**Asses the view that education was more important than language and religion in helping to create a national identity in newly independent SEA states.**

Education is defined as government provision of a standardised education in natural schools for the socialisation and integration of the different ethnic and religious groups to create a sense of national identity. Language and religion refers to the government endorsement of a common language and religion usually based on that of the dominant ethnic group to foster a sense of national identity and write a heterogeneous population. While successfully creating a national identity allows the respective population of the Southeast Asian States to see themselves as one people, also a fair representation of the different ethnic groups in the country and the absence of ethnic unrest. This essay seeks to argue that although language and religion also played a key role in complementing the use of education to create a national identity, education was more important than language and religion in helping to create a national identity because the exclusive nature of religion and language make them difficult for the minorities to accept whereas education has a more inclusive and wider appeal.

The use of education constituted an implicit and therefore less threatening, approaching of assimilating a heterogeneous population based on the culture of the dominant ethnic group in the respective Southeast Asian countries, as compared to the explicit use of common language and religion of the majority ethnic and religious group. This can be seen in Burma, U Nu practices extensive patronage of Buddhism. In 1961, the constitution formally proclaimed Burma as a Buddhist state. Government schools were also required by law to teach Buddhist students the Buddhist scriptures. However, this had the opposite effect of alienating a sizeable number of religious minorities in the country who perceived this as a sign of Burmese domination. Moreover, Ne Win’s use of Burmese as the national language failed as it served to only reinforce the use of minority languages at home and within their respective communities. The fact that education had the ability to cause the minorities to indirectly accept Burmeseas the official language, though reluctant, and learn them in school when religion and language were not able to do it showed that it is more important. Similarly in Thailand, Buddhism was made a symbol of national unity and Buddhist affairs became an everyday topic in mass media. Even though Phibun was successful in making Thai the national language in practice, it was achieved through compulsory schooling, showing that the education is more important. Therefore, education was more important than religion and culture in fostering national identity.

Moreover, the provision of a standardised education in schools facilitated the adoption of a common language which was a potent force as a medium through which national loyalties could be conveyed. This thus helped to foster a sense of national identity and unite a heterogeneous population in the Southeast Asian states differing ethnicities and religion. For instance, in Indonesia, although major, newspapers, radio and TV broadcasts have been in Bahasa Indonesia, education was still more important in promoting it as the national language as it is not only where more people came into more frequent contact with Malay, it was also important in staving off Javanese as ethnic languages was only allowed to be taught until the third grade. Implemented in the early 1950s, from the third grade onwards, it is legally mandatory to learn and teach in Bahasa Indonesia. Likewise, in Singapore, the bilingual policy adopted in 1966, which had been relied on Singapore government to foster racial harmony and integration, was based on the use of education as a mean to teach English, the official language in which all races can communicate to one another. Therefore, showing that Education was more important than religion and culture in fostering national identity.

Furthermore, the use of education was more effective than religion and language as a medium to inculcate common ideological values among the general population in Southeast Asian States, thereby helping to create a sense of national unity and identity even among the ethnic religious minorities. This is evident in Indonesia, the national ideology Panchasila premised on 5 principles which are nationalism, democracy, social justice and belief in God. For the most part, they are values that would be aptly inculcated through the education system, with the exception of the last principle. However, this is not significant as Islam was not supposed to be a force for national unity in the first place. Even Sukarno and Suharto both recognised that Islam was too divisive in contrast to the notion of a secular nation-state. Instead of unifying, the principle of believing in one God which religion and language probably have an advantage over education in inculcating, merely served to divide the Islamist nationalist and the government, showing that the education is more important. This can also be seen in Malaysia, education was able to inculcate the ideological values such as the principle of “believing in one God” and “upholding of the constitution” which preserves the primacy of Malay rights and language, thereby facilitating the gradual acceptance of Malay and Islam as the unifying force in Malaysia. Therefore, education was more important than religion and culture in fostering national identity.

However, a common language and religion, based on that of the dominant ethnic and religious group served as an effective unifying tool to the majority of the population, who would then form the critical mass for the new nation-state and thereby facilitate the use of education to forge a national identity. This can be observed in Burma, Buddhism was not the state religion under Ne Win. However, it was a religion promoted by the political leadership given its strong appeal to the majority of the population so as to make it easier for them to push forth their policies including in education. Being the language of the Burmese and the second language used by most other ethnic group, Burmese also replaced English as the medium of instruction at Burmese universities in 1965 to facilitate education, highlighting its key significance as a unifying tool. Likewise in Thailand, the standard Thai dialect was promoted by Phibun and Sarit as the national language, constituting a vital component of the Thai identity and national intergration by facilitating education. A sense of natural unity was also born with Buddhism as a unifying tool among the general population, making them more accepting towards the Thai government’s policies. Therefore, religion and language played a key role in fostering national identity.

The promotion of a “neutral language” in some countries and the flexible approach to the issue of religion contributed to sense of “cultural equality” and helped to reinforce ethnic harmony, thereby complementing the use of education in creating a sense of identity in the long term. For example in Singapore, instead of using Chinese which is the mother tongue of the dominant ethnic group, English was chosen as the official working language instead to create a viable basis for a common sense of identity among the diverse population. Malay, which is a minority’s mother tongue, was chosen as the national language to allay Malay fears in a Chinese dominated country. The general population is also allowed to practice their own religion as long as they do not attempt to mix religion with politics. Likewise in Indonesia, Malay, a minority language, was adopted as the national language. Indonesia’s language policy was so successful, both people from the inner and outer islands including the separating like the Acehs have no issue with speaking Malay. Even though Islam is the dominant religion in Indonesia, the word “God” enshrined in Panchasila is left deliberately vague to stress Indonesia’s status as a secular state. This serves to allay minority fears of the Javanisation of Indonesia society and allows them to retain a larger degree of cultural autonomy. Therefore, religion and language played a key role in fostering national identity.