

The Muslim Malay Community in Southern Thailand: A “Small People” Facing Existential Uncertainty

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Abstract

This article aims to apply Abulof’s concept of “small peoples” to the case of the Muslim Malay Community in Southern Thailand. Existential uncertainty as an intersubjective reality is the defining characteristic of a “small people.” Moreover, the article explores how the Muslim Malay community in the South of Thailand is facing ethnonational existential threats due to the assimilationist policies of the central government. The Patani-Malay language and the Islamic religion are threatened by policies favoring a homogenous national culture based on a unitary nation-state held together by the three pillars of nation, monarchy, and religion. Finally, the article concludes that one of the root causes of the Southern insurgency is the perceived slow death of the Patani-Malay ethnonationality by a significant number of traditional leaders and youths. Some “soft” approaches to deal with the intersubjective reality of existential uncertainty experienced by the Muslim Malay minority are also provided as tentative recommendations.

Keywords: deep South of Thailand, development, ethnic conflict, Islam in Southeast Asia, Muslim Malays

We should be ashamed of ourselves for sitting idly by and doing nothing while the colonialists trampled our brothers and sisters. The wealth that belongs to us has been seized. Our rights and freedom have been curbed, and our religion and culture have been sullied...

From the *Berjihad di Pattani* (Liow, 2006, p. 100)

Introduction

“Small peoples” were originally defined by the Czech author Milan Kundera as a group of people who lack a sense of “eternal past and future” (Abulof 2009: 227). The concept was further explained and refined by Abulof to include three main components, which mainly deal with the intersubjective reality of an ethnonational group (Abulof 2009: 229). Two important factors are a clear sense of a historical past and of a future, while the third component deals with the present, more specifically with governance and self-

determination. In other words, a strong ethnonational group has a clear historical past, a strong identity, and a feeling of an assured future as a distinct group. Furthermore, for an ethnonational group to be strong, it must also have some sort of self-government in order to achieve some level of self-determination. This is exemplified by the post-World War II ideal of the nation-state; nation referring to a unitary ethnonationality, and state dealing with the apparatus of government and territorial sovereignty (Barber 1996; Chua 2007; Ellis 2009; Friedman 2000; Fukuyama 1992; Habermas 2006; Lal 2004; Marchetti 2009; Melle 2009; Thakur and Weiss 2009). In this scenario, an ethnonational group has sovereignty over its territory, and controls the government. A second scenario is a multiethnic state, in which ethnonational groups enjoy some measure of autonomy (August 1995; Feigenblatt 2007a, 2007b; Khong 2006; Kolodziej 2005; Kornprobst 2009; Scott Cooper 2008). Examples of this are the cases of Malaysia and Switzerland. However, “small peoples” refers to ethnonational groups that lack those characteristics, and thus live in constant existential fear. It is important to note that what is significant about the previously mentioned characteristics is their subjective character. Their combination results in an aggregate intersubjective reality, which is perceived by the group as an objective fact. Thus, a relatively strong ethnonational group in terms of objective resources and capabilities, such as the Israelis, can perceive themselves as a “small people” living in constant danger of extermination.

In the case of the Israelis, their fear is mostly that of physical extermination by their many enemies in the Middle East, however fear of extermination can be caused by other factors (Abulof 2009: 235). Abulof presents the case of the French Canadians, and explains how their feelings of uncertainty are due mostly to a fear of slow death through assimilation into the dominant Anglo culture (Abulof 2009: 230). Both groups can be considered to be “small peoples” in that they lack at least one of the three characteristics that define a strong ethnonational group.

The following sections will apply the concept of “small peoples” to the case of Muslim Malays living in the Thai deep South. First, a brief overview of the historical background of the ethnonational group variously known as Muslim Thais, Malay Thais, and descendants of the Sultanate of Patani will be provided (Dingwerth 2008; Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008; Neher 2002; Soldiers 2008; Ungpakorn 2007; Wyatt 2003). Then, a section will cover the intersubjective existential uncertainty of Malay Thais from the point of view of identity and self-determination, while another section will deal with issues of physical existential threats. Finally, the results of the two sections will be interpreted and explained to show how Malay Thais suffer from fear of extermination due to both assimilation and actual physical disappearance.

The Sultanate of Patani and its Descendants

The ethnonational group currently known as Muslim Thais is mostly found in the three southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, as well as a few districts of Songkla Province (Dingwerth 2008: 5; Liow 2006). The vast majority of the inhabitants of the region are Muslim and speak a dialect of Malay known as Patani-Malay. Rubber plantations, subsistence farming, and fishing are the most important economic activities in a region that has been bypassed by the exponential growth of Thailand’s economy in the last decades of the twentieth century (Liow 2006; Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008). Moreover, per capita income in the Southern provinces is around one third of the per

capita income in the capital (Dingwerth 2008).

The region was formerly the independent Sultanate of Patani until it was forcefully annexed by Siam in 1906 (Liow 2006; Ungpakorn 2007; Wyatt 2003). Contrary to what happened to other Malay sultanates in the peninsula after the end of colonial rule, the Sultanate of Patani was not given the autonomy enjoyed by luckier neighbors, which joined the Malay Federation, later to become the Federation of Malaysia (Neher 2002). Annexation instantly transformed Muslim Malays from a majority in their region to a minority. In addition to that, Siam became Thailand in the early decades of the twentieth century, which further defined the State as a Thai nation-state (Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008; Neher 2002; Ungpakorn 2007; Wyatt 2003). Nationalist military governments during and after World War II further promoted the idea of the unitary centralized nation-state based on the three pillars of Nation, Monarchy, and Religion (Mulder 2000; Wyatt 2003). It is important to note that “Nation” refers to the Thai nation, most specifically central Thais, “Monarchy” refers to the often interrupted Chakri dynasty, and “Religion” refers to Theravada Buddhism (Mulder 2000). The educational system was shaped so as to promote the unitary state and a version of history reflecting the point of view of conservative central Thais (Somwung Pitiyanuwat 2005). While the propaganda machine was being set up in Bangkok, the government decided to promote the resettlement of Buddhist Thais to the deep South, so as to promote the process of assimilation (Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008).

Control over the territories was centralized, and governors were always appointed by Bangkok, as well as most other high-ranking officials, including the Chularajmontri (Liow 2006: 102; Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008; Neher 2002; Pongsudhirak 2008; Ungpakorn 2007; Wyatt 2003).¹ Needless to say, most teachers in the deep South were also sent from Bangkok, as well as all of the teaching materials. For many years, only Thai was taught at schools, and Buddhism lessons were also compulsory. To top it all, civic education, a euphemism for royalist propaganda, was and still is compulsory in public schools (Somwung Pitiyanuwat 2005). The result of those policies was the economic stagnation of the once prosperous Sultanate of Patani. Moreover, Muslim leaders felt alienated by the central government and threatened by the onslaught of a foreign culture. One action taken by the Muslim Malay communities was the setting up of a parallel education system based on the ancient institutions of the Sultanate of Patani (Dingwerth 2008; Liow 2006). Religious schools proliferated as a way of coping with a lack of tolerance in the traditional Thai education system.

Over the years, the Muslim Malay community divided into three main groups: the traditionals, the moderns, and the hybrids (Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008). The traditionals were mostly Muslim Malays who did not attend Thai public schools, could barely speak Thai, and attended traditional religious schools or studied abroad in Muslim countries. Moderns were Muslim Malays who had attended Thai public schools, could speak Thai fluently, had never attended a religious school, and who supported assimilation of Malays into Thai society as the way to successful socioeconomic development. Between the two groups, one finds the hybrids, who have attended Thai public schools at some point in their lives, and also religious schools. Throughout the Thai occupation of the Sultanate, the central government has favored dealing with the

¹ The Chularajmontri is the nominal head of the Muslim community in Thailand. He is appointed by the central government, and lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim Malay community in the deep South. The last two Chularajmontris have not been ethnic Malays.

moderns and co-opting them in order to rule more effectively (Jitpiomrasi and McCargo 2008). This was effective for many years, due to the unwillingness of the traditionals to take any role in the official government of the region. In other words, the traditionals were more concerned with protecting their culture through religious schools and informal community leadership than with the occupying bureaucracy sent by the central government. Thus, the moderns were allowed to fill the lower ranks of the bureaucracy in the deep South. Things started to change when the numerical balance moved towards the hybrids. More and more youths were attending Thai public schools as well as religious schools. The result of the shift was similar to what happened in other colonial societies (Hillel 2009; Ackerly and True 2008; Laffey and Weldes 2008). Hybrids started to feel increasingly alienated by Thai society, and left behind in terms of economic development. Usually, a growth in the proportion of youths in conjunction with relative economic deprivation leads to conflict (David Carment and Taydas 2009), and this is exactly what started to happen in the Thai deep South. Insurgent movements that had been virtually dormant for years started to regain strength, and to use more violent methods. Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi started to recruit young disgruntled hybrids to carry out daring attacks on government infrastructure. An insurgency that had all but died by 1990 was on the rise again in 2004 (Soldiers 2008: 1).

Regarding the actual system of government imposed by the occupying power, the local government was headed by the centrally appointed governor. However, power was always divided between the governor and the military. The names of the security agencies in charge of the South have changed over the years, but one of the most important is the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) (Dingwerth 2008: 6; Jitpiomrasi and McCargo 2008; Ungpakorn 2007). The ISOC was originally established to deal with the communist insurgency during the Cold War, and was later given control over the deep South. Several laws allow the military and the police to detain suspects for long periods of time without due process (Liow 2006; Soldiers 2008), and in several cases the military has made use of those powers to detain great numbers of suspected militants. Two cases are especially infamous; the Krisek Mosque massacre, and the Tak Bai incident. The two events claimed more than 190 lives, including many women and children, and both occurred at the height of the insurgency in 2004 (Liow 2006: 98; Ungpakorn 2007).

Muslim Malays also face the threat of Buddhist village militias supported by the Queen.² Village militias, such as the Queen's Village Protection Volunteers (Or Ror Bor) and the Ruam Thai (Thais United), established by Maj. General Phitak Ladkaew, terrorize Muslim villages with impunity. Buddhist militias usually have close ties with the military and the police forces in the area, and tend to function as an unofficial branch of the security forces, with little or no accountability. While the groups were established with the aim of protection, there have been reports of involvement in vigilante-style attacks against Muslims (Soldiers 2008: 17).

In summary, the Muslim Malays from the historic Sultanate of Patani have become second-class citizens in a Thai ethnonational state based on the three pillars of the Thai nation, the Chakri Dynasty, and Theravada Buddhism. Some of the existential threats they faced, such as a military occupation, Buddhist militias, and an intolerant

² Queen Sirikit has openly supported several village militias and favored the Buddhist communities in the deep South.

ethnocentric educational system, have been discussed. The following sections will explore two other kinds of existential threats faced by the Malay minority in the deep South, and how the concept of “small peoples” fits their present intersubjective reality.

Existential Uncertainty due to Assimilation

As described in the previous section, the Thai State has attempted to forge a national culture based on that of Central Thais and Theravada Buddhism (Mulder 2000). The three pillars of the Unitary State complement each other, and preempt any attempt at redefining the state as a multiethnic entity, which would better reflect demographic reality. Thailand as a territorial entity is home to a vast array of ethnic groups (Mulder 2000; Neher 2002; Wyatt 2003). One of the largest Chinese overseas communities has made a home in Thailand, and has become the backbone of the economy and some of the professions. Mons, hill tribe peoples, Indians, Burmese, Khmer, *inter alia*, are all present in the Thai territorial state. Nevertheless, if one reads a history book used in a Thai public school, one gets the idea that the territory of present day Thailand has always been controlled by central Thais, and that all other groups are merely guests. A civic religion was created to promote the monarchy as the central pillar of the nation-state, and a highly ritualized version of Theravada Buddhism was put in the service of the State (Callahan 2005; Chye 2008; Hamlin 2009; Liow 2006; Ungpakorn 2007).

After Siam annexed the Sultanate of Patani, the same assimilationist approach was attempted with the Muslim Malay communities. Their history was omitted from the public school curriculum, their symbols were ignored, and Buddhism was introduced as part of both the official curriculum and, most importantly, the hidden curriculum. The Civic Religion of the State, including its recently created rituals, was imposed on them (Ungpakorn 2007). As explained in the Introduction, the concept of “small peoples” has at its core a feeling of identity as a distinct ethnonational group, with a clear sense of past, present, and future (Abulof 2009). Before the annexation, the Sultanate of Patani had a clear sense of a past, a long history with its own traditions and dynasty, a clear sense of the present, their own State and self-determination, and a feeling of a future as a distinct ethnocultural group. However, that all started to change after the annexation.

The past may seem a strong foundation of an ethnocultural group, but it can also be undermined, since it depends on passing on knowledge about history, and history is written by the winners. The Thai government has ignored or simply omitted the South’s independent history from official accounts, including public education (Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008; Ungpakorn 2007). That means it becomes increasingly difficult to pass on the group memory of a unique and ancient past to the new generations. Elders and leaders feel that by omitting their history, the government is taking away their past. The past lives in the present in the memory of the living; it becomes part of their intersubjective reality. That part of the intersubjective reality of a group is very important, in that it provides a strong sociocultural base and gives a general feeling of stability and group strength. Thus, it is understandable that Muslim Malays in the deep South feel uncertainty regarding the “future” of their past. They fear that their unique past will be forgotten, and future generations will live without a clear idea about where they came from, other than the one fabricated by the central government. Therefore, the imposition of a unified history omitting the unique contribution of the Muslim South has threatened the sense of “past” of the Muslim community, leading to a feeling of

existential uncertainty.

Now let us consider the present. The three pillars of the nation-state, the central government's propaganda machine, and the media all promote the vision of a unitary state based on Central Thai culture (Ungpakorn 2007; Wyatt 2003). It is clear that Muslim communities feel that their culture and distinct way of life is threatened in the present. Civic religion is full of rituals stressing Theravada Buddhism, the Chakri dynasty, and Thai culture (Mulder 2000). The Muslim community feels bombarded by assimilationist propaganda from all corners. One simple yet striking example of the degree of force employed by the government in order to promote the assimilation of the Muslim South can be seen in any movie theater. Every movie in every theater throughout the country must be preceded by a propaganda music video exhorting the King ("Asia: The Trouble with Harry; Thailand's Lese-majeste Law" 2009). People are required to stand for the full duration of the song as a sign of respect and "submission". Failure to stand is not only punished through the usual method of ostracism, but also through the draconian *lese majeste*, which means that any citizen can accuse the "offender" of disrespect to the monarchy, and the accused can be sentenced to a jail term of up to 15 years ("Asia: The First Hurdle; Thai Politics" 2009; "Asia: The Trouble with Harry; Thailand's Lese-majeste Law" 2009; "Leaders: The King and Them; Thailand's Monarchy" 2008; "A Right Royal Mess; Thailand's King and its Crisis" 2008; Ungpakorn 2007). Needless to say, this has happened several times, not only in the South, but also in other parts of the country. It is important to note the symbolic nature of the ritual, and how it pervades even the private sector, such as movie theaters. Other examples can be seen in official school books and official holidays. Thus, Muslim communities feel themselves to be in a constant state of siege by Thai culture and civic religion. Moreover, Patani-Malay is not used in government schools in the South; only Central Thai is taught, which means that if left to the public school system, children would not learn their ethnonational group's ancient language (Liow 2006; Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008).

It is not hard to see why the Muslim communities in the South do not identify themselves with the symbols of civic religion; after all, the Queen did not establish Muslim Community Defense groups as seen in the previous section (Soldiers 2008: 17). Thus, the Muslim community does not have a strong feeling of "present" as a distinct ethnonational community. Their intersubjective reality is one of the threat of assimilation into Thai culture. The picture is very similar in terms of religion, which has led the community to renewed attempts to promote a parallel system of Muslim schools to protect their religion and to instruct new generations in their faith. From the point of view of the Muslim Thai community, there is a clear existential threat to their culture and religion, both in terms of the "past" and the "present".

In terms of their view of the future as a distinct sociocultural group, their existence cannot be taken for granted. Fewer members of the new generations are part of the traditional group, and keeping Patani-Malay alive is a challenge, considering that public education is conducted in Thai. Thus, the Muslim Malay community in Southern Thailand cannot take its future existence as a given. The importance of this intersubjective phenomenon is that it differs from the normal state of affairs for strong ethnonational groups. Few Japanese would question the existence of the Japanese nation in the future; its existence is taken for granted. However, for the Muslim Malay community in Southern Thailand, the present undermines the past, and diminishes

the possibilities for a future. In summary, government policies forcefully promoting conversion to a civic religion based on Central Thai culture has undermined the historical base of the Muslim Malay minority. Moreover, the day-to-day experiences of members of this ethnonational group face myriad attempts to force their assimilation into a foreign culture, and in the process this takes away the normal cognitive assumption of an eternal future as a distinct group. Therefore, the Muslim community in the deep South can be considered to be a “small people”, suffering from challenges similar to those faced by French Canadians on the sociocultural front, while also facing physical existential threats similar to those feared by Israelis.

Existential Uncertainty due to Annihilation and/or Internal Displacement

An ethnonational group may face physical threats to their existence. In a case approaching a Weberian ideal type, the Israelis have faced several attempts by other ethnonational groups to exterminate them (Reisman 1981; Bzostek and Robison 2008; Waxman 2009). This threat is still present in the collective subconscious of the Jewish and Israeli communities. Fears of obliteration are reinforced by hostile statements made by leaders of neighboring countries calling for the destruction of the State of Israel (Abulof 2009; Waxman 2009). While the physical threats faced by the Muslim Malay community in the deep South are not at such a macro scale as those faced by Israel, they do have some common characteristics with the experience of Jews during the early years of the Nazi regime (Roberts 1997). First of all, there is no rule of law in the South, but rather a permanent State of Emergency under martial law (AHRC 2009; Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008). Members of the military and the police have wide discretionary powers to make arrests without a court order, and may keep suspects in custody for long periods of time without access to a lawyer (AHRC 2009). Beyond the powers enjoyed under martial law, the military enjoys virtual impunity from any atrocities committed by its members in the deep South. More than 3000 people have died since 2004 due to the insurgency. The military has promoted a military solution to the unrest in the Southern provinces, leading to atrocities such as the attack on the Krisek Mosque and the Tai Bai incidents, in which almost 200 civilians died (Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008). Military tactics also include sweeping operations into villages suspected of harboring insurgents, and widespread intimidation of the civilian population (AHRC 2009). In order to keep suspects out of their villages for longer periods of time, the military has established “reeducation camps” outside the deep South. Many suspects are virtually forced to accept incarceration in these camps, with the result that many innocent Muslim men have had to leave their families and villages for prolonged periods of time, and thus have left their families in dire economic circumstances.

In order to truly understand the scale of the military operation in the South, it is worthwhile examining the increases in the military budget over the years. The budget rose from \$2.4 billion in 2004 to \$4.2 billion in 2008 (Dingwerth 2008: 6). Taking into consideration that Thailand is still a developing country, and that the Southern provinces are among the poorest in the country, it is ironic that billions of dollars are being used by the military rather than in tackling the root causes of the conflict, such as asymmetrical development and unemployment (Liow 2006). Due to the exponential power imbalance between the military and the Muslim community, and the aggressive military tactics used to deal with Southern unrest, it is understandable that the Muslim community

lives in an intersubjective reality of fear of physical annihilation. Muslim communities have to cope with the realities of a military occupation with very little respect for their physical safety.

Unrest in the South has also led to the gradual internal displacement of Muslims to other parts of the country in order to escape the violence. This leads to the dismemberment of families and villages, and the disruption of social interaction with other members of the community. In addition, early policies of the central government shortly after the annexation relocated thousands of Buddhist Thais to the Southern provinces in an attempt to reduce the relative majority of Muslims in the region, and thus ease assimilation (Soldiers 2008; Ungpakorn 2007; Wyatt 2003). The influx of Buddhist Thais to the area further raised the fears of the Muslim community in terms of its historical ownership of the land in the region, and the possible sociodemographic changes to the population in the area. Relocation of thousands of Thais into the Southern provinces was perceived as an attempt to dilute and divide the Muslim Malay community, and in that way ease its assimilation and control by the central government.

In conclusion, the Muslim community in the deep South has faced and still faces physical threats to its existence. The prolonged military occupation of the region, in addition to the aggressive military solutions pursued by the security forces in order to deal with Southern unrest, further exacerbate the situation. Furthermore, the lack of accountability and rule of law disrupt the daily lives of entire villages due to the ever-present possibility of death, incarceration in a camp, or internal dislocation. The physical threats faced by the Muslim community in the deep South are very real, and lead to a diminished existence in which the present is at best liminal, and the future uncertain.

Conclusion

As shown in the two previous sections, the Muslim community in the deep South of Thailand lives in an intersubjective state of existential uncertainty. Threats to its culture, religion, and sense of historical past due to policies of the central government lead the embattled community to a diminished existence, and an ever-present feeling of uncertainty. Thus the sociocultural aspect of the Muslim community as a distinct ethnonational entity is under constant threat from external sources, and because of that, its future existence cannot be taken for granted by its members. The same is true in terms of the physical factors of self-determination. The overwhelming military superiority enjoyed by the central government and its use as a tool to subdue and forcefully assimilate the deep South limits the freedom of action of the Muslim community. Threats to the physical integrity of the community as an integrated entity through forced dislocation, vigilante attacks, raids, and detention, *inter alia*, all help create an intersubjective reality characterized by the fear of the possibility of physical destruction. Therefore, the Muslim community in the deep South can be considered a “small people” fighting for its right to exist, both as a physical entity and as a sociocultural ethnonational group.

Limitations and Further Research

The present article follows an interpretative approach to the conflict in the Thai deep South that concentrates on the intersubjective realities of the Muslim community

regarding its level of uncertainty in terms of existential threats, both physical and sociocultural. Needless to say, this interpretation needs to be complemented by attitudinal research conducted in the affected communities, as well as in-depth interviews with opinion leaders in the Muslim South. Due to the macro level of analysis taken in this article, the Muslim community was assumed to be relatively monolithic, with the exception of a brief discussion about the three main groups composing it. However, the Muslim communities, as well as the insurgency, are relatively heterogeneous and dynamic entities (Dingwerth 2008; Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008; Neher 2002; Soldiers 2008; Ungpakorn 2007; Wyatt 2003). In addition, further research is needed in terms of the policy making process undertaken by the central government and related stakeholders to deal with the problems faced by the deep South since 2004. Future studies dealing with attitudinal change in Muslim communities, as well as a detailed analysis and evaluation of the Thai government's approach to the Southern unrest, could add needed empirical support to this interpretative study.

Recommendations

Since this article deals with the intersubjective reality of the Muslim community in the deep South, a few recommendations dealing with that reality are provided. Assuming that the Muslim community feels a high level of existential uncertainty, both physically and socioculturally, one way to deal with some of the grievances of the community would be to tackle that intersubjective reality. Note that in order to deal with that intersubjective reality, it is not only necessary to deal with the actual "objective" reality of the Muslim South, but also to deal with their perceptions of that reality. Some concepts can be borrowed from international relations and diplomacy to deal with the precarious intersubjective reality of the Muslim community. Lessons from preventive diplomacy can be applied when the government or one of its agencies deals with the Muslim community. Confidence-building measures can lower the sense of threat felt by the community when dealing with government forces. Finally, second-track diplomacy can improve communication and reduce suspicion between members of the Muslim community and those of the majority population. Some of the previous approaches have been attempted at several points during the conflict. Most efforts to deal with the intersubjective reality of the Muslim community have come from civil society and academics, and have produced some positive results (Jitpiromrsi and McCargo 2008). However, more government reassurance is needed, since the Muslim community considers the government to be the prime threat.

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