

# TOWARDS LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PLURALISM IN THAILAND: A CASE OF THE MALAY THAIS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Thailand is an anomaly among the South-east Asian nations. Much of her uniqueness is in large part a result of the lack of a colonial past. The Thai people are a synthesis of a wide array of cultures. The ability to assimilate other cultures during different periods of history added to the richness of Thai customs and traditions. Nevertheless, Thailand shares to a certain extent an 'identity crisis' of the type that confronted her neighbouring countries. The Malay Thai minority is a case in point. This paper draws particular attention to the southern border provinces where the people are mainly of Malay ethnic origin, and there has been some resistance to integration into the dominant culture of Thai society.

Indeed, this problem is unfortunate for national unity and regional development. However, the issue has not been seriously questioned and considered at the national level. So far only token recognition has been given to linguistic and cultural differences of the Malay-Thai minority (see, for example, Brudhiprabha 1978; 1981). I hope that the following analysis will serve as guidelines for a viable solution to the problem.

The issue of the Malay Thais in the southern border provinces has been discussed to some extent during the last decade (e.g. Suhrke 1970/71; Banomyong 1974; Haemindra 1977; Forbes 1982), and I am certain that more will appear. The present paper is an attempt to propose that education is one of the most effective instruments for national unity. It is hoped that a case of the Malay Thais will more or less substantiate my theory - that of the "hot 'n' sour-variety-soup"!

## 2. THE THAIS

The total population of Thailand today is approaching 50 million. In terms of the major characteristics of the people, Thailand is one of the most homogeneous societies of South-east Asia. The striking uniformity of the Thais is the centripetal force which keeps the nation more unified and integrated. Although the Thais comprise an overwhelming majority of some 85 per cent, the heterogeneous ethnic makeup of the population includes the Chinese (10%), the Malays (2.5%) and a few other minorities like the Khmers, the Vietnamese, the Indians and various groups of hill tribes.

The largest ethnic group in Thailand is the Chinese. The second largest group is the Malays. These two ethnic minorities play a significant role in the

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economic and social life of Thailand. The Chinese migrated to Thailand during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Echikawa (1968) maintains that because of the similarity between the Chinese and the Thai value systems, they assimilated into Thai society quite easily. The Chinese Thais have been influential in the economic circle of the country since World War II.

The ethnically Malay inhabitants of the southern vassal states were fully incorporated into Thailand in 1901, but the Anglo-Siamese treaty on the Thai-Malaysian frontier was not fixed until 1909. In contrast with the Chinese, the Malays pose some crucial sociocultural problems for the central government.

Although the large majority of the Thais are Buddhists (about 94 per cent), an estimated 4 per cent of the total population are Muslims. Only a small percentage of the Thais are Christians, Hindus, Sikhs or others. Hence Islam is the second religion of Thailand. Theravada Buddhism is the official religion of the country. However, the constitution provides complete freedom in religion for the Thai citizens. Among the Chinese Thais the popular religious belief is Hinayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism; while the Malay Thais adhere to Islamic faith.

Thailand is divided into four distinct regions: the Central, the North, the North-east and the South.

Each region has its own local dialect: namely, Central or Standard Thai (Siamese) which is the dialect of Bangkok and the literary language of the country, Northern Thai (Kam Muang or Yuan), North-eastern Thai (Isan or Lao) and Southern Thai (Paktai). The regional variances in terms of ethnicity, language and culture pose the problems of pluralism and regionalism in Thailand. The North-east and the South are areas where these problems arise (Wong 1973).

The people of North-east Thailand are of Lao origin, but it is not always possible to distinguish a Lao Thai from a Thai. The North-eastern dialect is distinct from Standard Thai, although it is not entirely unintelligible. Until very recently the North-east has been relatively isolated and neglected. Hence the North-easterners are still somewhat hostile to the central government.

The Southerners are different from the majority of the country - physically, linguistically and culturally. They look like the Malays, and speak Malay as well as follow firmly the Islamic code of life. Because of their distinct Malay ethnic makeup, their geographical distance from Bangkok and the closeness to Malaysia, they lean pervasively towards their immediate neighbour. On many occasions, a separatist movement has threatened the stability of this area. Hence Thailand's problems of pluralism and regionalism loom large in the far south.

The Southern dialect is widely spoken in many provinces, except in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat where Malay is almost exclusively spoken in their daily life. It should be noted that the Malay language spoken in the south is known collectively as Pattani Malay. It is a local variety of Malay written in the Jawi alphabet which is said to be the old Arabic script of the Qur'an.

### 3. THE MALAY THAIS

'Thai Muslim' or 'Thai Islam' (an erroneous usage) is the official term used for the Thai who professes Islam, while 'Thai Buddhist', in contrast, refers to the Thai who follows Buddhism. Personally, I think it is inappropriate to use religious affiliations for ethnic identifications. Hence, using Thai as a

headword and Malay as a modifier for a new compound noun, the term 'Malay Thai' is proposed in this paper.

The term 'Thai Muslim' reflects the government policy that the various Muslim peoples of Thailand "should see themselves, and be seen, not as Malay, Chinese, or Indian Muslims resident in Thailand, but as a new religio-national group, the Thai Muslim" (Forbes 1982:1068). Of all Thailand's Muslim minorities, the largest group is of Malay origin. They live mainly in Satun, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. In these four provinces they form 83 per cent, 80 per cent, 62 per cent and 78 per cent of the total population.

### 3.1 The southern border provinces

The provinces of Satun, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat are known officially and collectively in Thai as *Cangwat Chaidai Paaktai* (southern border provinces). Nevertheless, Satun is perhaps an odd man out. Geographically, it is separate from the rest; historically, it is different; linguistically, the largest numbers of its inhabitants speak Thai (91 per cent), though many are bilingual. Religiously speaking, it leads with an 83 per cent Muslim population. Hence Satun is not included in the following discussion.

Pattani, the historic centre of the south, has a long and glorious past - being a cultural focus and the cradle of Islam in South-east Asia (Wyatt and Teeaw 1970). It was the most important among the vassal Malay states in the south of Thailand.

Collectively, the three provinces now and then pose the problem of secession from Thailand. For example, in 1948 a petition endorsed by the people of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat was addressed to the United Nations requesting to join the Federation of Malaya.

In terms of politics, Pattani has threatened the security of the region by far the most. One of the major separatist factions in the south is the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO). PULO with its Narathiwat-based and other separatist groups advocate the secession of the southern border provinces from Thailand as well as the establishment of an Independent Pattani Republic. Linguistically, in Pattani the 1980 census data indicate 102,220 (24.40 per cent) native speakers of Thai, and 302,733 (72.26 per cent) native speakers of Malay.

Yala is the southernmost province of Thailand adjacent to the Malaysian Peninsula. Although it may not be as sensitive as Pattani, in 1977 the most spectacular political attack by the separatists was carried out during a Royal visit to Yala. Two bombs were exploded within a short distance of the King and Queen. They escaped injury, but some spectators were killed and injured. The attackers were arrested and they confessed to being members of PULO. The 1980 census data of Yala show that Thai was the mother-tongue for a total of 85,681 people or 32.30 per cent of the population. In contrast, Malay had 140,194 native speakers, i.e. 52.85 per cent.

Finally, Narathiwat is located at the far south-east of the country. Politically, PULO operates chiefly in the districts of Rangae, Bacho, Yingo and Ruso. Linguistically speaking, the 1980 census identifies 86,468 (21.73 per cent) Thai native speakers, and 280,008 (70.38 per cent) Malay native speakers in Narathiwat.

On top of the separatist activity in these three provinces, there are some banditry, extortion and cross-border smuggling. The central government still faces considerable difficulties with the separatist movements, bandit gangs, extortionists and smugglers. Moreover, the economic status of the southerners in general is relatively low. The Malay Thais are principally fishermen, subsistence farmers and small rubber planters. This low economic status is a continuing problem of regional inequalities.

To sum up: Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat are politically plagued with the problem of Malay irredentism. The linguistic, cultural, economic and religious problems also loom large. The Malay Thais are the vast majorities amidst the Thai minorities in the three southern border provinces. Hence true integration with the local people and the national mainstream will perhaps remain a long way off.

### 3.2 National policies and programs

After the nationalist revolution of 1932, and especially when the military nationalist regime of Pibul Songkhram came to power in 1938, the government policies were forcibly assimilative. In this connection, Forbes has this to say:

Pibul discriminated strongly against the Malay language and culture. *Shari'a* law was set aside in favor of the Thai Buddhist laws of marriage and inheritance, sarongs were banned, and the wearing of western-style long trousers and topees was made compulsory for men. The chewing of betel and areca nut was prohibited, and it was even stipulated that loads should be carried on the shoulder (Thai fashion) rather than on the head (Malay fashion).  
(Forbes 1982:1059)

The assimilationist policies of the government aroused various opposition and the emergence of a Malay separatist movement in Southern Thailand began. When Pibul was returned to power by coup d'état in 1947, further intimidation was continued. Many local leaders were arrested and troops were sent in to suppress an uprising in Narathiwat. There was an exodus to Malaya for sanctuary of some two thousand Malay Thais. However, mounting concern over adverse international opinion forced Pibul to give a number of concessions to the Malay Thais, including the recognition of their separate cultural identity.

Fortunately, Pibul's attempts at forced assimilation were discarded by his successors. Instead, the policies of political integration and socialisation were gradually implemented. However, the damage had already been done under the coercive measures of the Pibul administration. Yet since the overthrow of Pibul Songkhram in the coup d'état of 1957, successive Thai administrations have become aware of the need to reach a peaceful cultural coexistence in the long run.

In line with this policy, some attempts have been made to teach Thai to children of Malay ethnic origin, to teach secular subjects in the traditional Islamic *pondok* schools and to promote adult and non-formal education.

In order to implement the policies and to achieve the goals, the Thai Government launched several projects for political socialisation, minority participation and population transfer. The following are some programs carried out during different periods in the southern border provinces: public television for the district, a Malay-Thai newsletter, private religious schools, a southern