CHAPTER 1

Islam on the Move: The Intersection of Faith, Identity and Social Network

1.1 Background and Rationale of the Study

With a population of 10,000 people[1] (documented and undocumented), the Burmese Muslim[2] community is one of the most prominent in Mae Sot, a town in northwest Thailand close to the border with Burma. The Burmese Muslims started to arrive in Mae Sot in the mid-1960s, due to outbreaks of violence in Burma[3] against Indian migrants, including Muslim and Hindu communities. The continuing unstable socio-political situation in Burma at that time resulted in a surprisingly large number of Burmese Muslims moving to Mae Sot in the late 1980s along with the curtailment of black market activities in Phalu and Wangkha; plus as a result of a series of attacks by the Burmese military in Kawmoora[4] (see also Lee Sang Kook 2007). Mae Sot became the main destination for Burmese Muslims seeking shelter at that time, due to its location not so far from Kawmoora. By crossing the border to Thailand, they attempted to avoid subsequent attacks along the Burmese border. As well as its geographical

[1] Information collected during an interview with a Thai Muslim, a committee member at Nurul Islam Mosque in Mae Sot. He mentioned that the total number of Muslims from Burma has reached over 20,000. This number is only a rough calculation which places Muslims from Burma as one single community. In fact, this population contains a number of different Muslim communities with different cultural backgrounds, such as Burmese Muslims, Arakan Muslims or Rohingyas, Karen Muslims and Mon Muslims.

[2] In this thesis I use the term "Burmese" to refer to the national group who identify "Burma" as their native land. The term "Burmese Muslim" is not used to refer to every Muslim from Burma; it only refers to one Muslimethnic group in Burma (which is not officially delineated).

[3] In this thesis, I use the term "Burma" instead of "Myanmar", not due to any political issue but to maintain term consitency.

[4] Phalu, Wangkha and Kawmoora are three areas located in Karen State (Burma) bordered with Thailand, and which had border gates constructed by the KNU. This was in response to the border closing regulations set by the Burmese government during its military rule. The three border gate areas subsequently developed as the centers of black market activity under the KNU before finally being destroyed by the Burmese military.

position, the presence of a Muslim community in the town was also a reason why Burmese Muslims were motivated to move to Mae Sot. Their presence helped Burmese Muslims adapt to Mae Sot life, by accessing temporary settlements, and participating in religious routines, or economic life[5]. The number of Burmese Muslims in the town increased sharply along with the economic boom of Mae Sot in the early 1990s, a reflection of the economic integration being encouraged by the authorities. The Thai Prime Minister at that time, Mr. Chatchai Choonhavan, campaigned by saying "Changing a battlefield into a market place", and reopened border gates in order to develop transnational trade between Thailand and Burma. After the establishment of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) in 1992, Mae Sot and Thailand's other international borderlands became the subject of various national economic regulations aimed at free trade (Walker 1999, Tsuneishi 2005, Arnold 2006). Under a series of eight development plans (1997-2001), Mae Sot grew into a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) focused on the industrial and commercial sectors. It is this which motivated Burmese Muslims to move to Mae Sot. Many Burmese Muslims came from Burma direct to Mae Sot, but others were Burmese Muslims who relocated from refugee camps in search of work. State flexibility and the presence of agencies facilitating border crossings have contributed to the increasing number of Burmese Muslims living in Mae Sot.

The better infrastructure in Mae Sot as compared to their home towns has allowed Burmese Muslims to feel at home there, and most admitted to me that living in Mae Sot, has allowed them to be truly free. They can join a variety of economic activities without worrying about trouble from the local government or other communities. In addition to working in factories and shops, some Burmese Muslims also engage in trade in Mae Sot. At Phajaroen market, they can be seen everywhere; selling household items, herbs, fresh meat and fish. Some of them sell from a cart, or from a temporary stall, while others rent a permanent shop. Prasatwithi Road is located not far from the market, and there many Burmese Muslims are actively involved in the gems trade, either as traders or brokers. Other trade activities run by Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot include food and beverage stalls, secondhand bicycle, used car and spare parts sales, as well as passport and money transfer agencies.

[5] Islamic norms require each Muslim to always help other Muslims in need of help.

The Burmese Muslim community really appreciates the plurality of Mae Sot, as this gives them freedom of religious expression, while being a Muslim in Burma attracts discrimination. While in Mae Sot, they feel comfortable participating in their religious routines, and are even brave enough to show their religious identity in public. This fact is evidenced by the fact that there has been a Muslim community in Mae Sot since the mid-eighteenth century. Various religious infrastructures have been built, such as Nurul Islam and Bengala Mosques, which facilitate Burmese Muslim's religious routines in public. In addition, the presence of a Burmese Muslim community has allowed them to reassert their Muslim identity, such as through wearing skull caps (men) and *hijab* (women), Burmese Muslim can easily be distinguished from the other Burmese migrants; furthermore, when Burmese Muslims meets other Muslims, they will shake hands and greet each other with "*Assalamualaikum*", then use their Muslim names to introduce themselves.

Burmese Muslims think that Islam not only has a religious meaning, but is also a part of their ethnic identity, as shown through their use of various Islamic attributes during their everyday lives. Fundamentally, the impact of religion on Burmese Muslim identity has a strong relation to two different factors: their ancestors' history and the building of national identity in the modern state era. The first factor is a part of their "self-ascription", in which Burmese Muslims view themselves in accordance with genealogical traits. However, the Burmese Muslims also define Islam as a key part of their way of life, so that many Burmese Muslims' cultural products are interpreted based on their Islamic knowledge. The second factor is associated more with the power relations that exist between the self and the state, which tends to contain political identity. In Burma, the state has tried to create a single Burmese identity aligned to the Burman majority, and choosing Buddhism as the national religion. In this case, the state would seem to exclude Burmese Muslims from the Burman majority through religious differences, even though both of them actually share similar origins and some cultural attributes.

In this study, I refer to Burmese Muslims as an ethno-religious community because their identity is shaped through the conflation of ethnic and religion identity. As I mentioned previously, Burmese Muslims are culturally similar to the Burman majority

in some respects; for example, Burmese is used as their daily language and it is also the mother tongue of both communities. Betel nut and *thanaka* are two cultural products that are always consumed on a daily basis; moreover, Burmans and Burmese Muslims also wear similar traditional clothes, and in particular the *longyi*. However, Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot can easily be distinguished from Burmans as they have Islamic names and some Islamic clothing they wear on a daily basis. While visiting a Burmese Muslim's house, one can also see items hanging on the wall, such as a calendar with Arabic calligraphy or mosque photographs. In terms of food, both communities actually eat similar types of food, though the use of *halal*[6] food by the Muslims creates a differentiation between the communities in this respect.

As well as its function in terms of identity, I also argue that Islam, or religion, is considered by the Burmese Muslims to be social network, as it helps them survive in Mae Sot. Through religious activities at the mosque, Burmese Muslims can meet, socialize and maintain relationships with other Muslims from other communities in Mae Sot. As a result, Burmese Muslims have the chance to access a lot of information related to house rentals or job vacancies. Nurul Islam Mosque not only accommodates their religious needs, but also helps them in various other ways. The educational institution at Nurul Islam allows every Burmese Muslim to access a Thai formal education and a religious education. The resettlement process in Mae Sot is also assisted by the fact that Nurul Islam rents rooms at affordable rates. Eventually, Burmese Muslim arrivals can expand their social networks by becoming members of Tablighi Jama'at, which is based in Nurul Islam.

The success the Burmese Muslims have had at reconstructing their ethnic identity in Mae Sot leads me to question some scholars who have argued that migration is a significant factor in the interchange of ethnic identity. I believe we cannot simply say that cultural contact and assimilation pressure regarding identity in the host country always result in the degradation of a migrant group's identity. The transformation of ethnic identity can happen through inter-marriage during migration, and this has a

[6] Halal is an Arabic term defined as "to be allowed" or "permitted". Halal is commonly used in the context of foods, whether it could be consumed or not by a Muslim. Based on what it is written in the Koran, Muslim is prohibited to eat the foods contaminated with pork, reptiles, fanged animal, amphibia, and blood.

permanent migration pattern. Throughout this study, I will argue that the transformed or sustained ethnic identity of a migrant cannot be separated from the structural power in the new location. Burmese Muslims have been able to reinvent their ethnic identity due to a long migration history in Mae Sot, which is an area conducive to the development of with plural identities. The second factor is the territory of Mae Sot, which is located near to a border between Thailand and Burma, and this has facilitated the Burmese Muslims' imagining their ethnic identity. In addition to this, I do not deny that migration has had a significant impact on the shifting meanings of ethnic identity in the study area, for as in the Burmese Muslim context, the reinvention of ethnic identity in Mae Sot is not only related to boundary maintenance, but also reflects an attempt to draw-upon social capital.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

1.2.1 Research Questions

a) The economic integration regime set up around the international border has led to flexibility from the Thai state in Mae Sot in relation to the flow of goods, people and ideologies. How have the Burmese Muslims manipulated state flexibility for the sake of their own socio-cultural and economic survival?
b) How has the Burmese Muslim community in Mae Sot shaped itself and been reshaped by the multiple forms of power that exist in the study area, i.e. the local Thai authorities and local residents?
c) How has the Burmese Muslim community in Mae Sot cultivated a Muslim identity into its social network, for its own benefit?

1.2.2 Research Objectives

a) To understand how Burmese Muslims negotiate with and manipulate the flexible economic system set up around the border, for their survival in Mae Sot.
b) To understand what external factors have influenced the re-construction of the Burmese Muslim migrants' identity in Mae Sot.
c) To elucidate how Muslim networks have helped the Burmese Muslim migrants in their socio-politic-economic lives in Mae Sot.

1.3 Literature on Burmese Muslims and Muslim Studies in the Thai context

It is important to review the literature on Burmese Muslims, both in the Burmese and Thai context. So far, only two books have been published in English that focus on the notion of Burmese Muslims amid the complexity of Muslim identity in Burma[7]. Most of the social studies on Muslims in Burma tend to concentrate on the violence perpetrated against Rohingya. Moreover, some scholar and, NGOs, and the mass media, have tended to focus on the issue of Rohingya. This imbalance in terms of the focus of the literature could lead to generalizations in terms of viewing the Muslim community in Burma as a single entity, that is, as the Rohingya. While acknowledging the Rohingya issue, this literature review will describe Muslim diversity in Burma and the complexity of ethnic classifications within this group. Moreover, I will focus on Burmese Muslims, since this community is spread all over the world. For most Burmese migrants, Thailand is the key migration destination. From Thailand, Burmese Muslims move on, to Malaysia and Singapore, and some have even used the UN resettlement program to move to Japan, Australia and the US.

1.3.1 Muslim Settlement in Burma

The history of Muslims in Burma can be broken down into three different time periods: the traditional state era, during British colonial rule and the modern nation state. The first Muslims to reach the coastal regions of Lower Burma and Arakan were the Arabs and Persians in the ninth century. According to a Burmese chronicle, during the reign of King Anawratha (1044-1077), two Arab merchants became stranded on the shores of Martaban, and they were taken to the Burmese interior to service the King as horsemen. Another chronicle mentions that the nucleus of the Muslim community in interior Burma was Indian captives (including Muslims) who were brought there during the reign of Kyanzittha (Yegar 1972). From their first arrival in the twelfth century, no reports mention that Muslims had significant power in Burma. Then, around the thirteenth century, this story changed with the emergence of another Muslim group, the Tartart warriors from China, who headed to the interior of Burma. It is told that the Tartart warriors were sent to expand the Chinese region from the city of Bhamo, and

[7] Moshe Yegar (1972) and Jean Berlie (2008).

then told to attack and destroy Pagan. In another part of Burma, the Kingdom of Arakan, the influence of Bengal Muslims entered the region around the fifteenth century, with the coming of the Bengal Sultanate's army under General Veli Khan, who helped Narameikhla reclaim the throne from the Burmese Court of Ava.

The wars that occurred during this period led to Muslims in the interior of Burma working as soldiers or being caught as prisoners. In addition to these groups, Muslim merchants from the Arab Peninsula, India and Persia also visited Burma's coastal regions and dominated the sea trade up to the early sixteenth century. These merchants married Burmese woman and lived in these areas temporarily before continuing their trade journeys to other regions[8]. Since then, the Muslim population in Burma's coastal areas has gradually increased. Many of them believe that inter-marriages such as these were the embryo of Burmese Muslims in the country. Through Muslims' expertise at seafaring, they were often trusted by the local authorities to occupy strategic positions. Some of them later moved to Burma coastal towns (such as Rangoon) and joined in with commercial trade with Burmese natives. Muslims in the interior of Burma and in the coastal areas (especially from India) quickly became Burmese, except for their religion. However, the local people continued to consider them foreigners, meaning they were (and still are) referred to as '*kala*[9].

1.3.2 Muslim Classification during British Rule in Burma

British victory in the Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-1885 led to them conquering all of Burma, then uniting it with Greater India. While it was under British rule, the number of Muslims in Burma increased significantly, due mostly to increased Indian Muslim migration. Indian Muslim migrants quickly dominated certain jobs in sectors opened by the British in Burma, becoming teachers, clerks and engineers, as well as doing unskilled work such as working as servants and laborers. The presence of the British colonial government, along with the large-scale Indian migration, resulted in Burmese social, economic and political systems changing. As mentioned by Yegar

[8] The cruise depends on the timing of the monsoon.
[9] Since the Burmese Chauvinism movement in 1932, the term *kala* has been used to support discriminatory practices agains non-natives. Being called *kala*, means a person is excluded from Burmese life.

(1972), under British rule, "no new public, army, police, or civilian and administrative [organization] was established in Burma without Indian[s]". From the start of British rule and until 1921, the number of Indians in Burma rose to one million, with half of them being Muslim[10]. Indian Muslims preferred to build their own settlements similar to their native lands, and they avoided assimilating with the local culture, although some of them married local women.

Under British rule, a national population census was held every ten years, with the first held in 1872[11]. This national census was the first instrument used to give an overview of ethnic classifications among the Muslims in Burma. For the first national census, Muslims were categorized into two major groups: the Indian Muslims and Burmese Muslims. Indian Muslim consisted of some sub-divisions based on their native locations, whereas Burmese Muslims were divided into two sub-divisions: the Arakan and Burmese Muslims. Another national census covering the whole of Burma was held on 1891, and used a more complex Muslim ethnic classification. Muslims was classified into a number of groups based on their ancestry. For the Indian Muslims, there were Saykhis, Sayyids, Moguls and Pathans, while the Burmese Muslims were sub-divided into Zerbadee[12], Arakanese, Panthay and Shan Muslims. In the national census on 1921, ethnic Muslim classification in Burma was subsequently changed, along with the application of place of origin as a data collection tool[13]. For the last census under British rule, Muslims were classified into four: Indian Muslims, Burman-Indians, Burmese and Panthay (Chinese).

A hatred of Indians began to appear among the Burmese, as the Indian migrants increasingly dominated various economic sectors. Native Burmese seemed jealous of the success of the Indians, particularly as they were basically migrants. This hatred gradually helped foster a growing sense of nationalism among the native people, and this eventually trigerred the anti-Indian riots that took place in the 1930s, which targeted

[10] This number does not include temporary Indian migrants who come to save money and returned to India. Their population is estimated to have reache done million, but was seasonal in nature (see Yegar 1972).
[11] The first national census did not cover the upper Burma regions because they were still under the rule of the King of Burma.
[12] This term was used to refer to mixed marriages between Muslims and Burman Buddhists, who later became the nucleus of the Burmese Muslim community.
[13] Muslim classifications used in India like Sayikhi and Sayyid are no longer used in Burma.

every Indian (both Hindu and Muslim). As a result, the Burmese began to politicize religion, to enhance nationalist feelings against Indian domination. In 1938, anti-Indian riots returned to the whole of Burma, with the main targets this time being Muslims. Burmese nationalists claimed that Muslim marriage system was a threat to the sustainability of Burmese identity. They instilled hatred against every Muslim who had married a local Burmese Buddhist and converted them into Muslim. The impact of this nationalist movement was also experienced by Burmese Muslims, or the *Zerbadees*. Although they had blended into Burmese culture, they were still categorized as *kala* because they were Muslims, so were still the object of discrimination. During the nationalist movement, many Muslims, especially Indians, returned home or migrated to other countries, meaning their population decreased sharply.

1.3.3 Forming Ethno-Religious Identity: From *Zerbadees* to Burmese Muslims

In his book called *The Muslims of Burma*, Yegar (1972) gives a lot of detail on the early history and development of Islam in Burma, from the traditionalist kingdom period right up to the early modern nation state era. As found, the state seemed to keep excluding Muslims as an ethnic minority, making work unclear on the issue of Burmese Muslims. This is different to Berlie (2008), who makes firm classifications of Muslims in Burma, especially during modern nation state era. In his publication, *Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslim*, Berlie claims that there are four different groups among Muslims in Burma. The first group is called the "Muslims of Indian origin", and consists of Muslims from Bangladesh, India or Pakistan. The second group is the Arakan Muslims or Rohingyas, Muslims from Rakhine state. The third group is the Panthay Muslims from Yunnan, and the last group, the Burmese Muslims or *Zerbadees*, who are the mixed marriage descendants of Muslims and Burman Buddhists. Although they are different, three of those four groups (excluding the Panthay) basically have a cultural link to India.

Both Yegar and Berlie argue that the term Burmese Muslim was controversially but continuously used during the early modern nation state era in Burma. During British rule, *Zerbadee* was the term used to describe Burmese Muslims - the mixed marriage

descendants of Muslims (from India, Arabia or Persia) and native Burmans. People categorized as *Zerbadee* were not classified into the group of "Muslims of Indian origin", because Burma was their native home. At a particular level, they were also considered to have a similar identity to Burmans, since their mother language was Burmese, and they also dressed and acted like the Burmans. The term *Zerbadee* first appeared during the third national census in 1891. However, the use of this term invited some protests from various sections of Burmese Muslim, because it was considered to have a controversial meaning (Yegar 1972). As a result, the term Burmese Muslims was proposed by the Burma Muslim Society (BMS), in order to replace the term *Zerbadee*. After many refusals, the term Burmese Muslim was finally approved by the British colonial government, and was first used in the national census of 1941[14].

According to Yegar (1972), the Muslims categorized as Burmese Muslims are the descendants of Indian Muslims and Burman Buddhists[15]. This classification means that Arakan Muslims are not classified as Burmese Muslims, although they also have a cultural link to India (and especially Bengal or Bangladesh). Arakan Muslims are separated from the Burmese Muslims because they are from Arakanese ethnic descendants, so they have their own culture that is different from the Burmese Muslim. On the other hand, Burmese Muslims also face a cultural barrier due to the identity of their ancestors, the Indian Muslims. This barrier was easily constructed, since Indian Muslims in Burma kept reinventing their identity through daily language use, other attributes and their education system. As a new group at that time, Burmese Muslims began to translate the Holy Koran and other religious texts (especially in Urdu language) into Burmese. The aim of this was to support the new generations of Burmese Muslims when learning about Islam (using their own language), and without them having to be educated at an Indian school.

[14] The results of a national census in 1941, which was the last census held under the British rule, were belived to be incomplete, therefore it was not published. This was due to the end of British rule during the census period, as a result of the invasion by Japanese forces (see Yegar 1972).

[15] The nucleus of Burmese Muslimscan be categorized as: 1) sons of an Indian father and a Burmese Buddhist mother, 2) sons of an Indian father and a Burmese Buddhist mother who converted to Islam, 3) sons of an Indian father and a Burmese Muslim woman; 4) sons of Burmese Muslim and Burmese woman who converted to Muslim, 5) sons of a Burmese Muslim mother and Burmese father who converted to Islam (very rare), and 6) sons of a Burmese Muslim father and mother (Yegar 1972; 33-34).

The Burmese nationalist movement became widespread in the early 1930s, and this triggered internal tensions between the Burmese Muslims and Indian Muslims. This movement was based on hatred against the Indian migrants, so anything related to Indians was the target of discrimination. Burmese Muslims themselves were also the object of discrimination and were categorized as *kala* because their religion was the same as the Indians'. A campaign which ran, called "Burma for Burmese and Burmese is Buddhist" was used to exclude Burmese Muslims, though culturally they could be classified as Burmese. At that time the anti-Indian riots caused many Burmese Muslims to act like a Burmans while they were in the public sphere, keeping their Muslim activities to their home space, in order to avoid violence (Berlie 2008). As Burmese Muslims share common behaviors with the Burmans, the Indian Muslims often claimed they were not truly Muslim.

After Burmese independence, Burmese Muslims fought for their right to be recognized as an ethnic minority in Burma. This attempt never succeeded, even after the military regime (*Tatmadaw*) took over power in 1962. They were not considered a minority ethnic group, but were considered Burmese citizens and given the same rights as others. In practice, they did receive equal treatment; instead, there were many prohibitions placed on the Burmese Muslim in terms of religious matters. During the *Tatmadaw* regime, the Indian influence was removed from Burma through the construction of Burmese as the national language and Buddhism as the state's religion. For Burmese Muslims, this was a double-edged sword; on the one side an advantage and on the other are disadvantage. The positive side was use of the Burmese language in informal Islamic schools, to replace the Urdu. After that, the holy Koran, the Hadiths and many other religious texts in Burmese began to spread among Muslims across Burma. On the other side, the state did not provide financial support to these Islamic schools and they required every Muslim student to learn *lokaniti*[16] in Burmese public schools.

As explained above, this study places Burmese Muslims as representatives of an ethno-religious community for whom their religious background has a strong influence on their identity. The term Burmese Muslim cannot be separated, in fact splitting the

[16] Buddhist instruction in ethics.

term into two would result in different, separate meanings. This is, of course, related to the construction of national identity and the diversity of the Muslim community in Burma. In the first case, the decision to make Buddhism the national religion has often led to Burmese Muslims being excluded from being Burmese, since there is a religious difference between them. On the other hand, one cannot over-simplify the situation by classifying them as Muslims from Burma, because within the Muslim community itself, there are various ethnicities, such as Indians, Rohingyas, the Karen, Mon and Panthay (Chinese Muslims). One irony is that despite the state's hegemonic decision to exclude them from being Burmese, the Burmese Muslims themselves imagine Burma to be their native land; based on which they draw their ethnic boundaries with other Muslim ethnicities.

The various forms of Muslim discriminations that occurred during the *Tatmadaw* regime caused many Muslims to escape to Thailand, with Mae Sot being the main gateway because it is located at the Thai-Burmese border. This study divides Burmese Muslim migrations to Mae Sot into two different time periods: the 1960s and 1980/90s. During the first period, most Burmese Muslim migration was of individuals, the main cause being the unstable political situation in Burma (there were very few economic motives). Mae Sot Muslims were considered the main patrons for such migrants, and they sheltered them and employed them[17]. During the second period, most Burmese Muslim migrants traveled to Mae Sot in groups, moving because there was large-scale violence used against them by the Burmese military, which destroyed their villages. The economic boom in Mae Sot also triggered a large-scale migration of Burmese Muslims in the mid 1990s. During this second period, the Burmese Muslims who traveled to Mae Sot did not just include men, but also some women and children.

Nowadays, Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot lives in harmony with other Muslim communities, such as the Thais, Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis. Their settlement is concentrated in *Chumchon* Islam, which includes some parts of Sripanit Road and along Islam Bamroong Road. With a total population of 10,000 people, Burmese Muslims represent the largest community among all the Muslim communities in Mae

[17] Most Burmese migrants during this period were men (it was very rare for women to migrate) and were employed as farmers, housekeepers and shopkeepers.

Sot[18]. Burmese Muslims are also closely involved in the economic growth of Mae Sot, and are involved in a number of economic sectors, working as laborers in factories, as shopkeepers, merchants at the market, businessman or even religious teachers at informal Islamic schools. In this study, the most interesting point I wish to highlight about the Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot is their interpretation of identity. According to some studies, Burmese Muslims prefer to present their Burmese identity while they are in Burma (see Yegar 1972 and Berlie 2008), but those in Mae Sot have tended to reinvent and reassert their Islamic identity. Although Burmese identity is embedded in the physically, performatively they attempt to show they are Muslims.

1.3.4 Locating Muslim Studies in the Thai Context

The uneven geographical spread of the Muslim population in Thailand is one factor in the paucity of Muslim studies in the region. To date, most studies on Islam in Thailand have been dominated by issues related to the conflicts taking place in the three southernmost Thai provinces (see Gilquin 2005, Liow 2006, Yusuf 2009), mainly due to the significant Muslim population of those areas (90% of Thai Muslims live there). In addition, this area has been the focus of study for most social scientists and political scientists. In fact, the conflict in southern Thailand has also been covered extensively by media. In an analytical context, current Thai studies mostly view the nature of ethnic conflict within the dynamic of building Thai national identity. Most scholars claim that the prolonged conflict in southern Thailand cannot be separated from its political dimension. Some other scholars argue that ethno-nationalism in those areas is not only influenced by an imagination of cultural awareness and an historical distinction from Bangkok (as the centre), but also appears as a response to the lack of development in those areas. Recently, many scholars have started to view the future of the southern Thai conflict in terms of having to develop a peace building project.

Amid a number of studies on the dynamics of building Thai national identity in the three southernmost provinces, there are some scholars who focus on transnational issues. For example, a study by Liow (2011) shows the impact of transnational Islam on

[18] According to the archives of the Nurul Islam mosque board and interviewsheld with the mosque committee, the total population of Thai Muslims in Mae Sot is 6,500 people, consisting of 3,150 men and 3,350 women.

the social transformation process among Muslims in the south of Thailand. In his study, he states that an open interaction with global Islam was the beginning of the Thai-Muslim internal conflict. The new ideologies brought by new generations (those educated in Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia and others in the Middle East) and the coming of various new religious movements, are often in opposition to the forms of Islam practiced by older generations. In contrast, Dorairajoo (2002) shows how Thai identity is being constructed as cultural capital by Thai Muslim migrants in Malaysia. Some Thai Muslims utilize their Thai identities to open Thai restaurant businesses in Malaysia. Thai Muslims who live in the south often do not know how to cook tom yum soup properly; nonetheless, in Malaysia its taste will be considered authentic Thai, because Malaysian assumes it is of Thai origin.

A good ethnography of Thai-Muslims on Nipa Island was written by Anderson (2010), and this provides a variation on Muslim studies in Thailand, most of which focus on the southernmost provinces. She examines how Nipa Muslims have been very flexible with their identity as Thais and Muslims. Although they live separately from the Thai mainland, Nipa Muslims have not isolated themselves from other communities. Through this study, Anderson argues that their identity is a locality process, which is re-active and always changing over time. In addition to Anderson, Suthep (1977) and Berlie (2000) are another two scholars who have contributed to the study of Muslims in Thailand. Both of them focus on Muslim development in northern Thailand, but in different contexts. Through a case study of Yunnanese Muslim traders, Berlie discusses how ethnic networks were very significant in the early development of Islam in northern Thailand (2000). Interestingly, Suthep (1977) tries to be very detailed by examining the history and structural ethnicity of two different Muslim communities in Chiang Mai; the Yunnanese and Pakistani Muslims. He shows how both ethnicities maintain their faith (and even strengthen it) while assimilating with local identity.

Through a case study of Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot, here I aim to enhance the literature on Muslims in Thailand. I try to establish that the development of Islam in Thailand has not only been influenced by Muslim ideology from Malaysia and China, but also from India. In this case, I do not claim that Muslims in Thailand are part of a homogenous community, because the group is actually very heterogeneous, both in

terms of the ethnicities represented and the group's ideological approach towards Islam itself. Such awareness is important for the future study of Muslims in this region, which so far has been focused on the three southernmost Thai provinces. Through this thesis I would also like to show another perspective on how Muslims are viewed in Thailand, which is mostly related to the ethno-nationalist context only. The concept of ethnicity or ethnic identity is certainly a focus of this study, although I do not examine this through the nationalist context, but rather focus on the phenomenon of Muslim migrants in accordance with their struggle to live far from their home towns. As migrants, Burmese Muslims are certainly different from the Muslim minorities in southernmost Thailand, who are Thai citizens and live in their own land with a Muslim identity as a minority. So, what about the Burmese Muslim migrants, who are mostly illegal and have a cultural distinction from local people of the Buddhist majority?

1.4 Research Methodology

1.4.1 Scope of the Research

This research study focuses on the nature of identity among Burmese Muslim migrants in Mae Sot. The main research frameworks used can be divided into two: the formation and function of identity. The constructivist argues that identity is a social construction that is not only related to the idea of "belonging" and "togetherness", but also contains political matters (Anderson 1991, Erikseen 1993, Gladney 2003, Keyes 2008). In this sense, identity is a tool used to dominate, or negotiate, with any practice of subordination. Therefore, identity cannot be classified as something static, because it is mostly manipulated and situated for particular interests (Barth 1969, Leach 1954, Keyes 1981, Chua 2007). Before explaining the function of identity for Burmese Muslims, I will first describe what shapes their identity. In short, Burmese Muslims are considered part as an ethno-religious community, since their identity is arranged based on the conflation between ethnic and religious identity. This is shown materially and/or in a physical form, such as the clothes they wear, their customs and their behaviors. In Mae Sot, ethno-religious identity can be easily reconstructed due to the plurality that exists there. The coming of other communities into the town, such as Burmese migrants

and Muslim communities, has also facilitated the reconstruction of Burmese Muslim identity in the town.

As for Burmese Muslims, religious identity is not only utilized to develop a sense of togetherness, and to reduce barriers with other communities, it is also manipulated into socio-cultural capital and helps form their social networks, both of which help them to survive in Mae Sot. In a social context, I believe that Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot have reinvented their religious identity and attempted to negotiate with the 'ethnic stigma' they face as Burmese migrants in Thailand, where the term '*khon phama*' (Burmese people) is always perceived in a negative way. The glory of the Muslim community in Mae Sot was expected to improve their image in the eyes of local people and the state authorities. In a cultural context, and with the religious identity, Burmese Muslims have attempted to place themselves as the coordinators of culture among other Muslim communities. This is supported by two main factors: their large population and the good understanding of Muslim knowledge they have. Apart from the social and cultural functions, being a Muslim has also given them the chance to access a Muslim network built since the eighteenth century, stretching from Mae Sot to other regions of Thailand.

1.4.2 Research Site

Muang Chod was the term used to refer to Mae Sot back in the thirteenth century. *Muang Chod* was part of the Sukhothai Kingdom, under the rule of King Ramkhamhaeng. During that time, Sukhothai was at the peak of its powers, and its territory included Vientiane in the east, Nakhon Si Tammarat in the south, Chod (Mae Sot) and Hangsaphadi in the west, and Luang Prabang in the north (Lee Sang Kook 2007). During the Ayuthaya era, Mae Sot became the main route for various military expeditions carried out by the Ayuthaya Kingdom (Siam) and Toungoo (Burma). At the same time, Mae Sot was also used by traders who wanted to reach Siam or go back to lower Burma. Even though it became the main route, Mae Sot was still an uninhabited region, a so called isolated zone. The coming of British rule in Burma after the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824 to 1826 was the starting point of the early change to Mae Sot,

from an isolated zone to a busy trading zone. Mae Sot also developed into a plural area, along with the arrival of trans-national migrants who built new communities there.

Administratively, Mae Sot is one of the nine districts of Tak province. It covers an area of 1,986 km² and is divided into ten sub-districts, one of which is the municipal area. Mae Sot town, which is also a municipality, has a dense population and quite complex social and economic systems. The population is spread over 20 different *Chumchon*. This research study focuses on the two main roads in the town: Islam Bamroong road and Sripanit road, which are located in the area called *Chumchon* Islam. Both roads are the focus of this study, since I assume they best represent the plurality of Mae Sot town, as well as the activities of the Burmese migrants. Burmese Muslim's social activities in these four locations are not only limited to the same community; they also link to other communities. On the other hand, here I focus on the two main economic centers in Mae Sot: Phajaroen market and the gems market, which are located not so far from these two roads

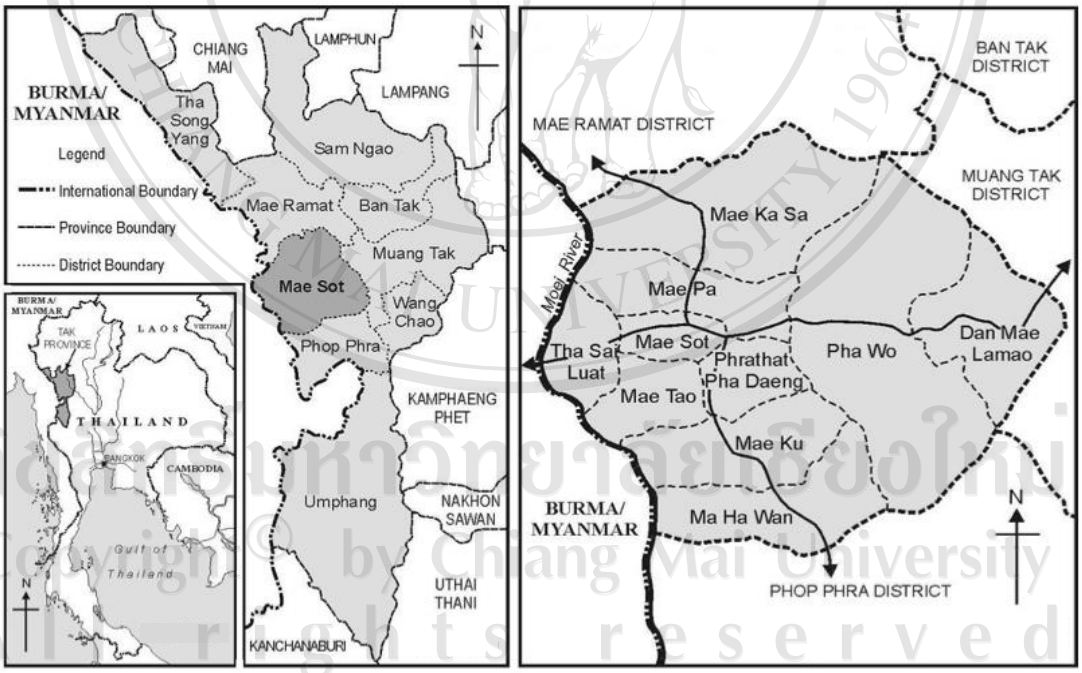

Figure 1.1: Map of Thailand and Mae Sot District (source: Lee Sang Kook 2007)

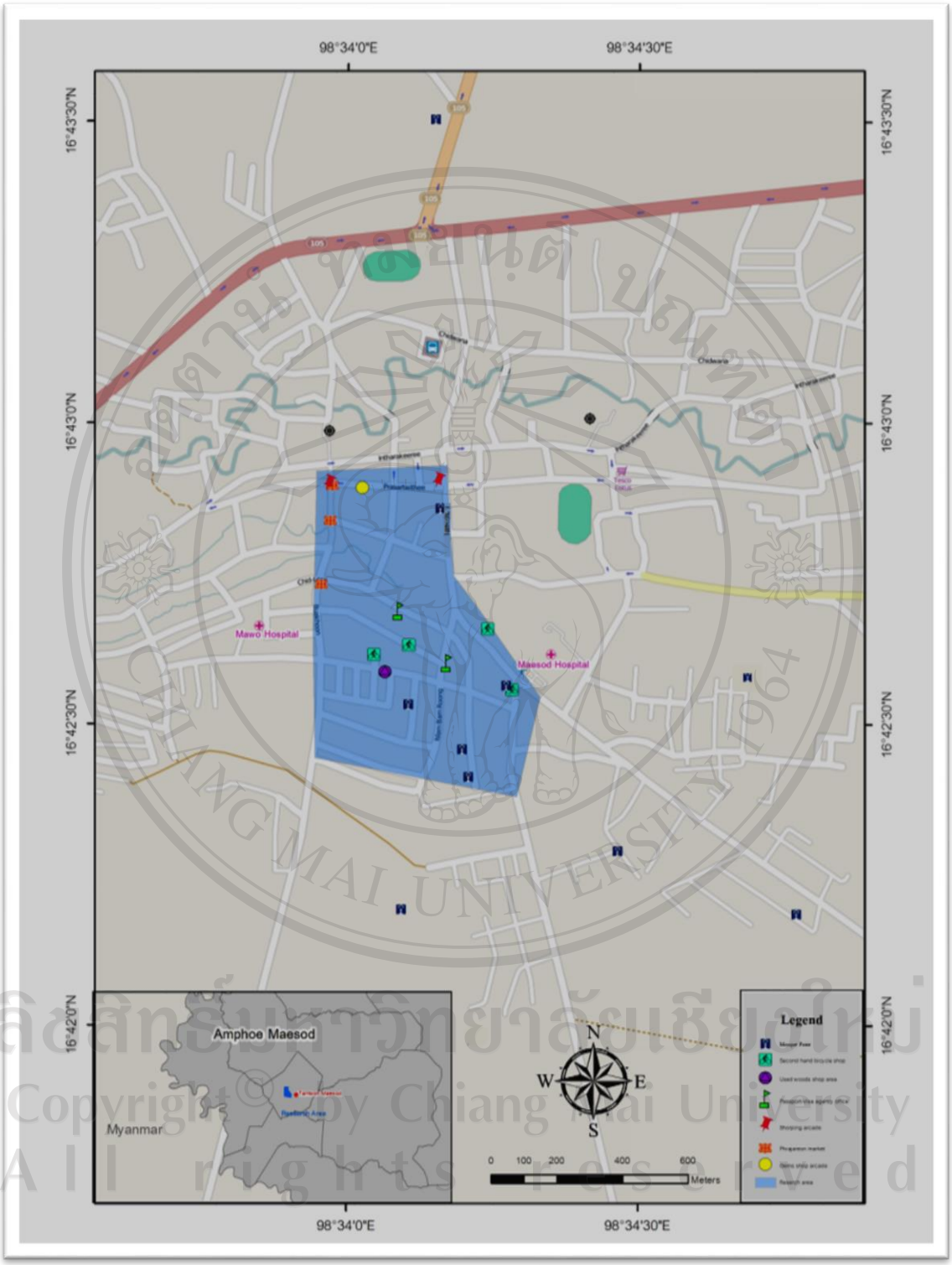

Figure 1.2: The area colored blue is the research site (*Chumchon* Islam)

1.4.3 Analytical Units

a) Burmese Muslim and ethno-religious identity

In this study, I classify Burmese Muslims into two different groups, according to their period of migration to Mae Sot. I use "old migrants" to refer to Burmese Muslims who arrived between the independence of Burma and the 1960s, while "new migrants" is a term I use to refer to those who have migrated since the late 1980s. The "new migrants" group is the main unit of analysis here, since they have been crucial to the rapid transformation of socio-economic life in Mae Sot. The opening of the border for transnational trade activities in the early 1990s resulted in an increasing number of Burmese Muslims moving to the town. Subsequently, the identity of these "new migrants" has become very complex; they are not only refugees and economic migrants (such as laborers, traders, middlemen and businessmen), but also religious teachers. Staying with the context of identity, by focusing on these "new migrants", I am able to capture their dialectical in a realistic way with the local identity, assuming that their assimilation into the local identity is currently "processing".

By focusing on identity construction, this study deals with the actors' points of view. A significant factor that leads to different assimilation levels between one actor and another is the differences in their decisions about the future (whether they will live permanently or return to their home town). Assimilating with Thai identity is considered an important point for some Burmese Muslims, those who wish to live permanently in Thailand. These people define assimilation in a flexible way, without it being a threat to the sustainability of their own identity. To them, Thai identity is regarded as cultural capital, so assimilating with this identity is seen as an adaptive strategy, one needed to survive in Mae Sot. Amidst Mae Sot's plurality, assimilation with local identity is not a threat at all, because every migrant still has a space to reconstruct his or her own identity. For this study I focus on the community level by viewing some crucial community activities that take place in terms of maintaining their sense of belonging.

b) The border economy

Thai state regulations were introduced to open the international borderlands for transnational trade in the early 1980s, and this marked the beginning of the socio-economic transformation of Mae Sot. From a rural area, Mae Sot subsequently developed into a border town with promising new economic opportunities for the people living there. However, the opening of the border meant people who lived in Mae Sot had to learn to deal with the economic regulations of both countries. The unstable frameworks adopted by both countries often required people to engage in transnational economic activities to keep up-to-date, be creative, and also manipulative. In this thesis I consider livelihoods as one of my units of analysis, as they appeared through people's responses (especially Burmese Muslims') to economic border regulations between Thailand and Burma.

c) Muslim network as social capital

Nurul Islam, which is located in the heart of Mae Sot town, is the oldest and biggest mosque in town. This study looks at this mosque, as it has had a significant impact on the Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot. The roles played by Nurul Islam Mosque can be divided into two: as a "space" and as an "institution". The presence of this mosque in the heart of the economic center supports Burmese Muslims when undertaking their religious obligations (particularly praying five times a day) in the midst of their work. In addition to its function as a worshiping center, Nurul Islam is also a space accessed by Burmese Muslims in order to socialize and build relationships with other Muslims. Various informations related to housing rentals or job vacancies in Mae Sot are circulated through the short meetings they hold after praying at the mosque.

Institutionally, many properties belong to the mosque and are managed by *motowali* (committee), on behalf of Muslim Mae Sot, and these help a lot to accommodate Muslims' various needs. In the education sector, Nurul Islam kindergarten and Islam Suksa School are two Thai formal educational institutions under Nurul Islam Mosque which provide various groups with their services, including the Burmese Muslim migrants. During their settlement, Burmese Muslims can save money by renting land or a house from the mosque at affordable rates. Moreover, Burmese

Muslims can also hold cultural activities such as weddings and funerals, based on financial help provided by the mosque committee.

In this thesis, I also analyze and discuss Tablighi Jama'at, one of the religious movements based in Nurul Islam Mosque, as a part of the wider Muslim network. For Burmese Muslims, joining Tablighi Jama'at is a strategy to negotiate with multiple powers in Mae Sot (i.e. the state and other Muslim communities) as well as a tool to broaden their social networks. Through socialization with the members of other communities, Burmese Muslims can accumulate cultural capital (including religious knowledge and Thai language) that might help them to access financial capital in Mae Sot. The network used by Tablighi Jama'at stretches to the local, national and transnational levels, and is also manipulated by some Burmese Muslims for their mobility interests.

1.5 Methods of Research

Since this is an ethnographic research study, the data used in this thesis tries to be as close as possible to the feelings of the object of study. Various data was collected using four different methods: participant observation, in-depth interviews, unstructured interviews and documentary research. The primary data for this study was collected from my fieldwork visits, which combined participant observation, in-depth interviews and unstructured interviews. Moreover, the secondary data I collected was the result of documentary research using various archives belonging to the Muslim community in *Chumchon* Islam and some archives from Mae Sot municipality. The research was divided into two different activities: pre-elementary research (December 2011 and April 2012), and extensive fieldwork (December 2012 to May 2013). The information I obtained from the interviews was then written as ethnographic data by situating me as an object of the research. On my first week at the field site, I took-up an offer to stay in a room at Nurul Islam Mosque, which was actually the room used by the Imam from Burma. I was allowed to stay there because the Imam was not there at the time. Moreover, they considered me as a *musafir* (Muslim traveler), so I was the one in need of help. I later realized that Islam is cultural capital for a Muslim in Mae Sot;

furthermore, I contextualized this personal experience alongside the case of the Burmese Muslim migrants.

Staying at the mosque meant I became quite well known among the Muslim communities at my research site. After ten days living there, I met Abdullah (40 years-old), a Thai Muslim and a member of Tablighi Jama'at, who subsequently invited me to stay with him at his house. In order to collect information while conducting my research, I attempted to use multiple identities as a research tool; to create closeness and a rapport with my research objects. Three different identities helped me to collect information, these being my identities as an Indonesian, as a Muslim and as a student at Chiang Mai University. These three identities positioned me both as a stranger and also an insider on particular matters. In this case, being a stranger was due to the cultural distinction between the researched object and me as a researcher – here referring to the language distinction and the cultural difference. However, being a stranger was also an advantage sometimes, such as when experiencing a new cultural tradition, as well as having a level of sensibility towards small things, like something important yet often forgotten.

I assume that being a Muslim was cultural capital for me, as it made me as an insider in the target community. Muslim "brotherhood" or Muslim togetherness allowed me to get into and be accepted by the Muslim community in Mae Sot. They welcomed me warmly, and they shared their life experiences in Burma and in Mae Sot with me. Their experiences with discrimination and migration were the two main topics I wished to be retold. Their stories were mostly similar, from one person to another, so they may have been general claim, or maybe they were dramatizing and exaggerating. They told me their stories, expecting that a Muslim from another country, like Indonesia, would understand the many dilemmas and problems faced by Muslims in Burma. On this matter, they really wish to be united, because all Muslim are equal and have to help each other. In addition, being a Muslim made me familiar with some of the religious practices in Mae Sot, because they are similar to those practiced in Indonesia.

In-depth interviews were conducted by utilizing key informants[19], which is the most effective data collection tool while carrying out participation observation. Besides focusing on social phenomenon as they occurred at the research site, I also used in-depth interviews to establish the historical background of Mae Sot and its people, either on an individual or communal level. I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty[20] key informants with a familiarity and understanding of the current social phenomenon. I personally selected those who were eligible to be a key informant by using the snowball-sampling method. In accordance with my research focus, 70% of the key informants were Burmese Muslims who had come to Mae Sot after 1990, and another 30% were old migrants; Thai Muslims, Karen Buddhists and Arakan Muslims. The ages of the informants varied between 19 and 65 years. Limiting the age to determine key informant is significant when wishing to maintain the quality of information captured. A gender imbalance when selecting key informants could not be avoided, since there were ethic concerns to consider, both related to the researcher and the target population. From a total of 20 key informants, 17 of them were men and the rest were women.

As a key data collection tool, the in-depth interview definitely has some weaknesses, mostly related to limitations of the human memory. During my interviews, while telling a life story, a key informant often forgot the time when the event occurred, and in some cases they could not even remember their own ages. Another obstacle was the use of two names; an Islamic name and a Burmese name, which caused inaccuracies in terms of information, and confusion when applying the snowball-sampling technique. Most of the Burmese Muslims I met in the field introduced themselves with their Islamic names, and these names are somehow strange for other Burmese Muslims, because some know their Burmese names only. The difficulties faced memorizing the names was also made worse by the use similar Islamic names among the Burmese Muslims, such as “Muhammad” and “Ibrahim”. In order to overcome those two major problems, I always cross-checked information, from one informant to another, though I

[19] Due to security concerns for all the informants involved in this research, I use pseudonyms instead of their original name. However, I provide original information regarding their background information, including their ethnic-national, occupations and age.

[20] In addition to these 20 informants, I also conducted interviews in the form of unstructured and informal conversations with 30 people.

returned to meet the same informant to ensure the information given to me previously was correct.

The next technique I applied to help provide accurate information through participant observation and in-depth interviews was documentary research. By using this, I was able to minimize any inaccuracies related to the history of Mae Sot or the history of the Burmese Muslim community. The data collected through documentary research can be classified as secondary data, as this helped my primary data. There were three different sources used for my documentary research: 1) data from the board organization structure (*motowali*) of Nurul Islam Mosque, 2) the annual reports of Tablighi Jama'at community, and 3) administrative data from Mae Sot Municipality. In general, the information collected using this technique was demographic, geographic (maps) or administrative, plus there was some information regarding the Muslim community's activities. The secondary data was more historical, and was collected by reviewing three different theses: 1) 'Islamic Identity in Chiang Mai: A Historical and Structural Comparison of Two Communities' (1977) by Suthep Soonthornpasuch, 2) 'History of Muslim Mae Sot' (nd) by Chalee Sriprasert[21], and 3) 'Mae Sot border social system' (2007) by Lee Sang Kook.

The completion of this thesis cannot be separated from the crucial roles played by my translator and my research assistant. I officially worked with a research assistant during my six-month participant observation in Mae Sot. His name is Halim, and he is a 19 year-old Burmese Muslim who had just completed his 12th grade at CDC school (Children's Development Center) in Mae Sot when we worked together. I chose him as my research assistant due to his background in the community I studied. He was also able to dedicate his time for my work and he can speak three languages (Burmese, Thai and English). Several days before I started my in-depth interviews, I gave him a script with my questions in English. However, the order of the questions was often not in accordance with the script, but depended on the answers given by the interviewees. Some spontaneous questions were also asked, so Halim had a significant role as the research assistant. In addition to helping with the interviews, he also helped reading and

[21] This is an unpublished archive about the development of the Muslim community in Mae Sot, saved by the committee of the mosque and written by Chalee Sriprasert, a Mae Sot native.

transcribing documents in Burmese and Thai. Furthermore, a Thai Muslim from Mae Sot named Kismatullah (35 years-old) also sometimes helped me interviewing Thais.

1.6 Organization of the Thesis

The second chapter of this thesis will review some theories and concepts related to the social phenomenon I studied during the fieldwork research. I formulate my thesis arguments by connecting three different concepts: borderlands, ethno-religion identity and social capital. A long history of ethno-national migration to Mae Sot has led to this border region growing into a plural space over the past few decades. On this matter, the Burmese Muslims have been helped in their efforts to reinvent their identity due to the presence of other communities who share a common culture. Moreover, Burmese Muslims have assumed that reinventing their identity does not only mean drawing a barrier with others, but also provides a social network that helps them accumulate multiple forms of capital.

Chapter 3 traces the history of plurality in Mae Sot - the setting of my study. The road built from Mawlamyine (Burma) to Mae Sot by the British, to help teak wood exploitation activities, was the beginning of a transformation in terms of the town's landscape and socio-demography in the border region. This road helped open the overland trading route to Siam for Muslim traders from the Indian subcontinent, who had previously only done business in Burma. Many of them were Muslim traders who crossed to Mae Sot and subsequently lived there and built their own settlement. Year on year, the Muslim community has gradually developed with a diverse and variant ethno-national mix, including Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Burmese (who arrived most recently). They assimilated with local culture, but also kept maintaining their religion identity and some degrees of ethnic identity.

Chapter 4 of this thesis contains of a discussion on Burmese Muslims and their economic activities. In this chapter, I give a detailed explanation of some new behaviors displayed by the Burmese Muslims as a response to Thailand-Burma regulations which opened the border in the early 1990s. In this chapter I limit the discussion to particular kinds of livelihood, such as the secondhand commodity businesses, gems businesses, passport agencies and money transfer services. Not every Burmese Muslim can access

these livelihoods, only those who are skilled, have knowledge, have financial capital and a suitable social network. Following Lee Sang Kook's arguments (2007), this chapter also attempts to show that Mae Sot is a transit area for transnational commodities, including goods, finances and even people. However, the presence of Burmese Muslims, along with the livelihoods mentioned above, leads me to claim that Mae Sot is a particularly active and responsive transit area. Running those businesses requires every Burmese Muslim to deal with many regulations from both countries. The various commodities these businesses deal with are not only transited through Mae Sot, but are also modified and even reproduced, before being redistributed to the final destination.

The formation of Burmese Muslim identity is the focus in Chapter 5. The conflation of ethnicity and religion within Burmese Muslim identity has led me to link them as an ethno-religious community. In Burma, the status of Burmese Muslims is still ambiguous, because they are not categorized as an ethnic minority. Though they are culturally close to Burman identity, Burmese Muslims are excluded since they are not Buddhist. The growing of the Muslim community and religious identity in Mae Sot has helped Burmese Muslims to maintain their religious identity there. In Mae Sot, Burmese Muslims tend to use Muslim names when introducing themselves to other Muslims (their Burmese names are merely official names). Shaking hands and offering the greeting "*Assalamualaikum*" is customary when they meet other Muslims, and other Muslim elements can be identified through their eating of Halal food and some if the clothes they wear in the public or private sphere.

The next two chapters, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, focus on the cultivation of religious identity and how it is turned into cultural and social capital by the migrants, to help them survive. In Chapter 6, I first discuss Nurul Islam Mosque and its role in the development of the Burmese Muslim community in Mae Sot. This role covers various contexts, such as religion, social issues, education, cultural and economic attributes. To describe the various roles Nurul Islam plays, I begin with its history and functional changes, from a religious space into an institution that contributes a lot to the development of the Muslim community in Mae Sot. As for the study of Burmese Muslim, I divide the role of Nurul Islam into two different forms: as a space and as an

institution. As a space, Nurul Islam gives Burmese Muslims opportunities to meet and socialize with Muslims from other communities, as well as to access information or knowledge. As an institution; meanwhile, Burmese Muslims are assisted by the committee at Nurul Islam Mosque, which manages the mosque's educational interests (Nurul Islam Kindergarten and Islam Suksa School) and social welfare activities (the public cemetery and housing rentals) on behalf of the Muslim community in Mae Sot.

Chapter 7 focuses on one religious movement based at Nurul Islam Mosque, which is Tablighi Jama'at. This chapter deals with three significant aspects of Tablighi Jama'at ralated to its connection with Mae Sot and Burmese Muslims. First of all, this chapter explains in detail the history of Tablighi Jama'at in Mae Sot, and focuses on one charismatic figure named *Haji* Yousuf Khan, who introduced this movement to the region. Secondly, I describe the Tablighi Jama'at's activities in Mae Sot, including the tensions that occur between members and non-members. Third, I focus on the motivations of Burmese Muslims to join Tablilghi Jama'at and become loyal members. For Burmese Muslims, being a member of Tablighi Jama'at is not only related to faith, but it is also a strategy to negotiate with the powers that exist within the Muslim community. Moreover, they access this movement to accumulate Thai cultural capital and to build social networks.

The last chapter is the conclusion of this study, and reviews some important descriptions and arguments. This chapter also contains my discussions of the findings, including a critique of and suggestions regarding the current literature focused on ethnic identity issues. Based on this thesis, I believe it is important to highlight the heterogeneity of actors to be considered, as this has led to the construction of ethnic identity in Mae Sot having multiple meanings.