

Bangkok Melayu Makings of a Thai Muslim Culture

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There are many small Malay communities embedded within and around the Bangkok Metropolis, referred to as Bangkok Malay Communities or aptly Bangkok -Melayu. This paper will attempt to trace the makings of a new culture, referred to as Thai Muslim culture by the author, as the community assimilates into the mainstream Thai society. This observation was made during her nine-month study conducted under ASIAN Fellows Program in 2002 / 2003 and published in Umaiya, 2003 entitled “ The Assimilation of Bangkok-Melayu Communities in the Bangkok Metropolis and Surrounding Areas”. The paper will touch into the mainstream Bangkok - Melayu community, in addition to the six communities reported in the study.

In Thailand, Malays or Thai Muslims are known to be residing in the four Southern provinces namely Satun, Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani where they form the majority. In Bangkok, the Bangkok-Melayu is a minority community living in a majority Thai Buddhist society.

This paper will focus on the evolution of culture of the Bangkok-Melayu resulting from the Malay motherland, long contact with the dominant Thai Buddhist society, urbanization, impact of globalization such as the global Islamic fundamentalism.

The objective of this paper is to share knowledge and to contribute to the understanding of indigenous knowledge on Bangkok-Melayu.

The approach adapted in this paper is to use the findings on the cultural evolution undergoing within the Bangkok-Melayu communities on identity, customary practices, on the environmental influences such as religion, Thai Government policies, regional and global developments; as indicator to study on the emergence of the Thai Muslim culture.

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Bangkok-Melayu

Origins and location of settlements of the Bangkok-Melayu was reported in Umaiya (2003) entitled “The assimilation of Bangkok-Melayu communities in the Bangkok metropolis and surrounding areas”. Reference is made to accounts from different in a variety of sources, such as written in Thai language by Thai Buddhists -Chulchakrapong (1997), Hiranto (1978) in Thai language by Muslims in Thailand, Jitmoud (1988), Saleh (1997, 2001), Chalayondesha (1996), Chernpakdee (2001), Damrile (2002); in English by foreign writers - hall (1968), Wheatley (1961, 1964); in English by Malaysian writers Siti (1970), Zain (2003); and in Malay language - Hikayat Marong Mahawangsa (1968). Several of the accounts are from respondents during fieldwork.

The “Coming of Melayu to Bangkok” started with the invasion by Prince Sarusi, the son of Rama I in 1786 followed with several other raids. The last group of Melayu migrating to Bangkok was during the reign of King Rama V Residents in Sai Kong Din informed that they came to Bangkok voluntarily instead of living under British rule in Malaya.

Melayu Identity

The author observed cultural attitudes and practices that are said to be indicative of attachment to a particular sense of Melayu identity.

Islam

The general observation of the author is nearly all Bangkok- Melayu normally undergoes Islamic religious upbringing. Religious education is readily available at mosques and Islamic schools. The degree of conformance to the “Five pillars of Islam”, iman (believe in one God), daily prayers, fasting, zakat (tax) and performing haj (pilgrimage) is relatively high.

This trend is fast changing trend to be a fundamental Muslim, arising from Muslim scholars being educated in abroad, namely Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Previously, the medium of Islamic instruction was Bahasa Melayu or Jawi including for reciting the Quran and studying Hadith (written in Bahasa Melayu and referred to as “Kitab”) which was popular among religious teachers. From the end of the 19th century, Peninsula Malaysia is similarly affected with the returning Malay students from the Middle East, Hashim Musa (2004).

More details on Muslims in Thailand and also specifically the Bangkok-Melayu can be referred in Jitmoud (1979, 1988). Boonpibal (1987). Chalayondesha (1996), the Thai Fine Art Department publications in 1999 documented on Islamic practices in Southern Thailand and Saleh (2001).

Ethnocentrism and Rejection of Thai - Buddhists Values

The basic meaning of ethnocentrism is judging people from other cultures according to one's own culture, Haviland (1975). The author tried to identify specific discourses that suggest a negative application of the ethnocentric discourse: i.e. when respondents indicated a negative assessment of other cultures based on Bangkok-Melayu / Islamic values.

The great majority of Bangkok-Melayu will seek to marry within their own community, if that is not possible than a Muslim is required: matchmaking is common and this can help to expand the pool of potential partners. Whilst arranged marriages are fast disappearing, arranged meetings are becoming popular, such as during weddings and religious festivals. Interestingly, the author came across Bangkok-Melayu seeking potential in-laws in Malaysia. The endogamous preference may be a result of the fear of losing members to the dominant Thai - Buddhist society. This is also similarly affected by interaction, such as at workplace and University, resulting intermarriage with non-Muslims.

There are two common derogatory Thai-Buddhist proverbs that arouse strong feelings to the Bangkok-Melayu.

- a. "Khaek Melay kin muu mai pen, kin maa tom khem" meaning "Melayu people don't know how to eat pork but drink dog soup".
- b. "Khek thang lai keat maa samrap khat moo khaw hai pen man, khon boraan hen waa khaek tha kin muu cha khat moo yak jaung tang satsana mai kin muu" meaning "They (Melayu) are born to shine pots; our ancestors said that if they eat pork, it will be difficult for them to shine pots; therefore, they created a religion that forbids them to eat pork".

Taken from Sarochamas (1997:41), who refers to objections raised in the Islam Prayoot newspaper in relation to the above derogatory remarks, presented as a proverb, in the Thai Buddhist newspaper Siam Sapphakit. This example, that reflects a wider Thai-Buddhist ethnocentrism, creates anger amongst Thai-Muslims, and Bangkok-Melayu who are the Muslim majority in Thailand. Socially, such attitudes tend to make Bangkok-Melayu and Muslims as a whole turn inwards so their group.

A derogatory term that Bangkok-Melayu can use to describe Buddhists is See Yang, See Yaeh or Siang. When used in this context the term Siang serves to identify the Thai-Buddhists as unclean and therefore socialising with, eating with, attending a Thai-Buddhist function - for example, a funeral - or visiting a wat are all seen as undesirable and potentially polluting activities. The word kaffir is used as a similar alternative to describe non-Muslims as a whole. At sites where Malay dialect is not used, the Thai word Khon Thai or Khon Phut is adopted when referring to kaffir. At present, the term Khon Thai, Khon Phut or kaffir are widely used amongst the Bangkok-Melayu, where as the usage of the term See Yang, See Yaeh or Siang which portray the Malay element is indeed diminishing simultaneously with the Malay dialect.

The Pattani and the Bangkok-Melayu are conscious of being labeled as 'other' by Thai government policy, the use of the term khaek in the chronicles showed that it was an official attitude, and many / most Pattani and Bangkok-Melayu will have been exposed to such slurs in public by individual Thai-Buddhists or even representatives of the government such as policemen or civil servants. The predominance of this form of prejudicial discourse in Thai-Buddhist society has been documented by Sarochamas (1997) who noted examples in the Thai-Buddhist funerals because of religious reasons.

Coming into the realm of religious practice, are the attitudes towards government restrictions on wearing the hijab. When the hijab started becoming more popular in the 1980's the intolerance of the government aroused strong feelings amongst both the Pattani and the Bangkok-Melayu. This can be seen as an example of how religious matters seem to matter more to the Bangkok-Melayu than other secular-aspects of their cultural practices.

The greater presence of Muslims in important roles in political, administrative and social positions has improved the attitudes of Bangkok-Melayu towards the government; an example of this is the present Agriculture Minister who is a Pattani Melalyu.

Use of Bahasa Melayu (Jawi dialect)

The use of Bahasa Melayu can be traced back to the language brought by the immigrants some 200 hundred years and around seven generations ago. Until some 50 years ago, Maleyu language is used within Bangkok-Melayu community. With urbanization, formal education in Thai language, mass media together with interaction with Thai Buddhists there has been tremendous reduction in the use of Melayu language.

Only Bangkok-Melayu community in Khlong Bang Pho made it a point to retain Melayu language. Khutbah, Friday prayer sermons are still read in Melayu dialect spoken by old people (above 60 years) is rather unique, the pronunciation ends with an 'lang' sound, e.g. 'jaliang' for 'jalan' and 'making' for 'maken'. According to Professor Emeritus Dato Du. Asmah Haji Omar, this is similar to that spoken in Padang Terap, Kedah.

However, other Bangkok-Melayu community where there is a community with clear Bangkok-Melayu majority, for example, Khaeng Krathumrai Khet Nongcok, Melayu language is lost. Similarly, Bangkok-Melayu enclaves within the majority Thai Buddhist society in the inner Bangkok city no longer use the Melayu language. This can be attributed to urbanisation taking place earliest and the effect of Thai Government policy on use of Thai language for education in 1930's, Saleh (1997) and Tadmor (1992).

Use of Melayu Names and Kinship Terms

Kinship terms such as Mak, Pak, Ngah are still in use by the Bangkok-Melayu. Factors that affect the use of Malay kinship terms are the combination of the exposure use of Thai language in schools, mass media and the use of Malay dialect in everyday life. (Umaiya 2003). The author found that in the more urbanised sites people uses Malay kinship terms mixed with Thai, whereas in the more isolated villages the genealogical terminology is generally completely Malay.

It is normal for Bangkok-Melayu to have a Muslim name (considered as Melayu name) that is given at birth. The trend is towards adopting Thai practice of using of nicknames, sometimes by shortening the Muslim name e.g. Mah for Fatimah, Yah for Mariyah, Wood for Dawood, Mat for Muhammad, in addition to the formal Thai names.

Neighbourhood

Most Bangkok-Melayu prefers to live in a neighbourhood with a Muslim community near a mosque notwithstanding their origin, Bangkok-Melayu, Persians, Indians or Khmer. It was explained to the author that they can easily get involved in Islamic teaching and activities, thus have warmer, friendlier relations with their community.

Urbanisation has eroded community living and can be measured by the reduction in agricultural land, the increase in roads, factories and houses, and so on. The general effect is the weakening of the

Bangkok-Melayu familial bonds as well as cultural practices. This is one significant aspect of urbanisation: a new housing estate, established in a sparsely populated former rural community, can radically change the balance of ethnic groups in an area.

As property rises there is a strong tendency to sell agriculture land. Normally, a small piece of land with the family house is retained for own housing. Future generations then build homes within the compound, thus creating a slum like environment. Over long periods, this results in Bangkok-Melayu eventually living in embedded clusters within a majority of Thai Buddhist society. However, it is observed by the author that the third generation tend to sell the property. This is mainly due to the higher property prices and to secure homes for siblings, who in many cases are forced to live elsewhere and seeks to a share of the property.

Customary Practices

The Bangkok-Melayu customary practices is derived from Pattani culture prior to migration (also incorporating what is today Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan). The author observed they have developed their own particular practices. There remain traces of Pattani culture in remote areas only.

In study on Thai customs and beliefs of Thai Buddhists Manilerd (1988) described on common customary practices. The author noted some customary practices of Bangkok-Melayu are similar to that practiced by Thai Buddhists. It is likely that these are customary practices existed during pre-Islamic Pattani and were continued after converting to Islam. When the author interviewed Jitmoud, a renowned Muslim academician and author (see Jitmoud 1978, 1988), attempts to draw the line between Islamic practices and non-Islamic practices in relation to customary practices of Bangkok-Melayu. This seems to be towards dissociating un-Islamic practices from the Muslim society i.e. Mulsim practices are based only on Islamic practices.

Tham bun lang kiaw khaw (Harvest festival)

Harvest festival is a traditional celebration that Bangkok-Melayu has discontinued. The practice is declared un-Islamic. There were respondents in remote areas “unwittingly” practicing is by having small feast on the day of the festival. Guests are invited for a meal without elaborating on purpose. When asked by the author, they preferred not to give any response on the matter, except to smile.

Attire

It is observed that Bangkok-Melayu normally dresses in a Thai or western style dress. The older generation still prefer to wear sarong patik (similar to batik) and hijab in the case of women; for men they prefer to wear sarong pelikat imported from Muslim countries, especially Malaysia and Indonesia. Traditional Islamic attire is also preferred when carrying out prayers and for attending Islamic functions.

As for the younger generation, wearing of sarong patik is rather rare (some do not even know how to wear) but the wearing of hijab is ever increasing, especially when attending Muslim functions. The trend towards wearing the hijab is a direct result of the Iranian revolution, Sarochamas (1997) affecting Muslim worldwide. In the city it is quite rare to find men wearing sarong with kopiah (headgear) except when performing prayers participating in religious activities.

Food

The food eaten by Bangkok-Melayu comprises of a mix of traditional Pattani dishes, adaptation of Muslim food in the Middle East and to a large extent dishes eaten by Thais in Bangkok such as Thai Buddhist and Chinese cooking. The distinctive food identifiable to Bangkok-Melayu are satay and khaw tom mat ("ketupat pisang" - became a borrowed food to Thai Buddhists) and generally to Muslims are martabak (chicken or beef cooked in thin flour roll fried in oil on hot plate), khaw-mook (briyani - chicken, beef or mutton) and soup haang (Ox-tail soup cooked with skin).

There are a few traditional Bangkok-Melayu dishes practiced within the community. The dishes budu bilih and budu lon is still a favourite especially in the villages. Food associated with superstition, and therefore there is a conflict with the new Islamist teaching are danong dada, and khaw niaw leung gai yang (pulut kuning and roast chicken). These are usually prepared as additional dishes during for the departed tok nenck (great grand parents i.e. past generations) and served during certain ceremonies, such as weddings (as offerings - May bad omen not befall upon the couple and a smooth ceremony).

However, khaw niaw leung gai yang is also served during purely Islamic functions such as tamat Koran (marking completion of Koran recital) and male circumcision.

Rites of pasage rituals

There are Malay practices declared un-Islamic or not practiced in the lifetime Prophet Mohammad s.a.w., but practiced by some Bangkok-Melayu in private or on a small scale. The laak khaaw ceremony (offering raw rice through a medium to cleanse sins of the recently departed person) is strongly rejected by the Islamic fundamentalist. Whilst this is attributed to Hinduism, the author is informed that the practice is documented in Kitabs (old Malay language religious books). In Malaysia, this had been declared as un-Islamic for a long time.

Another practice is tham bun faak thong (“geleng perut” or pregnancy safety ceremony). This is performed in the seventh month of pregnancy. The ceremony is performed through reciting of versus from Koran and the midwife actually repositions the unborn baby to ease delivery. It is declared un-Islamic. The practice is still continued in remote areas. Similarly, the cradled ceremony for newborn babies, khuen pley (“nalk buaian” in Melayu language) has been decalred un-Islamic.

The tham bun khon taay or death feast, (“kenduri kematian”) - some view this as improper tradition as it is not practised during lifetime of the Prophet, however, the majority of the Bangkok-Melayu still practice it.

For weddings, it is normal to use the Thai or Arabic language instead of the traditional Melayu language to solemnise marriage all in accordance with Islamic practices. In Khlong Bang Po, the author observed that Melayu (Jawi) language is still used. There has been some controversy on the khan mak (“hantaran - procession carrying gifts to be exchanged during the marriage ceremony) as it is viewed as customary practice.

Entertainment

The author referred to Duanchan (1983) and extensively documented music, sports and games of the Thai-Muslims in suthern Thailand. Except for a few groups performing the Klong ramana, ligae riap and silat art of self defence - but demonstrated as entertainment), other forms of entertainment disappeared. These three Malay entertainment categories are still seen in the Bangkok-Melayu community of Khet Nong Cok where there is an effort to revitalise Malsly culture (including games) in an effort supported by the Thai government. Thus perhaps these will start to grow in response to this encouragement from the government (to other minority groups also), whose objective is to develop cultural diversity for purposes of tourism.

The older generation remembers playing Malay traditional games, *maak lum* (“congkak”) and *luuk khang* (“gasing taning” - top). The games have been included in the cultural revitalisation project is being undertaken.

Today lullabies are only sung by elder women when they baby-sit for their family or friends. The author was given some examples of traditional lullabies: they used a mixture of Thai and Bahasa Melayu (Jawi) words and told stories about pilgrims going on the Haj, about Nabi Mohammed or other stories related to Islam.

The author observed that modern Malaysian Islamic music is very popular with Bangkok-Melayu in Bangkok. The traditional *Nashid* (Arabic Islamic music sang in Malay language) is still being performed in Melayu language with a trend towards using Arabic language.

The loss of these traditional forms of entertainment can be attributed to assimilation into the mainstream Thai society that is also globalising, preferring for example football and modern music.

Thai Government Policy

Two Thai government policies that significantly affected the Bangkok-Melayu were the introduction of compulsory Thai surnames during the reign of King Rama VI (1910-1925) and compulsory education in 1921 and enforced after 1932. The use of Muslim or Melayu names is becoming less (Tadmor 1992, Saleh 1997).

As children are educated in Thai, there was a reduction in the use of Melayu language to the point of becoming almost extinct today. This then resulted in the medium of Islamic education to be changed to Thai language instead of Melayu language. A significant development is the shift of focus to securing Islamic education directly from the Middle East countries especially Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia instead via the Melayu language. As these Middle East educated Islamic scholars return they bring with them Islamic revivalist movement (Hashim 2004).

Matters relating to Muslims minorities in Thailand had been extensively researched by Sanitwong Na Ayuthatya (1988), Maluleem (1995, 1996, 1998, 2002), Suthasat (1976), Saleh (1997, 2001) and many others.

The approval of the government of Islamic Bank and a scheme to certify and label *halal* food is welcomed by all Bangkok-Melayu and Muslims, and is seen as an example of the government being positive and this improves their attitude towards the government. In addition, this scheme is

aimed at establishing Thailand as an exporter of halal food to Muslim countries - for this to work Thailand has to be recognised by other Muslim countries as having a strong enough Muslim community to provide reassurance that proper Islamic procedures will be followed. This is likely to strengthen the position of the Muslim community, however it should be noted that Thai-Buddhists own the companies producing the halal food.

The existence of a newspaper for Muslims since 1914 in Thailand has also been important for Pattani and the Bangkok-Melayu, ensuring that they have a public voice. The government has allowed these newspapers and magazines to be published as long as they do not threaten the nation's harmony and unity, nor engage in slander. A Muslim radio station has long been in existence and there are Muslim programmes on television; in 2002, during the Ramadan (Fasting) month, the author was invited to speak on the Muslim television about education opportunities in Malaysia.

The role of the King is particularly important in Thailand, and some changes as regards Muslims have met with great approval from both the Pattani and the Bangkok-Melayu. One such change has been that the King, or his representative, officiating the Maulid Nabi festivities ever since 1964. Another more recent change is that during the appointment ceremony for light ranking government officials the King has decided that Muslims do not have to participate in particular aspects of the ceremony that are Buddhist religious practices.

The bedrock of the distinctive identity as a Bangkok-Melayu is fast changing from a Melayu to towards being fundamentally a Thai Muslim. This is influenced mainly by the stronger desire to be a Muslim, strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith, as a result of the worldwide Islamic revivalist movement.

There has been a gradual loss of purpose to continue the use of Malay language and thus culture as the Thai language and Arabic (mainly as the learning medium to Islam) gained prominence. Malay customary practices considered un-Islamic has also been discontinued.

The economic and environment changes associate with urbanization are crucial to the understanding the accelerated loss of the Bangkok-Melayu identity and culture in the recent past. The Bangkok-Melayu successfully retained their identity and culture for generations until the onset of the recent economic development. This is most apparent when comparing Bangkok-Melayu who always lived in the centre of Bangkok are still mostly Muslims, and the Islamic religious factor can be pointed to as an essential to their continuing existence as a group distinct from the mainstream Thai Buddhist.

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