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

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Summary

This dissertation focuses on the actors and agencies in the transnational Buddhist networks that were involved in the making of Buddhism in Indonesia from 1900 to 1959. Using the framework of transnational networks, this dissertation endeavours to understand how Buddhism gradually secured a place in Indonesian society. By viewing the late-colonial and early post-colonial period as a continuum in which Buddhism continued to take root, it connects developments that have thus far been treated as separated by the demarcation line of Indonesian independence.

My dissertation argues that modern Buddhism in the Indonesian archipelago developed as a result of global and regional religious transformations. Particularly important was the spread of Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia. Especially, the dissertation investigates the dominant roles of lay people, Buddhist missionaries and intellectuals who were living in and travelling to colonial Indonesia. The findings here also show that from the 1920s onwards, non-state actors played a pivotal role in establishing connections between people involved in the spreading of Buddhism in colonial Indonesia, in South and Southeast Asia, and beyond.

In Indonesia, the Peranakan Chinese were the primary local actors in this process because of their pivotal role in the making of modern Buddhism

from the beginning of the period under consideration until the post-independence years. The Peranakan Chinese community can be seen as a “place” where people from various backgrounds who were interested in Buddhism articulated their ideas about Buddhism and interacted with others. The Peranakan Chinese were the main community that originally adhered to the Buddhist community of the Northern Tradition (Mahayana Buddhism) in Indonesia.

The meeting between transnational Buddhist networks stemming from South and Southeast on the one hand and the Indonesian Peranakan Chinese on the other hand, had a major impact on the making of modern Buddhism in Indonesia. Their encounter reflected the meeting of two different ‘winds’ of Buddhism: the Southern (Theravada) and the Northern (Mahayana) winds respectively. These interactions between the two winds generated the complexity and peculiarity that was characteristic for the making of modern Buddhism in Indonesia in the early twentieth century.

Several kinds of actors were instrumental to this process that lasted from at least the late colonial period until 1959. First, the Europeans that belonged to international organizations which belonged to or were connected with Theravada Buddhism, such as the Theosophical Society. Second, the Europeans that exclusively established the international Buddhist organization called the Java Buddhist Association. Third, the South and Southeast Asian Buddhist missionaries from Sri Lanka and Singapore. Finally, the local Indonesians, namely the Peranakan Chinese who adhered to Mahayana Buddhism.

The focus of this dissertation then shifts to the question of how Buddhism, as a practiced religion, came into public spaces in Indonesia. It demonstrated the crucial roles of the *klenteng* (Chinese places of worship) and the Borobudur in establishing the public presence of Buddhism. Some *klenteng* and the Borobudur became central venues for activities organised by Buddhists, particularly from the 1930s onwards. These sites attracted a variety of groups of the Indonesian Buddhist community and those associated with it. The interest of the Europeans and the Theosophists specifically revolved around the Borobudur and this greatly influenced the process of reclaiming the neglected religious meaning of the Borobudur as a temple. This reclamation was effected by re-establishing Buddhist religious performativity such as the celebration of Vesak at the Borobudur, which first took place

in 1927. The klenteng, on the other hand, became the meeting place of the Peranakan Chinese Buddhists and a centre of Buddhist intellectual and religious activity.

A further outcome of this dissertation research is demonstrating the emergence of partnerships and Dhammic connections between Indonesian Buddhist society and other Asian regions, which were created from the colonial times onwards. The connections with Buddhists from colonial Srilanka and colonial Singapore resulted in the transfer of Buddhist material culture to Indonesia, a phenomenon that did not take place during the establishment of relationships of Indonesian Buddhists with Western/European Buddhist activists. These Buddhist material cultures and modern Buddhist symbols included the adoption of the Buddhist flag, Buddha's statues, and also the planting of the Bodhi tree.

The introduction of Buddhist material cultures affirmed the position of Buddhists in Indonesia, who had become part of a wider context of transnational notions of Buddhism. To Buddhists in Indonesia, this was the beginning of a firmer Dhammic connection that led to more confidence in the development of Buddhism in post-independence Indonesia. These inter-Asian Buddhist connections served as one of the foundations of the future of Buddhism in Indonesia, particularly in the 1950s when Buddhists in Indonesia officially imported the (Southern) Theravada Buddhism lineage by performing the Bhikkhu ordination.

After Indonesia had become an independent state, the Buddhist community showed a different dynamic. The most recognizable change was the absence of European agents in the Buddhist activity and community. There was also an influx of Javanese and Balinese adherents to Buddhism and there were structural changes to the way Buddhist communities were organized. Following ethnic diversity of Buddhists, a new place of Buddhist centre called vihara emerged in Semarang, Central Java in 1955. This new Buddhist center, Vihara Buddha Gaya Watugong, became vital Buddhist place for Buddhist activities aside from klenteng. In contrast to colonial times, independence had opened new spaces and opportunities for women to explore their interests. During this period Indonesian Buddhists also instigated new relationships with the state, particularly with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Inter-Asia Dhammic networks and Dhammic connections among Asian Buddhists were visibly strong and vibrant in the 1950s and this led

to the adoption of the ordination of monks trained in Southern/Theravada Buddhist practices in 1953 and 1959. The 1959 ordination is regarded as the pinnacle of the (re)emergence of Buddhism in Indonesia. The event was held in Semarang, Central Java. It was attended by distinguished monastic members or bhikkhu Sangha from South and Southeast Asia countries.