

Power in southeast asia – examples

[Parts of the World](#), [Asia](#)



What are some of the ways in which power manifests itself in Southeast Asia? Illustrate your answer with at least 3 examples. The concept of power is one that has existed in Southeast Asia for a long period of time. Unlike that of the Western regions, where power is more of a concept and is intangible, power in Southeast Asia is more concrete and real. Power is defined as the possession of control or command over others (Dictionary. com, n. d. In the context of Southeast Asia, power is gained through control of powerful items or valuable resources, as this would usually translate to wealth, a higher position within the social hierarchy, and hence more command over other people. In Southeast Asia, the focus is on accumulating more command and control, instead of just exercising it. Due to the long history of trade and migration within Southeast Asia itself, these concepts have inevitably become a coherent and homogenous one. My essay will seek to show the various ways that power is manifested, particularly in three different levels within a nation state.

Firstly, power exists on a national level via certain nation state political models. Secondly, within a nation state, power manifests in different groups of religions, as religious beliefs have influenced how they attempt to both acquire and accumulate power. Thirdly, power exists among individuals, in the idea of merit and social mobility throughout one's social hierarchy. Firstly, the most evident way that power is manifested in Southeast Asia is on a national level, through nation states' political systems. One such political system is the mandala system, where power is centralized and drawn towards the sacred core.

One might imagine this visually as a series of concentric ever widening circles, with state authority fading as the circles widen. What mattered was the sacred centre, not the borders (Tambiah, 1970). This political system was typically found in Pre-colonial nation states in Southeast Asia. For example, in the 13th Century, King Suryavarman II spread its Mandala polity throughout the state of Angkor by building the renowned ‘ Angkor Wat’ among many monasteries and temples in the centre of the state (Dellios, 2003).

Thereafter, advantaged by its location on the northwest shore, Angkor relied successfully on trade of its wet-rice agriculture to produce great amounts of wealth, enough to support a population of a million people (Dellios, 2003) In this aspect, power is recognised in the form of wealth, as many people saw ‘ Angkor Wat’ and its surrounding temples as the sacred centre that drew the wealth towards the core of its nation. Because Angkor Wat was built by King Suryavarman II, many people also acknowledged him as a manifestation of god, someone with immense power.

In a mandala polity where power diffuses further away from the centre, these people tried to get closer to the centre, hence giving King Suryavarman II even more command and power over them. A more recent example of a region following the mandala system can be found along the Thai-Burmese border, where the Akha, a tribal upland ethnic minority, reside (Tooker, 1996). Under Thai law, the lands which the Akha and other upland groups occupy are owned by instead owned by the state. This insinuates that power is directed towards the centre, in the lowlands where the state resides.

On the other hand, the Akha, who reside by the highlands and are thus further away from the centre, have much lesser power. For instance, the Akhas suffered from occasional forced labour, extortion by government officials and forced migration (Tooker, 1996) by the state. In this context, the state has command over the Akha tribe and this allowed them to control the Akhas' resources, such as human labour, and wealth in the form of money. This is thus consistent with the mandala model, whereby the centre is most crucial and the borders are less important because power is drawn to the core.

Furthermore, villages surrounding this state tend to be aligned such that their hierarchically highest individual, the 'founder-chief' is centrally located within their village (Tooker, 1996). They believed this would usher in prosperity because it was aligned with that of the cosmos, which in this case was associated to the central core of the state itself. This reinforces another characteristic of the mandala political model, the patchwork construction; where smaller centres surrounding the core could preserve a greater deal of autonomy for acknowledging the potency of the central state.

Secondly, looking within a state itself, power is also manifested among different religions in Southeast Asia, as religious beliefs have continually influenced the way southeast Asians try to both acquire and accumulate command and control. One way is through the acquisition of sacred or mythical objects, which they believed were associated with power. An example of such an object is the kris, a unique ancestral dagger with a wavy blade, which was considered the paramount prestige weapon across many

religions in pre-independence Indonesia, particularly in the Binameseculture(Hitchcock, 1987).

Here, the kris was seen to contain magical and sacred powers, believed to be bestowed by the gods, making it a sacred object that is coveted because of its devine connection. Hitchcock also noted that it was crucial for thepersonalityof the kris to mesh positively with the personality of its owner, which i feel is important because of their aim to accumulate more power from the kris. Furthermore, in the Binamese culture, where imperial status was often inherited, the royal kris was a prized heirloom that visually depicted a genetic relationship to the former ruler (Hitchcock, 1987).

In this aspect, the kris can be seen as a symbol of a ruler's mandate to the rule. Hence, the kris can be considered as a powerful object because possessing it granted a ruler with overwhelming command and control over the people. The power of the kris is further exemplified when you consider the social status of its manufacturer, usually known as a smith, in traditional times. For instance, let us examine Java, where in the past, a smith had a very high social status, considered to be just below the government of princes and having an honoured position in court (Wrassers, 1940).

Wrassers (1940) even goes a step further to examine the ancient times, where the roles of a smith and prince more or less coincided, to the point that their relationship was sometimes likened to that of brothers. Hence, we can see that a kris was considered so sacred and powerful in Java that the manufacturers association with it vaulted his social status to the very top of the hierarchy, indirectly giving him more power in the Javanese society. Another way in which religious beliefs have influenced the acquisition and

<https://assignbuster.com/power-in-southeast-asia-examples/>

accumulation of power is through certain religious practices, such as those of the Mien people of Thailand.

For example, in their Mien wedding ceremonies, a medium, together with the groom and his father, are required to offer spirit-money to the ancestors by kneeling in front of a bed of corn and burning the spirit-money on it (Jonsson, 2004). These spirit-money, often made of paper, is burned and thus considered transformed into the realms of spirits. In this case, power is manifested in the form of money and wealth, as these exchanges with ancestor spirits brought honour and wealth into the spirit world and in return, urged blessings and wealth for the Mien household.

The idea being that having more money and wealth would vault one higher up the social hierarchy, hence giving them more authority and control over those of a lower social status in the hierarchy. I feel that this depicts a patron-client relationship between the spiritual ancestors and the descendants of the Mien household. The spiritual ancestors, who reside in the spiritual realm, are the patrons as they possess spiritual and divine power because of their ability to bestow a household with wealth.

The descendants are then the clients who benefit from this wealth bestowed upon their household, but the amount of benefits received will depend on how much resources, in this case the spirit money, they can offer these ancestors. Thirdly, power is also evident when we focus on individuals within a state itself. It exists in the idea of merit and social mobility, because merit traditionally denotes the position and degree of mobility one has within the social hierarchy (Adams & Gillogly, 2011, p. 5) One is in a disadvantageous social position if he or she lacks merit, but the more merit one accumulated,

the greater ability he had to move up the social hierarchy and gain power and control over those below this social hierarchy. In Thailand, merit is directly linked to the amount of resources that one owns. Thus the two ways to move up the social hierarchy is either through accumulating more resources independently, or forming a patron-client relationship with another possessing greater resources than yourself (Adams & Gillogy, 2011, p. 2). It is a patron-client relationship because the leader has to reciprocate the benefits he accepted from the client. Forming this patron-client relationship is usually preferred as it is much easier. When many such relationships are formed with the same patron, the resources of the group increase and they grow in size and stability, hence denoting more merit and power within the social hierarchy. Adams and Gillogy (2001) also noted that the resources are first distributed to those close to the leader, and diminishes down the scale.

Hence, we can see that social mobility is prevalent as individuals can ascend from the bottom of the Thai social hierarchy as long as he could find the correct patron and accumulate sufficient merit in the form of resources. This idea of merit and social mobility also exists in Laos, where merit is linked directly to wealth, and the most effective way of obtaining merit is through doing virtuous and moral deeds. This is because Laotians believe that wealth can beget to wealth via the mechanism of merit.

One example would be religious offerings, such as daily offering of food to the monks or grand donations to sponsor temple buildings (Adams & Gillogy, 2011, p. 41) . They hope that their donations will increase their merit, thus bringing them wealth and other positive outcomes, in this and the next life. This possibly explains why large donations are rarely anonymous, as the

donor wants to be recognised for his contribution and eventually accumulate as much merit as possible.

Hence, we can see that in this context, obtaining merit is important for Laotians because it increases their wealth and ultimately gives them an opportunity to move up the social hierarchy, thus gaining control over those now below them. This is also consistent with the idea of social mobility, in that it is not difficult to move up the social hierarchy in Laos as long as one accumulates sufficient merit. In retrospect, looking at modern Southeast Asia, while some new ideas of power have been introduced, such as those in the form of nuclear weapons and fear, some of these traditional ideas are still very relevant today.

For example, elements of a sacred centre and religious beliefs exist till this day in Thailand. Sitting in the middle of the grand palace of Bangkok is the Emerald Buddha of Thailand. This key relic was captured from a Lao king by a Thai king in the 18th century and has since served as a marker of the Thai monarchy (Adams & Gillogy, 2011). It is a sacred relic with a history that both represents and embodies the king of Thailand's power because the Buddha is seen as divine and sacred in Buddhism, Thailand's main religion.

In conclusion, power manifests differently across the three different levels of a nation state. Firstly through political models of a nation state itself, secondly through religious influences of a religion within the nation state, and lastly in the idea of merit and social mobility among individuals of the nation state. However, even though they manifest in different ways, ultimately the aim of accumulating more command and control is still

unanimous throughout Southeast Asia. Total Word Count: 1996 Words ?

Bibliography Adams, & Gillogy. (2011). *Everyday life in Southeast Asia*.

Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. Dellios, R. (2003).

Mandala: From Sacred Origins to Soereign affairs in traditional Southeast

Asia. Gold Coast, Australia: Bond University : School of Humanities and Social

Sciences : Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies. Dictionary.

com. (n. d.). Power. Retrieved Retrieved September 13 2012, from

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/power> Hitchcock, M. (1987). *The*

Binamese Kris: Aesthetics and Social Value. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en*

Volkenkunde , 125-140. Jonsson, H. (2004).

Mien Alter-Natives in Thai Modernity. *Anthropological Quaterly* Vol 77, No. 4 ,

673-704. Tambiah, S. (1970). *Buddhism and the spirit cults in North-east*

Thailand. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Tooker, D. E. (1996).

Putting the Mandala in its Place: A Practice-based Approach to the

Spatialization of Power on the Southeast Asian 'Periphery' -- The Case of

Akha. *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 55, No. 2 , 328-358. Wrassers, W. H.

(1940). *On the Javanese Kris*. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*

van Nederlandsch-Indie Deel 99, 4de Afl , 501-582.