

Thai-icizing the Malays: A Local Response to an Environmental Crisis

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It is November 1999. I have just arrived in the tiny Muslim fishing village of Bang Maseh in the southeastern coastal province of Pattani for doctoral dissertation fieldwork and am beginning to get acquainted with the people and the surroundings. I am seated in the house of Mek Song, who is making my lunch of rice and curried chicken. While observing her cook, I ask what that white powder-like substance she is adding to the curry is. She tells me that it is called picin in the local Pattani Malay dialect and it is a food flavor enhancer. The budding linguist in me, having translated picin as MSG (monosodium glutamate), shouts out my discovery with joy. Ludin, Mek Song's oldest son, who is in the room with me, says, "I don't know what MSG means but I know what NGO means."

In my presentation today, I will not focus on the activities carried out by the NGOs in the many villages around southern Thailand nor comment on the success or failures of such NGO projects. As there are several large panels on NGOs in this conference, I will leave you to attend them and listen to the NGOs and villagers themselves talk about these. Instead, I will focus on the so-called small-scale impacts of Thai-Buddhist NGO workers on the economic and socio-cultural lives of the Thai-Muslim villagers who they worked with. How did these Muslims villagers, once suspicious and disdainful of the Thai-Buddhists, now come to accept the group of them that worked as NGOs? What advantages did this acceptance of, and association with, Thai-Buddhist NGOs afford the Thai-Muslim villagers?

I hope to show that the interaction between these two groups of people, who were described in the scholarly literature as being on diametrically opposite ends of the linguistic, religious, and ethnic divide, has led to mutual benefits, trust, and deep respect, that has cut across linguistic, religious, and ethnic boundaries. It has also resulted in the Thai-Muslims adopting certain cultural practices that the Thai nation-state tried to impose on them in the past and, in the process, created a bloody, separatist war. I hope to show that the Thai-Buddhist NGOs have brought about such changes in Thai-Muslim society in a totally unintended but highly peaceful way.

Prior to the arrival of NGO workers into the villages, villagers hardly approached government officials to report the destruction of their environments and hence livelihoods. This was because they felt they did not speak good Thai and also had little hope of redress from these officials who they said received bribes from the commercial businessmen (eg. commercial fishermen whose practiced push-net and trawler fishing which depleted the waters of many species of marine life) who destroyed their environment and hence threatened their livelihood. In some instances, the government itself was guilty of harming their environment through so-called development projects.

One example was the widening of the road to the village surrounding the ancient city of Langkasuka in Pattani province in order to allow big tour buses to enter. This led to the cutting down of several fruit and rubber trees belonging to villagers. Another example was the cutting down of fruit and rubber trees in a village in Narathiwat province in order to allow the passage of

power cables. A third was the construction of a gas pipeline from Songkla province to Malaysia which posed a threat not only to the environment but to the people as well.

As a result, villagers have turned to non-governmental organization workers who support the preservation of the villagers' lifestyles by fighting against big businessmen and politicians.

Bang Maseh

The village of Bang Maseh, where I conducted 9 months of fieldwork between November 1999 and August 2000, is located by the coast of the Bay of Pattani. Villagers here say this area used to be called *telaga emas* in Malay and *bothong* in Thai, which means "golden pond". This was because of the abundance of shrimp in the waters, which was likened to gold because of its value. However, things began to change a little more than three decades ago. The seas, which were once full of life, became lifeless gradually due to plunder by big commercial boats practicing illegal methods of fishing such as the trawler and push-net. These environmentally destructive methods depleted the seabed of fry and depressed the earning capacities of the fishermen in the region. The construction of shrimp farms on village land caused further damage to the waters and led to the removal of mangrove forests which were important breeding grounds for various species of marine life. This situation saw the influx of NGOs into this area.

NGOs in Bang Maseh

Bang Maseh village is one of the 26 coastal and inland villages united by a group of NGOs working to aid in village development projects. In Bang Maseh, such projects have included fish-rearing, mussel harvesting, and salted fish-making. The NGO team comprises Acharn Anan (head), 4 salaried Thai Buddhist women, and several young Thai-Buddhist students of Acharn Anan.

Acharn Anan is an instructor in the Department of Biology at the Prince of Songkla University in Pattani. He specializes in the study of water-birds and it was his frequent trips to the roosting sites of migratory birds in Bang Maseh village led him to become what I call an "academic-NGO", i.e. one whose primary occupation is that of an academic but who use his educated knowledge of the subject matter at hand to help local residents solve their problems. Realizing that the environment of the water-birds was being destroyed by the construction of shrimp farms, Acharn Anan decided to stop the destruction of this physical environment. Hence, began an involvement with the inhabitants of the abodes of the water-birds, the predominantly Thai-Muslim villagers of Patani, Yala, and Narathiwat.

The interaction between Muslim villagers and Buddhist NGOs has led to transitions in the behavior and cultural practices of the Muslims. New patterns have emerged that challenge the prevailing view that Muslims and Buddhists harbor deep and unbridgeable divisions. Below I examine some of these changes.

Firstly, changes in Defining and Re-defining Islam

Muslim villagers insisted that they supported Thai-Buddhist NGOs primarily because the issues of environmental and resource conservation, which were promoted by the NGOs, were Islamic principles as well. "As long as they respect Islam and work within Islamic laws, I will look up to them," said Pakcik Asae, an old villager from Narathiwat. To poor Muslim villagers whose livelihoods are under threat today from so-called development projects of the government or from

rich businessmen practicing mechanically-intensive and environmentally hazardous methods of resource collection to ensure huge takings, Thai-Buddhist NGOs who came to help them find solutions to the environmental crisis had to be reconfigured within the sacred world of Islam. Making the kafir acceptable to the Muslim meant he had to be imagined into the believer's sphere of Islamic rules and regulations. The use of the environment as the common platform of contention allows the poor Muslim villager to co-operate with the non-Muslim NGO. Furthermore, NGO meetings and seminars were often conducted with deference to Islam. The NGOs stopped the meeting when it came time to pray and they always ended each meeting by inviting a respected villager to deliver an Islamic prayer. This respect for Islam displayed by the Buddhist NGOs stood them in good stead with the Muslim villagers.

Commercial Muslim businessmen who over-exploited the environment using push-net or trawler boats also used Islam to justify their opposition to the NGOs. They turned to the poor Thai-Muslim villager and said "How can you support these NGOs? Don't you know that NGOs originated in America and they are all Jews there?" In this web of contestations over rights of access to resources, both rich and poor Muslims try to locate their positions within certain precepts of good Islamic behavior.

Secondly, we see changes in Negotiating Islamic practices

In the Muslim dominated south, most villages are organized along ethnic lines. Where there are mixed populations, the two ethnic groups become spatial ethnics. You find the Buddhist section of the village (usually a wat and dogs may be found here) and the Muslim section (often marked by the presence of a mosque).

Thai-Buddhists often lamented that the social distance between Buddhists and Muslims had increased. "It was never like this when we were young," said one Thai-Buddhist teacher. "I lived in a mixed village and though there was the Muslim side and the Buddhist side of the village, we crossed over to the other ethnic's space often. We played together and visited each other's houses during both social and religious occasions. When we invited our Muslim friends to a feast, we did not cook any pork. Muslims used to eat at such feasts in my house. In fact, when Buddhist villagers held wedding dinners, they held it on 2 consecutive days. One day for the Buddhist guests where we served pork and the other day for Muslim guests where the food was halal (cooked in accordance with Islamic dietary rules)". She then went on to speak with much hurt and anger. "But now, it's all different. The Muslims don't visit us and they do not invite us to their houses. Even when they do visit our houses, they will not even drink water out of our glasses for fear that it is tainted with pork!" And why was it like this now. "It's because of Islamization. The Muslims are now becoming more fanatical about Islam and less tolerant of socio-cultural and ethnic differences," she exclaimed angrily.

In such a situation, NGOs who have entered the lives of Thai-Muslim villagers, have engaged in interactions and created situations that have brought about changes that are in opposition to the situation described by this Thai-Buddhist teacher.

Spatial communalism - The "halal house"

Firstly, I observed changes in living space. Acharn Anan is highly respected by the Muslim villagers. His Muslim driver and his child's Muslim baby-sitter live with him. As such, his house is a "halal" house. Male Muslim villagers visit this house freely. They cook, eat, pray, and sleep

here. This is despite the fact that they are aware the Acharn Anan eats non-halal food, including pork, when he goes out with his Thai-Buddhist friends.

People communalism - Thai-Buddhist NGOs become halal cooks

Secondly, I noticed a transition to tolerance in terms of cooking and commensal rules. When I traveled with villagers involved in Acharn Anan's NGO projects to a nationwide demonstration by villagers to ask Parliament to approve a bill supporting community forest rights, we brought groceries and cooking equipment to cook our own food as we were on a limited budget. On this trip, I saw the two Thai-Buddhist NGOs traveling with us, helping to prepare the food. In fact, they cooked one meal by themselves. And all the Muslim villagers ate the cooking with relish. This is quite remarkable because ordinarily my Muslim informants would never eat food cooked or served by Buddhists. Yet, when the Buddhist NGOs cooked and served, they ate.

"Opportunistic Linguists" - Muslims speak better Thai because of friendship with NGOs

An important change that has taken place is that Malay-Muslim villagers are speaking better Thai primarily due to the interaction with the Buddhist NGOs.

The new linguistic capabilities of these Muslim villagers represent a real milestone in Thai society. Where previously the government tried hard to get Malay-speaking Muslim villagers to speak Thai through schooling, they failed miserably because Malay was still widely spoken at home. Malays viewed the Thai government's project as an imposition, as an attempt to destroy their language and therefore culture. Hence during separatist wars, schools were the primary targets of bombings and teachers the primary targets of kidnap and murder.

Today, NGOs have peacefully achieved what the government tried to do amidst violence. Now that the immediate threat is to their livelihood, these Muslim villagers realize that in order for their plight and situation to be communicated effectively to the rest of the country, they need to speak in the language of the state. Hence, they have now begun to learn to speak, read and write Thai because of its utilitarian value. They have joined hands with those non-government agents who are helping them to fight for their rights to their land and resources. Hence they have learnt the language of the state in order to challenge the state.

Another change that has taken place is that some Muslims have begun rejecting the traditional authority in the village, which consisted of the headman and the tok imam or religious leader and are turning to NGOs to lead them. In the village of Bang Maseh, villagers pointed out that the tok imam was more actively involved in his job as a seafood trader than in his role as guardian and promoter of the moral and spiritual well-being of his wards. The village headman had become very rich by building the environmentally destructive but economically lucrative shrimp farms on village land. This had led to the clearing of mangrove forests, which had provided villagers with food and fuel. Many villagers no longer looked to these traditional authority figures in the village to help them and have instead turned to NGOs to solve their problems.

How did Thai-Buddhist NGOs' successfully penetrate Thai-Muslim society?

When I asked my host father Bae Seing why all the NGOs in the village were Buddhist and if there were any Muslim NGOs, he replied, "Oh, there used to be Muslims NGOs in the past but they all left. There were personality differences between the staff." He then said something very

important. "The Thai-Muslim NGOs often told us what to do. They used to criticize us and denigrate us like as if we were stupid villagers." He continued, "Rich Thai-Muslims look down upon us. We never feel comfortable in their presence." One villager even went so far to comment, "We Thai Muslims are poor because when we become rich we forget our poor brethren. That's why Allah's made Thai Muslims poor and that's why rich Thai Muslims lose their wealth easily through gambling, alcohol, drugs, and women."

I argue that Thai-Buddhist NGOs have successfully penetrated Thai-Muslim society precisely because they are Buddhists. If they had been Muslims, they would not have been as successful. There is much social hierarchy in Muslim society and poor Thai-Muslims feel embarrassed to be in close contact with rich Thai-Muslims. They feel despised or else treated like ignorant children and told what to do or what is good for them. However, whenever the villagers met the Thai-Buddhist NGOs, it was always a two-way communication with the Buddhist NGOs respecting what they call "local knowledge" of the villagers. Furthermore, Buddhists have better connections with important sectors of the Thai state and are able to procure money, help and support for their cause compared to Muslims. Also, many of the NGOs are Buddhist females. The very fact that they are Thai-Buddhist is what allows them to work with the male Thai-Muslim villagers. Hence, to work successfully among these Thai-Muslim villagers, being a Thai-Buddhist NGO is the best choice.

Conclusion

NGOs the world over fulfill a myriad of functions. As non-GOs, they are seen as trying to correct or thwart government and big business interests that are supposed to be harmful to the citizens. In fact, good-intentioned development project often fail because the state sees its plans differently from the way ordinary people see them as James Scott points out in his book, *Seeing Like A State* (1998). NGOs then become the liaison between the state and the citizens or else they side with citizens to thwart state's efforts. In such mega-writings critiquing or praising NGO efforts, little attention is focused on the actual dynamics of interaction that takes place among the various players.

In this paper, I hope to have shown how such focus on the dynamics of interaction between Thai Buddhist NGOs and Thai Muslim villagers actually illuminates more the effects of NGO activities on all levels. In this particular case study, NGOs entered the Muslim villages in order to help find solutions to the current fishing crisis. Their interaction with the Muslim villagers effected certain transformations in the latter's habits and lifestyles. It caused those villagers involved in NGO projects to speak Thai fluently. This was a practice rejected by Muslims in the past because it was associated with the eradication of Malay language and hence Malay identity. In fact, Pakcik Yasin, a farmer from Narathiwat, clearly acknowledged the present situation by remarking, "In the past we were Malays but now we are Thais of Malay descent." This is quite startling because in the past, the Thai government has tried hard to "convert" these Malay-Muslims into Thais, an identity which was rejected outright by the Muslim community. But today, this aim has been achieved, through the NGOs reacting against the destruction caused to the traditional livelihoods of these Muslim villagers by the government and big business interests. People are now turning to Thai-Buddhist NGOs to act as their saviors. Where in the past, Muslims looked up to the traditional leaders in the village, they have instead today turned to these Thai Buddhists as their guides and solvers of their problems.