Islam, the religion based on the teachings of Mohammed, has many followers. It was brought to Southeast Asia about 600 years ago by traders, merchants, and sailors. Islam is the chief religion of Malaya, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines. Indonesia is the most populous Islamic nation in the world.

Christianity was introduced into the Philippines by the Spanish in the 16th century. Today, over 80 percent of the people of the Philippines are Catholic. The French spread Christianity in Vietnam in the 19th century, and there is still a large Christian minority living there.

The Teachings of Buddhism

Because Buddhism is so prevalent in Southeast Asia, this religion merits a closer look. Buddhism had it beginnings in the foothills of the Himalayas in India. Gautama, the great teacher of Buddhism and founder of the religion, was born about 567 B.C. The son of a king and a member of the Kashatriya (warrior) caste, he was a Hindu. As a young man, Gautama became upset over the differences between his own life of ease and comfort and the suffering of most of the people around him. Leaving the palace, he went into the forest to search for wisdom. After six years of isolation from society, and strict, simple living, he had not found the wisdom he sought. In despair, he swore not to move from under a bo tree until he had found the key to free humans from suffering. Finally, after 49 days, Enlightenment was gained. Gautama became the Buddha, the “Enlightened One,” and Buddhism was born.

Buddhism is very different from the religions of the Western world and therefore is sometimes difficult for Westerners to understand. In fact, Buddhism is not so much a religion as a way of life, like Hinduism. Buddhism has no gods, or even a supreme being, and no belief in a soul.

Buddha, after gaining Enlightenment, spent the rest of his life spreading his ideas. The four noble truths of Buddha’s teachings are as follows:

1. Existence is suffering.
2. Suffering comes from desire.
3. The cure for suffering is the extinction of desire.
4. To achieve the extinction of desire, there is an Eightfold Path of Conduct:
   - Right views
   - Right speech
   - Right effort
   - Right conduct
   - Right mindfulness
   - Right livelihood
   - Right intentions
   - Right concentration

The Five Moral Rules

As a definition of Rightness, Buddha offered five moral rules:
1. Let no one kill any living being.
2. Let no one take what is not given to him.
3. Let no one speak falsely.
4. Let no one drink intoxicating drinks.
5. Let no one be unchaste.

Key Ideas of Buddhism

The most important ideas of Buddhism are as follows:
1. Self-salvation is a person’s most immediate responsibility.
2. Nirvana is the goal of all Buddhists. Nirvana is a state of extinction or release from the Wheel of Rebirth (reincarnation).
Terms Associated with Buddhism

These terms are associated with Buddhism:
1. Pagoda: In almost every village of India and Southeast Asia, there is a wat or compound called a pagoda. The pagoda serves as the educational and social center of the community. The people voluntarily support the wat and the monks, for to do so is a way of merit to Nirvana.
2. Merit: good works.
4. Stupa: large mound of earth, usually covering a relic or relics of the Buddha.
5. Sutra: a thread on which the teachings of the Buddha are strung; also a sermon of the Buddha.

Early History of Southeast Asia

Prehistory

Until recently, anthropologists and archaeologists believed that the people of the Middle East were the first to develop agriculture (farming), around 10,000 B.C. However, there is now evidence that a prehistoric group of people, the Hoabinhians of Vietnam, may have been among the first to raise plants. Artifacts and other remains of these people were found in a Vietnam village named Hoa Binh.

Places with similar types of artifacts have been found in Malaysia and Thailand. In addition, there is evidence of plant raising also on the islands of Malaysia and Sumatra. All of these places and the peoples who lived there constitute the Hoabinhian culture.

The evidence so far collected seems to show the following about the Hoabinhians:
1. As early as 15,000 B.C., Hoabinhians began to use and grow on a regular basis the wild plants of the area. Domesticated (adopted for human use) seeds of roots plants, peas, and beans found in northern Thailand were proved to be 11,690 years old. Therefore, it is possible that agriculture may have existed in Southeast Asia about 1,000 to 2,000 years earlier than it did in Mesopotamia in the Middle East.
2. Hoabinhians seem to have begun making pottery before 10,000 B.C. By 4000 B.C. they had invented a type of outrigger canoe.
3. Hoabinhians were eating cultivated (grown by hand) rice and making copper tools by 3000 B.C.
4. Between 3000 and 2500 B.C., Hoabinhians were working with bronze.
5. According to some evidence, Hoabinhian culture may have spread to Africa.
6. Hoabinhian crops, agricultural methods, and pottery may have been carried to Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines as early as 3000 to 2000 B.C.
7. Anthropologists have found that the Chinese language has many words that were originally part of Southeast Asian languages. The Southeast Asian words for ax, boat, iron, kiln (pottery oven), plow, pottery, and seed were introduced into the Chinese language sometime during the prehistory of East Asia.
8. Sometime in the 1st century a.d., some Southeast Asians may have sailed to Madagascar, an island off the east coast of Africa. Through this contact, Africans may have learned about crops that were suitable to their soil and climate. It is also possible that trade existed between the Southeast Asians and the people of the Middle East.
The borrowing of words usually means the borrowing of the things named by those words. Therefore, some scientists now believe that the Chinese first learned about farming, planting, and pottery making from the Southeast Asians.

The reconstruction of the past by archaeologists and anthropologists seems to prove that certain cultural and economic achievements in other parts of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa may be credited to cultural diffusion from early Southeast Asians.

**Early Settlers**

Between 1000 B.C. and A.D. 100, tribes from the neighboring lands of Tibet, China, and India traveled into the green valleys of the Indochinese Peninsula, where they decided to settle and begin a new life. Later, some of their descendants settled on the Malay Peninsula and the islands archipelagoes (groups of islands) of Southeast Asia. The newcomers, who had been forced to leave their own homelands by invading armies of the Chinese emperors, knew how to make better tools and weapons than the people already living in these areas.

After these “foreigners” arrived, many of the original settlers were forced back into the remote mountains and jungles. Today their descendants can still be found living in these areas. Others stayed in the valleys and coastal plains, intermarried, and lived with the newcomers. As time went on, more and more settlers arrived, and the same process occurred again.

By the 1st century A.D., many different groups of people were living in Southeast Asia. Some groups in the remote regions gathered roots and other foods, or they hunted. Other groups used the “slash-and-burn” method of farming. Trees were burned down in order to clear the land for farming, and the ashes were used for natural fertilizer. When the soil in the clearings was no longer fertile, the people moved on and cleared new lands. This type of agriculture is still carried on in the hills of Southeast Asia.

The peoples in the coastal lowlands and river valleys grew rice in flooded fields by a process called “wet rice agriculture.” This meant the beginning of settled villages. The irrigation system took a long time to build, lasted a long time, and did not use up the soil. It also meant that people had to cooperate to make the system work. The irrigation system was used by all, and everyone had to agree on when and how it should be used. In this case, rights important to Americans, such as the right to own private property, would have been disruptive. People had to give up their individual rights for the sake of the community as a whole. In return, the village world provided security for the individual. No one had to work or face problems alone, and no one starved while neighbors had plenty.

Another result of this agricultural system was that more rice could be grown than was needed by the community. Only during the planting and harvest seasons did the rice fields need much attention. Consequently, many people were free to do other work, and extra rice was available to feed them. Some stopped growing rice and became priests, artisans (craftsmen), merchants, and, later on, rulers.

Although the family became the main unit of society, it was not as important an institution as in Chinese and Indian cultures. People trusted their relatives rather than strangers, but the extended family, with its many social relationships, as existed in China, did not develop in Southeast Asia. This is demonstrated by the fact that in most Southeast Asian countries family names were not used until the Europeans came.

In contrast to the rest of Asia and to most early societies, some of the Southeast Asian cultures gave important roles to women. In fact, throughout the area much of the village marketing and trading is still handled by women.
Indian and Chinese Influence

In addition to the settlers who came overland, Southeast Asia, which is located on the water route between India and China, had visitors who came by sea. Travelers and merchants journeying between these two lands stopped in Southeast Asia. In turn, sailors from Southeast Asia traveled to India and China.

Some of the Indian traders established trading settlements in the area. Later, religious leaders and other people from India also settled in these trading towns. From these Indians the people of Southeast Asia learned about the Hindu and Buddhist religions, and they borrowed Sanskrit as their written language. The Indians also brought with them new ideas about art, government, and architecture. Southeast Asians did not copy their Indian teachers exactly; for example, they did not adopt the Indian caste system. Instead, as in the case of the Africans and Islam, they adapted Indian ideas to their own needs and interests, and created something different and new of their own. Different parts of Southeast Asia made different adaptations, accounting for the differences among these nations that still exist today.

Some of the Indian trading settlements grew into powerful cities that gained control of neighboring areas. Kingdoms were established that fought against each other, often to gain more power and more territory, thereby guaranteeing a larger area from which to gather food and other resources. Several of these kingdoms grew into great empires that at one time controlled large parts of Southeast Asia.

The only exceptions to the general pattern of Indian influence were the Philippines, which were off the main India-China trade route, and Vietnam, which came under Chinese rule in 111 B.C. and remained Chinese for 1,000 years.

![Diagram of Influence of China and India on Southeast Asia](image-url)
The Empires of Southeast Asia

Funan and Srivijaya

As a result of the trade with India and China, small ports at the mouths of rivers along the Malay Peninsula and the mainland coast came into existence. When the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty of China (200 B.C.–A.D. 200) reached greatness, there was a huge increase in trade between the Mediterranean world and China. Southeast Asian ports grew in power and wealth because of their strategic locations on this trade route.

Funan, at the southern tip of present-day Vietnam, became one of the largest empires in Southeast Asian history (2nd–6th centuries A.D.) Funan was powerful because the earliest route of the India-China trade went across the narrow Isthmus of Kra, connecting the Malay Peninsula to the mainland. Later, as sailors learned how to cut straight across the China Sea to the tip of Malaya, Funan began to fall. Its place as the most important trading state was taken by the empire of Srivijaya (7th–13th centuries A.D.), which centered on the straight of Malacca.

Khmer Empire

Both Srivijaya and Funan owed their wealth to trade, not to agriculture. However, many inland states also arose, whose wealth was based on rich, fertile soil. The Cambodian, or Khmer, Empire was one of the more important. From the 9th through the 13th century, the Khmer kings gained control of most of the fertile lowlands of the Southeast Asia mainland. The Khmer capital was located at Angkor, near the Tonle Sap, that is, near Siemreap, in modern Cambodia (Kampuchea). Ruins of the magnificent stone temples built in this city still stand today. One temple, the Angkor Wat, is among the largest religious buildings in the world. The temples and other art and writings that still remain not only show a pattern of Indian influence, but also are the best examples of how Indian ideas were adapted to local customs.

The Khmer Empire, having used its wealth and energy on temple building, was too weak by the 13th century to stop attacks from the Siamese (Thai) states to the west. One by one, Khmer border provinces were captured, and within two centuries, the Khmer state ceased to be important. All that remained was what is now modern Cambodia. Today the Cambodians and the Thais still recall the old wars and the destruction that resulted. They have not forgiven each other, and this hostility prevents closer cooperation between these two countries with similar problems.

Kingdoms of the Indo-Chinese Peninsula

From about the 14th to the 18th century, mainland and island history took different paths. More or less continual warfare brought about the outlines of the present mainland countries. Vietnam, which had been under Chinese influence for 1,000 years, gained its independence in the 10th century. Its leaders steadily expanded Vietnam’s borders southward from the Songkoi. Vietnam reached its present borders by the 18th century.

Meanwhile, Cambodia (the Khmer Empire) was shrinking under Vietnamese and Siamese (Thai) pressure. One of the many Thai states became the kingdom of Laos in the
14th century. Siam (later Thailand) expanded steadily and by the 18th century was the strongest and most stable of the mainland countries. Burma (now Myanmar) was divided between the Mons in the south and the Shan-Thais in the north.

Islamic Kingdoms

On the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Indonesia a new outside force brought many changes. This new force was Islam, which came by way of India. Followers of Islam are called Muslims, and Muslim merchants from northwest India were among the most active in the Indian Ocean trade. Following the commands of their religion, they preached their faith while carrying on trade.

Islam was accepted by many Southeast Asian states because it gave the rulers many economic and political advantages. It allowed them to trade with other Islamic countries and make money. Also, with a world religion of this kind, the rulers gained a strong set of beliefs to oppose those of Hindu states. Islam provided a reason and a bond for opposing the European Christians who came to Southeast Asia to control trade.

For these reasons, Southeast Asians became Muslims quite rapidly. Wherever Indian influence was weak, Islam became strong. However, Islam merged with existing ways of life, and took on a Southeast Asian flavor.

The Arrival of Westerners in Southeast Asia

Portugal

Five hundred years ago spices such as pepper, cloves, and nutmeg were far more important than they are today. Spices helped to preserve food and made it taste better. The main spice-producing areas of the world were in Southeast Asia. The eagerness of Europeans to obtain spices from this region helped to shape its history.

In 1498, a Portuguese explorer named Vasco da Gama sailed into the harbor of Calicut, India. From India, ships could sail on to the distant spice lands of Southeast Asia. Vasco da Gama’s discovery of an all-water route to the spice lands was very important. The old routes between Europe and the spice lands crossed both land and water. Shipping goods along these routes was expensive and inconvenient because the goods had to be loaded and unloaded many times. Also, the old routes were controlled by the Muslims, who were unfriendly to the Europeans.

With the new route, Portuguese traders were able to transport goods more quickly and cheaply. To make as much money as possible, the Portuguese wanted to control the spice trade completely. They captured many important ports from the Muslims and established fortified posts in Southeast Asia. They patrolled the seas near the spice regions to keep out ships of other nations. Portugal also tried to spread Christianity in the spice lands. Their efforts met with little success, however, for most of the Portuguese who came to Southeast Asia behaved like conquerors and were disliked by the people of the area.