchami
(For the second time, I take refuge to the Buddha.)

Dutiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami
(For the second time, I take refuge to the Dhamma.)

61 Kwee, "Keraja'an di Klenteng Kwan Im Tong", 36.

62 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Hari Wezak", *Moestika Dharma; Maandblad Tentang Agama, Kabatinan dan Philosofie*, 50 (May 1936), 639-41.

Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami
(For the second time, I take refuge to the Sangha.)

Tatiyampi Buddham saranam gacchami
(For the third time, I take refuge to the Buddha.)

Tatiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami
(For the third time, I take refuge to the Dhamma.)

Tatiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami
(For the third time I take refuge to the Sangha.)

Pancasila Buddhist:

Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami
(I undertake the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures.)

Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami
(I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.)

Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami
(I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.)

Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami
(I undertake the precept to refrain from incorrect speech.)

Surameraya majjhapamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami
(I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness.)

The recitation of the Tisarana and Pancasila were crucial to the progress of Buddhism in Buddhist social history. As previously explained, the recitation of the Tisarana and Pancasila is one of the salient features of monastic activities, especially in the Ceylonese Buddhist tradition. The recitation symbolizes the reaffirmation of the Buddhist commitment to Buddhism.[63] The Tisarana

63 Swearer, *Buddhism and Society in Southeast Asia,* 548.

is also known as the Three Articles of Faith that have an essential part in Buddhist worship and devotional practices going back to the Pre-Asokan period.[64] Hence, the recitation of these verses during important, such as Vesak at the klenteng, signifies the penetration of Southern Buddhism (Theravada) into Chinese society. In turn, the recitation of these verses by the Buddhist community at the klenteng indicates the receptive attitude of the Chinese Buddhists to a new Buddhist tradition. The recitation of these verses can be compared to Olcott's conversion into Buddhism, and perceived as the pinnacle of the coming of Buddhism to Indonesia when the people affirmed themselves to be Buddhists.[65] Based on this historical investigation, it was during this period of time (1936) that the klenteng members -- the Peranakan Chinese and the Mahayana Buddhists -- officially accepted Southern Buddhism.

On 25 May 1937 another Vesak was held at Klenteng Kwan Im Tong in Batavia. Hwesio Ling Feng Fei led the ritual performance in Chinese tradition by offering incense at the nine different altars in the klenteng. By this time the Tisarana and Pancasila had become core components of the program. Four people of different ethnicities recited the verses and precepts in four different languages. The Chinese version was recited by a Chinese (Siauw Tik Kwie), the Pali version by an Indian (Chakrabutty), the Javanese version by a Javanese (M. Soetardjo), the English version by a European (E.E. Power), and the Malay version by Tjiong Kie Koan.[66]

In 1938, another Vesak celebration was held at Klenteng Kwan Im Tong. (A group picture was taken during this occasion. Unfortunately, because of its poor quality, it cannot be included in this dissertation.) The picture shows several important figures such as Hwesio Lin Feng Fei, Poerbatjaraka and his wife, the family of Jagannath L. Ghandy, Virchend Venchand Shah with his wife, Siauw Tik Kwie and Souw Sien Giap (one of the very active members of the BBA), Toan Kie Hok Kioe, Kwee Tek Hoay and his wife, Oeij Giok Lien (the chairperson for the Women group at Klenteng Kwam Im in Mr. Cornelis).[67] In another picture, the lecturers were shown standing and

64 V.V.S. Saibaba, *Theravada Buddhist Devotionalism in Ceylon, Burma and Thailand* (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2005), 3.

65 The Tisarana and Pancasila were recited to affirm one's intention of becoming a (Theravada) Buddhist in Indonesia.

66 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Keraja'an Wezak di Kwan Im Tong", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 33 (June 1937), 26.

67 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Keraja'an Wezak, 14 Mei 1938, di Klenteng Kwan Im Tong

delivering lectures in front of an altar, surrounded by the audience. Visakha Gunadharma and Poerbatjaraka were seen sitting on chairs next to each other, while sitting opposite them were Kwee Tek Hoay and Chakrabutty.

Three notable speeches were given during the 1938 Vesak celebration held at Klenteng Kwan Im Tong. The first speech was delivered by Chakrabutty and translated into Malay by Kwee Tek Hoay. The second speech was given by Poerbatjaraka and it focused on the interpretation of Queen Maya's dream before the birth of the Buddha -- the white elephant entering Maya Dewi's womb at the time of conception. Finally, the third speaker was E.E. Power, who delivered his talk in Dutch. It was translated into Malay by R. Soekirlan Poespadibrata. In his talk, he raised an issue about the importance of studying and practicing Buddhism in the time of calamities. He also stated that Buddhism is not a religion and that it is not the same as Hinduism. He explained that Buddhism is a philosophy for life which people ought to believe in; instead it must be proven through daily practices. Buddha is also not the leader of Buddhists; he is only a teacher who shows the way. Buddhism survived throughout the time because people kept following the teachings. Buddhist practice is founded on the five basic rules, namely, no killing, no stealing, no lying, no sexual misconduct and no misleading sensual pleasures and practices.

In the 1938 commemoration of Vesak, an interesting figure emerged as a guest lecturer. His name was Virchend Penchand Sha. He was identified in the *Sam Kauw Gwat Po* as one of the assistants of Mahatma Gandhi, a nationalist leader from India.[68] Kwee translated his talk into Malay language. Sha began his speech with an overview of the religious setting in India that was influenced by Jainism, Hinduism as well as other philosophies, including Buddhism. He

Batavia", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 45 (June 1938), n. pag.

68 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Hari Wezak dari taon ini", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 45 (June 1938), 16. I would expect to have more information about this figure that I suspect to be crucial in developing my argument about the Indian intellectual connection with Buddhist organization in Batavia at the time. Several editions of *Sam Kauw Gwat Po* recorded that Sha gave another lecture at the Batavia Buddhist Association, among which topics was about *Present India and Her message*. The lecture was delivered in 21 May 1938. V. P. Sha, "Present India and Her Message", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 46 (July 1938), 5-13.

went on to explain how Buddha influenced the social dimension and practices in India through his revolutionary teachings. An example was his disapproval of slaughtering animals for worship. Sha stated that the Buddha's teaching continued to benefit places beyond India, reaching Tibet, China, Japan, Siam, Burma, Ceylon and many more regions. Sha's presence and his lecture at the 1938 Vesak celebration proves the presence of Buddhism's transnational connections, particularly with India. It showed the vast networks that the Buddhist organization in Batavia had from the time it emerged in the early twentieth century.

By the end of the 1930s, the Vesak celebration had been reportedly done at the klenteng in different places in Java and beyond, such as in Menado, Sulawesi and Banjarmasin in Borneo. *Sam Kauw Gwat Po* recorded that in 1939, the Pakoempoelan Bibliotheek: Kamadjoean Lahir-Batin in Bandjarmasin, Borneo island led by Lie Tjong Tie organized the first Vesak celebration.[69] Meanwhile in Batavia, the Vesak had already been held for the sixth time at Klenteng Kwan Im Tong on 3 May 1939. A public announcement about the Vesak was disseminated in several newspapers prior the event.[70] This time three hwesio from Klenteng Lam Hoa Sie in Djembatan Lima, Batavia led the ritual, to take the place of Hwesio Lin Feng Fei, who passed away in November 1938.

Figures 5.2a and 5.2b present pictures taken at the 1939 Vesak celebration. This event was special as the Buddhist flag was introduced to the Buddhist community for the first time in Indonesia at this occasion. The flag was a gift from Bhikkhu Mahaweera to Visakha Gunadharma during her visit to Singapore for the celebration of Vesak.[71] At her sermon on this occasion, Gunadharma spoke about the meaning of the flag, the instruction given by Bhikkhu Mahaweera to display the flag at their houses, as well as her experience celebrating Vesak in Singapore. In summation, the 1939 Vesak was significant because it manifested the increased influence of Modern Buddhism which was

69 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Keraja'an Wezak di Bandjarmasin", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 56 (May 1939), n. pag.

70 *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indie*, (2 May 1939); *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, (3 May 1939).

71 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Keraja'an Wezak di Batavia oleh Pakoempoelan Batavia Buddhist Association", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 56 (May 1939), 7. Details about this visit and connection are discussed in a later chapter.

Figure 5.2a. Vesak celebration at Klenteng Kwan Im Tong, Batavia, 3 May 1939. Source: *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong* 56 (May 1939).

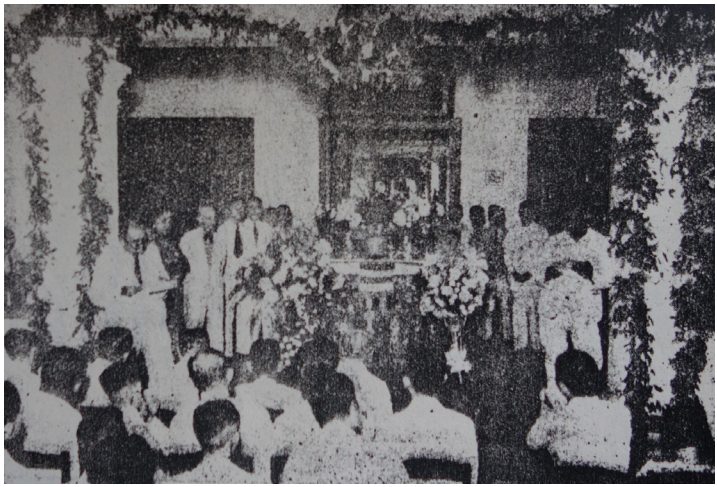

Figure 5.2b. Vesak celebration at Klenteng Kwan Im Tong, Batavia, 3 May 1939. Nanda L Punj (standing on the right) is reading a sermon in English that was translated into Melajoe by Kwee Tek Hoay (standing on the left). Standing behind Kwee Tek Hoay are Visakha Gunadharma and E.E. Power. The altar is embellished with a Buddhist flag brought by Visakha Gunadharma from Singapore. Source: *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong,* 56 (May 1939).

symbolically communicated through the gift of the Buddhist flag.

On 10 May 1940, the colonial government issued a state of emergency (*Staat van beleg*) as Germany overran the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg to invade France. As a result, the Vesak at Borobudur was cancelled as mentioned earlier,[72] and the klenteng were unable to issue public invitations to their celebrations of Vesak because the government suspended public announcements in the newspapers. Hence, the 1940 Vesak celebrations were relatively quiet. The Vesak celebration at the Klenteng Kwan Im Tong was attended only by eighty people, which included members of the JBA. After finishing with recitation of the Tisarana and Pancasila in Pali (affirmation of faith), Nand Lal Punj and Visakha Gunadharma delivered sermons. Power delivered a sermon entitled *A Practical Philosophy of Life* which content discussed the relevance of Buddhism in times of calamity such as the war in Europe and other places.[73] The remaining two speakers spoke about the teaching of the Buddha: Nanda L. Punj's talk was entitled *Rebirth* by and Gunadharma's talk was entitled "Flower Offering to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha" which was based on a book written by Cassius A. Pareira (later known as Bhikkhu Kassapa from Vihara Vajirarama, Colombo). Gunadharma's talk was exceptionally important because it explained that the act of flower offerings to the Buddha and altar on which the offerings are place express the core teachings of Buddha, namely *Anicca* (impermanence), *Dukkha* (suffering) and *Anatta* (non-self).[74] Kwee then concluded the event at eleven o'clock in the evening, after which some left while other stayed for more conversation while eating the offering fruits from the altar.

In 1941, Vesak was held as it had been before the German invasion of western Europe, but it was also the last recorded celebration of Vesak before the Japanese invasion of colonial Indonesia. Although Vesak was not celebrated in Borobudur, celebrations were held in several places. For example, the BBA Vesak celebration at the Klenteng Kwan Im Tong Batavia

72 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Keraja'an Wezak di Batavia", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 69 (June 1940), 5.

73 E. E. Power, "Buddhism, a practical Philosophy of Life", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 69 (June 1940), 10-18.

74 Mrs. Tjoa Hin Hoeij, "Flower Offering", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 69 (June 1940), 23-30.

was attended by about 300 male and female Indians, Javanese, Europeans and the Peranakan Chinese. By this time, the number of Europeans attending was much reduced.[75] The event this year also highlighted another significance pertaining to Buddhist connection to the empire. The Vesak event was moved from 15 May to 10 May in order to show respect and solidarity with the Netherlands which had been invaded by Germany in the previous year.[76] In aligned with this spirit, E.E. Power delivered a talk on "Why the World Is at War." Hence, the Vesak in 1941 marked a religious occasion (the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death) and a political event (the attack of Germany on Netherlands.[77] In this respect, the Buddhist community particularly those who had ties with the Klenteng Kwan Im Tong in colonial Indonesia showed their connection to the Dutch empire, interweaving their religious activity with the corresponding political situation.

In conclusion, Klenteng Kwan Im Tong -- later followed by other klenteng particularly in Batavia -- started organizing Vesak celebrations as early as 1935 and continued to do so until 1941, They transformed themselves into new religious sites for observing a new way of celebrating Vesak.

5.3. SYNCRETIC PERFORMATIVITY: INDONESIA AS A MICROCOSM OF MODERN BUDDHISM

The history of Chinese religion in colonial Indonesia is a study of syncretic traditions. For the Peranakan Chinese, as represented by Kwee, Chinese religion was a combination of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, a topic discussed in Chapter Three. The emergence of Buddhism in Indonesia involved a number of organizations. One of Kwee's articles indicates that the Peranakan Chinese's interest in Chinese religions and culture could have been one of crucial factors in the development of Buddhism. Kwee points out that

75 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Keraja'an Wezak di Klenteng Kwan Im Tong", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 80 (May 1941), 5.

76 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Keraja'an Wezak dan peringetan 10 Mei", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 80 (May 1941), 2. Also see *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, (8 May 1941).

77 Kwee, "Keraja'an Wezak dan peringetan 10 Mei", 3.

the connection can be seen from how the Peranakan Chinese maintained their partnership and connection with the Theosophical Society (an international organization) as well as local Buddhist organizations such as the JBA.[78] These two organizations have been discussed in Chapter Two and the above section in this chapter, both of which demonstrate these organizations' extensive influence on the spread of Buddhism in colonial Indonesia.

Furthermore, Kwee explicitly acknowledged that the Theosophical Society was a model for Peranakan Chinese spirituality (kebatinan). Although the number of Chinese who joined the Theosophical Society was small, he was convinced that it did demonstrate the fact that the Chinese were interested in kebatinan.[79] Kwee saw the cooperation with the Theosophical Society as an important factor into spread the Chinese religions and developing the local religious organizations. Kwee seems to have doubted that the Chinese would have made progress because many activities and programs organized by local religious organizations were mostly collaborations with local Theosophists.

With respect to Buddhism, it has been shown that the Peranakan Chinese relied more on intellectuals from the Theosophical Society and other international Buddhist organizations as sources of their knowledge. The involvement of these groups greatly diversified the kebatinan networks of the Peranakan Chinese and led to changes in the practice of Buddhism, particularly in performance of religious rituals. The collaboration with various organizations during religious performances caused inclusiveness to grow as a valued feature in the Peranakan Chinese Buddhist community. Inclusiveness, in turn, contributed to the invention of new Buddhist practices.

That Vesak practices were easily blended into the existing traditions of Peranakan Chinese Buddhists without major complications is the main example discussed in the sections above. Kwee's early writing on Chinese holy days do not mention the celebration of Vesak. The fact that the celebration

78 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Apa jang pakoempoelan-pakoempoeland kabatinan Tionghoa bisa dapat dari kaoem Theosofie", *Moestika Dharma; Maandblad Tentang Agama, Kabatinan dan Philosofie*, 65 (August 1937), 282.

79 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Orang Tionghoa di Indonesia dengan pakoempoelan Theosofie", *Moestika* Dharma*; Maandblad Tentang Agama, Kabatinan dan Philosofie*, 63 (June 1937), 201-06. Kwee states that until the year 1937 there were approximately 200 Chinese registered as members of the Theosophical Society throughout Indonesia. Semarang, Surakarta and Medan are claimed to have had the highest number of Chinese members. However, Lodge Penerangan in Surabaya was the only lodge whose members were all Chinese.

of Vesak gradually became a part of the Peranakan Chinese Buddhist practice suggests that the close connections between the Peranakan Chinese community, the Theosophical Society and Southern Buddhists were factors that led to the development of syncretic practices. The Peranakan Chinese began to follow the Theosophical Society's calendric routines. Records show that both groups annually observed Vesak at the full moon in May, which indicates that the two communities were starting to unify.[80]

The Vesak celebrations organized by Buddhist organizations and the Theosophical Society shared similar features. One feature is that Javanese, Chinese, Indian and Europeans participated in the celebrations. During one Vesak celebration at a klenteng, Kwee noted that for Vesak, people were invited to celebrate the teaching of the Buddha regardless of their religion and ethno-linguistic group.[81] He further emphasized that the truth in Buddhism was not exclusively for Buddhists**,** but for all. Another feature is that the klenteng were committed to maintaining good relationships with older Buddhist organizations such as the JBA. Thus, the BBA always involved the leaders of various organizations to play a part in celebrations.

Vesak celebrations at the Theosophical Society lodges and Chinese klenteng featured a heterogenous style which reflected the diversity of the participants in the celebration. A telling aspect was the usage of language. At least four languages were used on such occasions, namely, Pali, Malay, Chinese and Javanese, with Pali being one of the core liturgical languages of the Southern Buddhism Vesak celebrations. However, for most people, the use of Pali in colonial Indonesia was limited to mere recitation -- not comprehension -- of the language. Nevertheless, this limited use still made them a part of the Pali-using Southern Buddhist world.

Apart from the use of Pali, the Vesak celebration reflected, but did not entirely follow, modern Buddhism, whose proponents argued for excluding ritual activities from Buddhist practices and emphasizing the rational and practical aspects of spirituality with the objective of reclaiming the true message of the Buddha. Indonesian Vesak celebrations were characterized by a set of simple ritual activities, which suggests that the encounter with European

80 Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 125.

81 Kwee Tek Hoay, "Kenapa kita orang rajaken ini Hari Wezak", *Sam Kauw Gwat Po: Orgaan dari Batavia Buddhist Association, Sam Kauw Hwe Batavia, Menado dan Telokbetong*, 56 (May 1939), 4.

Buddhists influenced them to invent a new set of simple ritual practices but not to abandon ritual celebrations.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that Vesak became one of the most important activities of Buddhism in modern Indonesia as a result of the influence of transnational Buddhist networks. The Peranakan Chinese, who desired to maintain Chinese culture within their community, perceived that celebrating the Buddhist Vesak could help make klenteng (Chinese temples and shrines) the main centres for organizing regularly held Buddhist activities. However, Vesak did not develop as a religious celebration for maintaining a single cultural tradition. Rather, it became a syncretic religious celebration that intertwined the Peranakan Chinese religious traditions and Southern Buddhism. Vesak brought people of different backgrounds and ethnicities together in the same space to perform the same set of ritual ceremonies.

To conclude, this chapter offers two new understandings of modern Buddhism in colonial Indonesia. First, the development of modern Buddhist practices did not result in a complete demythologization or removal of ritual. In fact, Vesak itself became reinvented as a new Buddhist ritual. Second, the Dutch empire became a place where the Western scholars, Buddhist enthusiasts and native Indonesian intellectuals met and devised a new set of invented religious practices to reform Peranakan Chinese Buddhism. Buddhist in Indonesia celebrated modernity and at the same became a part of international community through the practice of Vesak ritual.