

## CHAPTER 3

### **Border Cosmopolitanism: Muslim Fluidity along Sripanit and Islam Bamroong Roads**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Migration and trade over the last one hundred years have changed the landscape in Mae Sot town. As an isolated area formally known as a conflict and suffering zone, it has been transformed into an entrance point for Thai export-import activities with neighboring countries. At the same time, Mae Sot has grown to be a space that accommodates the development of a variety of cultures; those of ‘the others’. Nowadays, as well as Thai citizens, one can see a large number of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot of different ethnic groups, such as the Burman, Burmese Muslims, Karen, Shan, Arakan and Mon. The unstable socio-political situation that existed in Burma during the post-colonial era, or after the fall of *Tatmadaw* regime, was the main reason why these people chose to cross the border and settle down in Thailand. In the 1990s, the number of Burmese migrants increased sharply for two key reasons: violence impacting upon the ethnic minorities in Burma, and economic developments in Mae Sot. In addition to Thai nationals and Burmese migrants, the population in Mae Sot is also made-up of other nationalities, such as Americans, Australians, Spanish and Japanese, among others. They are in Mae Sot as a consequence of the growing international NGOs presence in the town, focused on supporting humanitarian issues along the Thai-Burma border.

The large number of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot certainly gives it a different atmosphere to other Thai towns, for beyond all the usual infrastructures; the town seems different to other towns in northern Thailand. Signs and advertisements are often bilingual – in Thai and Burmese – and this makes the town an “in between” area, an area that belongs to both Thailand and Burma. The Burmese presence in the town becomes even stronger when one walks into the central trade zone downtown, and in

particular to Phajaroen market or *Tala'at Yai* as it is called by local people. It is common here to see people wearing *longyi* while chewing betel nut, and with *thanaka* applied to their faces. These attributes or cultural products that have become one of their identity markers can easily be found and utilized by all migrants, because they are sold in the traditional markets of Mae Sot. In some parts of Phajaroen market, a Thai might feel like a stranger in his or her own country due to the large number of Burmese migrants there, speaking Burmese as their transactional language. This occurs due to their status, not merely as customers or buyers, but also as traders or merchants in the market, working out of either permanent or temporary shops.

Phajaroen market is bordered to the west and south by *Chumchon* Islam, an area in Mae Sot dominated by the Muslim community. Being five kilometers square, most areas of *Chumchon* Islam are dominated by housing complexes and businesses serving Muslims and other communities. In this area are also some factories and some land left aside for paddy fields. Administratively, *Chumchon* Islam is one of the twenty *Chumchons* included in the administrative area of *Tamboon* Mae Sot. It borders *Chumchon* Wat Luang, Bhua Kho and Intarakiri 1, and in terms of religion, 80% of the population in *Chumchon* Islam is Muslim, 10% is Buddhist and the other 10% consists of Christians, Hindus and Sikhs. According to data from the *Tessaban* (Mae Sot municipality), the total population in *Chumchon* Islam is officially recorded as 4,443 people living in 560 houses. However, some informants told me that these numbers do not include migrants, of which there are estimated to be 20,000. The high levels of mobility of the migrants is a significant reason why the official population data for *Chumchon* Islam does not include them.

The Muslim community in *Chumchon* Islam is a very diverse community, because it consists of at least five different ethnicities and nationalities: Thai, Indians, Burmese, Pakistanis and Bangladeshi. Among these, the Burmese Muslims are the most prominent, and it is estimated there are around 10,000 of them. Trade is the major economic activity for most Muslims there; as business owners or employees. Each group has its specialist trading activity; for example the Indian-Pakistani are actively

involved in the textile trade, the Thais<sup>1</sup> dominate the food sector and grocery shops, the Burmese dominate the food sector also, plus trade gems and secondhand commodities, while the Bangladeshi mostly work as laborers.

Sripanit road and Islam Bamroong road are the two main centers of activity in *Chumchon* Islam. As well as residences, both roads support many of the activities that take place in this community, whether in the economic or religious sectors. The activities that take place along both roads provide convenience for the Muslim community, and there are two key religious structures: in the area; the Nurul Islam and Bengala Mosques, both of which facilitate religious responsibilities. Muslim domination in this area can be seen through the number of shops belonging to Muslims rather than non-Muslims. From the total of 30 shops along Sripanit road, only six belong to non-Muslims (Thai-Sino Buddhists), while among the dozen shops in Islam Bamroong road, only three belong to non-Muslims<sup>2</sup>. The Muslim shops offer many kinds of necessities for the Muslim community, from personal to household goods. Some are *halal* restaurants that serve various kinds of food, such as Thai food, Indian food and Burmese food. Some others are Muslim clothing shops and textile shops, tailors; daily needs shops, secondhand bicycle shops and some small stalls selling betel nut and tobacco.

Burmese Muslims are the most recent to arrive among the Muslim community in Mae Sot, and live together in a Muslim residential area concentrated along Sripanit road and Islam Bamroong road. In that area they lease rooms or houses belonging to Thai Muslims and Thai Buddhists. Some houses belong to the mosque, and these give a lower budget option for the Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot. The sharp increase in the number of Burmese Muslims arriving in the early 1990s led to both roads being widened to accommodate the larger crowds. This chapter deals with the historical background to the Muslim settlement and its development along Sripanit road and Islam Bamroong road, and since the arrival of Islam through Indian Muslims in the late

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<sup>1</sup> As well as trade, some Thai Muslims work at government institutions, such as police, teachers, doctors and nurses, or as bankers.

<sup>2</sup> According to Suchart (50), a Thai Muslim who was born in Mae Sot, some non-Muslims along Sripanit road and Islam Bamroong road have been living there since the residential area was first built. They are the relatives of Thai Buddhists who converted to Islam because they married Indian Muslims.

nineteenth century. By investigating the dynamic Muslim communities in Mae Sot over the last two centuries, this chapter will show how Mae Sot has grown as a cosmopolitan area; one containing multiple cultures and identities.

Cosmopolitanism is not always seen as a “universal morality”, but does lead to the principle of “continuous openness to the world”, “an orientation, a willingness to engage with other” and a “capacity to interact across cultural illness” (Notar 2008). Based on this understanding, this chapter will not relate cosmopolitanism to the political or nationalist context. Cosmopolitanism here will lead me to analyze the open space of Mae Sot, with its tolerance and accommodation of ‘other’s’ identities. Moreover, I will also examine how cosmopolitanism appears in the body of the actors. Cosmopolitanism is presented within Burmese Muslims’ bodies since their identity is a product of prolonged cultural contact. Islam is an identity marker for Burmese Muslims, as adopted from a “universal morality” which is localized in their culture. Having migrated to Mae Sot, the Burmese Muslim identity has been shaped and reshaped through their interactions with Thai culture. By viewing the relationship between place and people, this chapter concludes that cosmopolitanism can be formed everywhere; not only in capital cities, but also in border areas. This is due to the state’s engagement with the outside world as well as advances in technology, which have facilitated mobility among peoples and cultures throughout territories and beyond.

### **3.2 Mae Sot: From Isolated Zone to Plural Zone**

*Muang Chod* was the first name used for present-day Mae Sot, in the thirteenth century. *Muang Chod* was part of the Sukhothai kingdom under the ruler of King Ramkhamhaeng. At that time, Sukothai was at the peak of its glory, and its territory extended to Vientiane in the east, Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south, *Chod* (Mae Sot) over to Hangsaphadi in the west and Luang Prabang in the north (Lee Sang Kook 2007). Geographically, *Muang Chod* (which was later called Mae Sot) was in a strategic location between the Sukothai and Martaban kingdoms. However, Mae Sot was not a significant area for either kingdoms. In the Ayutthaya era, caravan traders and some royal army on military expeditions started to pass through Mae Sot (Lee Sang Kook 2007). Toward the end of the Ayutthaya dynasty, Mae Sot served a more significant

function as a military base, aimed at monitoring and controlling the movement of the Burmese army, as it led frequent expeditions from the Burmese Kingdom into Ayutthaya through Mae Sot.

It is recorded that the first migrations took place from Burma to Siam via the Myawaddy-Mae Sot crossing in the sixteenth century. These migrations occurred due to riots taking place in lower Burma (due to rebellions by the Mon and other ethnic groups), those which led to the fall of the Toungoo dynasty (Keyes 1979). The more unpredictable situation in the kingdom and surrounding areas led many people (Mon and Karen) to escape to Siam as refugees. Siam itself preferred to open its territory to migration rather than close it. The Siamese gave the migrants space to settle down, and later they used it to meet labor demands, or worked as guards in the border area. Notwithstanding this, Mae Sot remained a remote village until the eighteenth century, and was inhabited mostly by Karen subsistence farmers. Its topography, surrounded by mountains and wild forests, made the impact of its economic activities limited in the kingdom, and the absence of an infrastructure to connect it with other regions meant the area became isolated, and it was even referred to as a “suffering zone” (Chalee Sriprasert- nd).

The hierarchal lordship framework (*mandala*) that existed during the traditional Thai state era placed Mae Sot as a gloomy, peripheral area until the early nineteenth century, as this system only developed some government centers and capital cities within the kingdom. The image of peripheral was of those left behind, of wild forests where bandits lived. The Karen and Shan groups could be considered the first to settle in Mae Sot (Lee Sang Kook 2007), due to its geographical situation bordering both groups’ territories. An archive from Nurul Islam mosque, collected by Chalee Sriprasert (nd), mentions that 700 years ago, Mae Sot was a “suffering zone” inhabited only by two tribes. There were at least four ethnic groups in Mae Sot at this time: the Thais calling them *Kariang*, *Tai-Yai*, *Tai-Lue* and *Phama*. For many years these groups lived together and practiced a subsistence economy, which depended on traditional agriculture.

The mid-nineteenth century was a period of development from a Mae Sot point of view, turning the remote village into a busy commercial trading area. According to Anurak (1998, cited in Lee Sang Kook 2007), this economic transformation cannot be separated from the coming of British colonial rule in Burma, particularly after the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-1826. The construction of Mawlamyine as an economic center in lower Burma indirectly impacted the landscape around Mae Sot, turning it into a center of commercial trade connecting India and Southeast Asia. These changes started with the construction of a road from Mawlamyine to Myawaddy by the British colonial government; to facilitate teak wood exploitation in the peripheral areas. When it was used for colonial interests, the road was also utilized by Chinese and Indian merchants based in Mawlamyine, helping to expand their markets into the Siam region. The poor infrastructure between Mae Sot and Tak made them stop for a while and build a temporary settlement in Mae Sot. While there, they met Siamese traders who would stop-over during their journey to Mawlamyine. Based on this meeting of merchants, Mae Sot grew as a border town; as a key gateway for international, overland traders in mainland Asia<sup>3</sup>.

This growing market in Mae Sot supported its economic and infrastructure growth, and also increased the number of people migrating in. These migrants were generally long distance traders, either from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China or Siam. At first, they came seasonally and stayed in Mae Sot as a transit point and to carry out transactions. As the market became more crowded, so this area became livelier, and many more traders decided to settle down for longer, live there and trade with the visiting merchants. Chalee Sriprasert (nd) claimed that in the late nineteenth century Mae Sot was not only a living space for *Kariang*, *Tai-Yai*, *Tai-Lue* and *Phama* groups, but was also inhabited by *Ka Mueang*, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, who lived and created communities based on their native locations and on similarities in terms of identity and culture. The Shan, Chinese and Muslims built settlements in the central areas of the town, while most of the *Ka Mueang* preferred to live on the outskirts<sup>4</sup> (Anurak 1998, cited in Lee Sang Kook 2005). The absence of state power in Mae Sot at

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<sup>3</sup> The trade route which ran from South Asia to the Southeast Asian peninsula via Siam.

<sup>4</sup> Along with the development of Mae Sot as a commercial area, the Kariang ethnic group - early residents in Mae Sot - preferred to migrate out to other regions due to the shifting agriculture activities carried out by commercial traders (Lee Sang Kook 2005).

that time allowed all groups to replicate their cultures and social systems. As a result, Mae Sot then developed as a plural area, with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population.



**Figure 3.1: A monument signifying Mae Sot as a multi-religion town**

As a plural area, Mae Sot's identity evolved based not on a single culture. *Chao Mae Sot* (Mae Sot people) were of multiple ethnicities and nationalities, meaning their cultures, traditions and mother tongues were different. Even so, social contact with the local culture (*Lanna*) meant each group gradually melted into this way of life. They learned, adopted and performed *Lanna* identity, as this facilitated them socializing with the local powers. The changing system of state administration introduced in the late nineteenth century, in which central government started to control the whole state (so called 'centralization'), led to central Thai culture spreading-out across the entire Thai territory, and this period marked the beginning of national integration under the Bangkok imperial regime, known as 'Thai-ization'. Thai-ization in Mae Sot was carried out through the state's symbolic establishment of public schools, police stations, border checkpoints, prisons, municipality offices, customs offices and hospitals (Anurak, 1998, cited in Lee Sang Kook 2005).

### 3.3 Indian Muslim Traders and the Mae Sot Muslim Settlement

Muslims were one of the first migrant communities to build a settlement in Mae Sot. They first arrived in Mae Sot around the nineteenth century; mostly long distance traders from India (including Bangladesh), who had previously run businesses in Mawlamyine. They originally visited the town seasonally, bringing products such as gold, metal and textiles. After doing business in Mae Sot, they would return home with products bought from other traders during the trip. The decision of some Indian Muslims to settle in Mae Sot was influenced by two main factors: 1) the greater number of traders visiting and staying in Mae Sot, and 2) the lack of any roads connecting to other parts of Siam. According to Suthep (1977), some Indian Muslims were the first to settle down in Mae Sot, and then they became middlemen, connecting traders from the interior of Siam with foreign traders.

According to an archive on the history of Muslim Mae Sot written by Chalee Sriprasert (nd), the first Muslim to settle in Mae Sot was Samat Ali, in 2408 BE. He was a merchant from Hussainnagar village, Baradona P.O. (Post Office), Chittagong district in Bengal, and his journey to Mae Sot took rather a long time due to the undeveloped road system. His journey took even longer as he also stopped-over at places along the way, to trade. From his home village he took a ride on a ship heading to Dohayaree, and then transferred to another heading to Chittagong. By sea was his only way to reach Rangoon, but he continued overland to Mawlamyine and then on to Myawaddy, crossing the Moi River before finally arriving in Mae Sot. He decided to return to India to visit his family not long after his business in Mae Sot had been successfully completed.

Fayan Rahman, his twelve year-old cousin, accompanied him on his next visit to Mae Sot, where both of them ran a business before finally deciding to settle there. In order to keep contact with their home country, they sometimes returned to India, and each time they did so, they returned with other relatives. These relatives were interested in living in Mae Sot, as they had heard the success stories of their pioneer relative. Even though such pioneers inspired newcomers to journey to the town, most of them preferred to start new businesses; they didn't all work as transnational trader. Many



opened new business serving the needs of Indian Muslims in Mae Sot, working as tailors or barbers, or running teashops or restaurant. The coming of the Indian Muslims increased the number of Muslims, making them a proper community in Mae Sot, one able to fulfill its own needs.

Before establishing a settlement in Sripanit and Islam Bamroong roads, Muslims mostly lived in a place now called Intarakiri 1 road, where they lived alongside the *Tai-Yai* community, earlier migrants to Mae Sot. The shifting of the Muslim settlement from Intarakiri road to Sripanit road begun with the establishment of the Nurul Islam mosque in 2444 BE. Muslims preferred to build houses around the mosque, the aim of which was to facilitate their religious practices. Sripanit road used to be a forest, but gradually changed into a densely populated area, busy with various kinds of economic activity within the Muslim community. The increasing number of Muslims caused the settlement to grow to the south, as far as three km out. This area later became known as Islam Bamroong road. Nowadays, some areas in Sripanit and the whole area of Islam Bamroong road, are under the *Chumchon* Islam administration.

The penetration of the Thai state administration into Muslim community life first happened through the first Muslim to be selected as the community *Kamnan*, Makbur Ahmad. At that time, a *Kamnan* was only considered a connector between the Muslim community and the state, because the board committee structure of the Muslim community had not been designed yet. The Muslim community only had a leader of rituals and religious activities, called an *Imam*<sup>5</sup>. The limited religious knowledge that existed when Nurul Islam mosque was first established led them to regularly invite Imams from India. The role of the Imam has changed since the first Imam was selected from the internal community around the 1970s; the same time as the board structure was developed for the third renovation of Nurul Islam mosque. Since then, the meaning of the Imam, as a leader of the Muslim community responsible for religious, social and cultural aspects, has grown. Despite having an Imam selected internally, the community sometimes still invites Imams from Burma.

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<sup>5</sup> Literally means a leader of *shalat* –the prayers, but some Muslim communities in particular countries use this term to refer to a religious leader, or even a social-political leader.

Year on year, the Muslim community in Mae Sot keeps growing, not only in terms of the population, but also in terms of prosperity. The new generations are growing older by the day, so their educational interests have become the focus of attention of the Muslim community. Parents wish their children to retain their Islamic values, and this resulted in a proposal for the first Islamic educational institution to be set up. The school, called Islam Suksa, was built on the opposite side of the road from the Nurul Islam mosque. With the increasing number of students, the school was later moved to Islam Bamroong road. At the same time, Thai-ization began to creep into the Muslim community through the Islam Suksa educational system, leading to a change in the curriculum at the school, from a religious one to one combining Islam with the Thai educational curriculum. However, Islam Suksa was still different to most Thai public schools, because it taught Islamic religious values and removed the Buddhist lessons.

Stronger national integration or Thai-ization in the late nineteenth century inflicted assimilation pressure on the migrant community, including the Indian Muslims in Mae Sot. One of the early responses to this among the Indian Muslims was to change their names to Thai-sounding names. This happened in the 1970s and was not only seen as a successful demonstration of the domination of the state over its people, but also led to tactics developing among the people to negotiate with the state's domination. Adopting a Thai name was considered the first step in the Muslim migrants reacting to Thai naturalization. After adopting Thai names, they reported to the Muslim community's leader; Haji<sup>6</sup> Yousuf Khan at that time, who requested they be naturalized by the state authorities in Mae Sot. As well as changing their names and requesting citizenship, they could become a Thai citizen by marrying a local Mae Sot woman.

From the above, it can be concluded that Mae Sot Muslims had a strong cultural link to India at first, but later became Thai citizens through naturalization or through inter-marriage with Thai women in Mae Sot. To support this argument, Rozi, a 35 year-old Muslim in Mae Sot, told me:

When tracking my family's history, we (Muslims in Mae Sot) are of Indian descent. Over a hundred years ago, Indian Muslim came to trade in Mae Sot, and then they lived and married Thai Buddhist women (who later

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<sup>6</sup> Islamic term used to call males who went for Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca, in the Saudi Arabia).

converted to Islam). The generation that was born from a mixed marriage were the embryo of the Thai Muslim community in Mae Sot today.

He told me this while we were talking on the mosque's veranda. He continued using his own experience as an example. He told me that his grandfather was from India, and came to trade in Burma, finally settling in Mae Sot. After moving there, his grandfather married a Thai Buddhist woman who converted to Islam. His father was born and grew up in Mae Sot, where he still lives. He married a Mae Sot Muslim woman, who is also the descendant of a mixed marriage. In addition to speaking Thai and English, Rozi said that he is fluent in Urdu and understands some Burmese. He can speak Urdu because he learned it at home with his father and his grandfather. His Urdu has improved, having studied at a university in India several years ago. He knows some Burmese because Burmese migrants surround his living and working environment. Ten years ago, he married a Mae Sot Muslim woman who is also a descendant of inter-marriage.

With respect to the early migration of the Muslim community to Thailand, and especially to Mae Sot, the issue of gender needs to be studied more, since the majority of the migrants were males. According to Berlie (2000), the long journey and its dangers were the main reasons why men tended to be the only people traveling at that time. In his study, he shows how Yunnanese traders had to travel hundreds of kilometers from their homes to reach northern Thailand. The lack of connectivity to other regions and the transportation used (ox carts or horses) meant the journey took a long time. Moreover, the journey was quite risky, since most areas along the route were wooded, meaning there were a lot of wild animals, plus bandits who wanted to steal their belongings. Berlie mentions these various reasons as to why men became the main actors in the caravan trade, while the women tended to stay at home. However, I believe that religion also had a significant impact with regard to women's domestication in the context of Muslim migration to Mae Sot<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The Islamic doctrine that suggests men (husbands) should work outside the house and women (wives) stay at home, to avoid possible slander and sin, is still embedded in the Muslim community in Mae Sot. For example, no women take part in any religious routines, especially the five-times-a-day prayers at Masjid Nurul Islam. According to Muhammad (60), this is due to the particular sect that is followed at this mosque, which is the Hanafi sect. This sect believes women should pray at home. Another religious activity is the *Jama'at Tablighi*, and as I observed there is no space provided for ladies during this either.

As well as India and Bangladesh, there are also Mae Sot Muslims who have a cultural link with Pakistan, because they are the descendants of Pakistani. This community lives in a Pathan (term to call Pakistani) village on one side of Islam Bamroong road, though Muslims from other communities like Indians, Bangladeshis and Burmese later inhabited this area. Suthep (1977) states that Pakistanis were the second Muslim community to arrive in Mae Sot, after the Indian Muslims, as they helped build their residences. Most of them migrated to Thailand as refugees, rather than due to trade, and it is assumed they left Pakistan around the 1860s, when it was known as East India, to escape from the British Army. At that time, Thailand was open to migrants due to the need for border guards, and labor to support its industrialization (Lee Sang Kook 2007). In addition as entering Thailand through Mae Sot, they also reached the Kingdom through Hod, Mae Sariang and Mae Sai, which are also close to the border with Burma in the north of Thailand. Some Pakistanis lived in Mae Sot for a while, then moved to the interior of Thailand, such as to Lamphun, Lampang and Chiang Mai.

The Muslim community in Mae Sot became particularly diverse after the Burmese Muslim migrants arrived in the 1960s as refugees, due to the increasing Burmese violence toward migrants, and especially Indians, whether Hindu or Muslim. In the late 1980s, there was an even larger migration of Burmese Muslims to Mae Sot, due to spreading violence against Muslims in Burma and the growing economy in Mae Sot. Due to their migration history, the identities of the Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot are quite complex; some are economic migrants, others religious or education migrants, while others still are displaced persons. Overlapping of these categories sometimes occurs.

During the 1980s, social contact between the Muslim community in Mae Sot and the transnational Muslim network increased, along with the growing activities of the Tablighi Jama'at. This was influenced by the increasing movements of Tablighi Jama'at followers from other regions of Thailand, or even other countries like Burma, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The establishment of the Hafiz School, run by its Tablighi Jama'at leader, attracted Muslims from other areas. Most Hafiz students originally came from Burma, even though some of them were from Mae Sot and other

regions of Thailand, particularly southern Thailand. The Hafiz school teaches the reading and memorizing of verses of the Koran. The language used at the school depends on the students' mother tongues, because teachers are invited from the students' home areas. The students are aged from around 9 to 15 years-old. To graduate from the school, every student has to spend at least two to three years there, depend on their ability and progress. One things of note is that due to the socialization that takes place at the Hafiz school, students normally leave being able to speak two or three different languages (Thai, Burmese and *Jawi*).

### **3.4 Burmese Muslim Community: Its Mobility and Hybrid Identity**

Speaking Burmese while chewing betel nut; the men wear a kurta set with a skullcap, while others wear shirts and sarong. The women wear the hijab and put thanaka on both cheeks. They are everywhere; at the market, at food stalls, along the street or in small lanes.

The above description describes my feelings having spent two months in Mae Sot, researching for this paper. As I mentioned previously, the Burmese Muslim community is the biggest in Mae Sot and is very visible among the other Muslim communities there. The Burmese Muslims live across all parts of Mae Sot, but especially around *Chumchon* Islam, with its consecration area along Islam Bamroong road. Similar to the identity of other Muslims in Mae Sot, the Burmese Muslims' identity is complex, because it is the product of multiple cultural contacts over many years. The British colonial period was the most important for the spread of Islam to Burma, though it has already spread to Arakan state many hundreds of years before. The Indian Muslim community formed the embryo for the Burmese Muslims. Some of them moved to Burma at the same time as the British, either as part of the colonial government, or in the military, to trade, or as laborers. After independence, discriminatory practices were put in place by the Burmese government, which forced the Muslims to assimilate into Burman culture if they still wanted to stay there.

The different reasons behind the Burmese Muslims migrating to Mae Sot have led to their complex identities. Most of them can be categorized as economic migrants, because their purpose for moving was to improve their financial situation. Phajaroen Market is one of the main trading spots for the Burmese Muslims, on all scales and

trading a range of commodities, those in demand among the Thais and Burmese in Mae Sot. The Burmese Muslims trade on the north side of Phajaroen market, which is the location of the Mae Sot gems market. There are at least 200 Burmese Muslims who trade at the market, either as sellers and owners of stalls, or as brokers. Not far from there, along Sripanit road and Islam Bamroong road, one can also see Burmese Muslim running various businesses, such as small grocery shops and restaurants. As well as their involvement in the commercial trading sector, many Burmese Muslims work in factories, as shopkeepers, waiters at restaurants, or work as domestic labor.

The history of Burmese Muslim migration to Mae Sot can be divided into two different phases. The first migration phase was around 1960s and the second was up to 1980s. During first phase, the main reason for people migrating to Mae Sot was to escape the unstable political situation in Burma. Burmanization under the *Tatmadaw* regime caused the Indian, Hindus, Muslims, and some other ethnic minorities to become the target of discrimination. Anti-Indian riots and anti-Muslim sentiments occurred across all parts of Burma, and this drained the energy of Burmese Muslim families, leading to them fleeing across borders, included to Myawaddy. Without taking their property with them they crossed the border here and built a temporary settlement in Mae Sot, where they worked for Mae Sot residents, mostly as farm workers. Other Muslims also migrated from Burma, such as Indians, Bengalis and Arakanese, as did Karen people.

The cruelty of the Burmese military regime in the 1970s is stuck on the memory of Commit (73 years-old), a Burmese Muslim who came to Mae Sot during that first wave;

More than 35 years ago I came to Mae Sot by myself, because I could no longer live in Burma. I used to have agricultural fields, but every time we harvested we had to give a proportion to the government. They decided how much we give, without taking into account the success or failure of the harvest. Once, my harvest failed and I couldn't pay the government, so was then caught and arrested. My family helped to release me by paying a ransom, but not long after my release, the military caught me and put me back in jail without good reason. This time, my family could not help me, but I managed to escape and then walked across the border to Mae Sot. I came here by myself, leaving my wife and children at home.

He also mentioned that Mae Sot at that time was still quiet, with only a few houses. There was only one Muslim settlement along Sripanit road, mainly around Nurul Islam Mosque. There was still no one living in Islam Bamroong road because it was still wilderness. At first, Commit stayed at a Muslim's house on Mae Sot, and worked there. He cleaned the house and also worked in the field owned by the host, to get extra money. After marrying a Burmese Muslim he met in Mae Sot, he later rented his own house. He confessed to me that he has never gone back to Burma, and that since leaving he has had no contact with his wife, children or family there. From the bottom of his heart he said he hoped to go back to Burma one day, but it seemed impossible, as the military would probably catch him.

A similar thing happened to Abdul (75 years old) 40 years ago in Mae Sot, a Burmese Muslim now living around Bengala mosque. He told me:

The first time I came to Mae Sot was around 1975, when this area (Bengala mosque) was still wilderness. There was no one brave enough to come, since there was a lot of crime. I initially lived in Sripanit road, then moved here as the mosque was being built. Since then, many more Muslims have come to live here; there are now Burmese, Bengalis and Arakanese. In the last 20 years, more and more Muslims have come here; most of them came from the refugee camps. They have told me it was difficult living in the refugee camps and wanted to improve their financial situation.

As Abdul mentions above, the second wave of Burmese Muslim migration to Mae Sot took place two decades ago, due to discrimination against Muslims in Burma, along with the booming economy in Mae Sot at that time. This large migration began with the halting of black market activities in Kawmoora (on the Burma border, close to Thailand) by the Burmese military. Before Kawmoora was demolished, many Burmese Muslims who lived and traded in that area sold goods such as textile, clothes, food, gems and livestock, either to the local community or foreigners such as Thais, Chinese or even some Nepalese who visited. This area was then bombarded by the army as it was assumed to be a center of the opium trade and of weapons smuggling, in support of the rebellions led by the ethnic armies in Karen state. The destruction of trade activities in Kawmoora caused the whole population to cross the border to Thailand, with the

Burmese Muslims choosing Mae Sot town as their main destination; seeking refuge in the Muslim community there.

As Musa (45 years-old), a Thai Muslim who grew up and lives in Mae Sot, explained to me:

After the Burmese military attacked a market in Kawmoora, everyone came to Mae Sot. Since we Muslims have to help each other, so Mae Sot Muslims helped the Burmese Muslims who came to the town. Haji Yousuf Khan, who was the Muslim leader here at that time, allowed the Burmese Muslims to stay temporarily in the Islam Suksa School. Moreover, they were provided with a temporary refugee camp in Umphang, but they preferred to return to the town; therefore, the Thai government brought them back to the three new refugee camps. However, many Burmese Muslims stayed in the town, while theirs from the camp moved into town also.

Since then, the number of Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot has grown rapidly. In previous years, the migration of Burmese Muslims was on a smaller scale, with the majority being traders who joined the markets in town and also some laborers who worked in a number of sectors. As well as the migrants, other Burmese Muslims who lived in Myawaddy crossed the border every day on a border pass or illegally. They would arrive in the morning to buy trading commodities, and then return with them to Myawaddy, to be resold there. Burmese Muslim migrants who moved with first wave were generally registered in the municipality and given a pink ID card. Their children born in Mae Sot were also given “Thai” citizenship in some cases. However, most of the Burmese migrants who have arrived over the past two decades have no ID card, meaning they are illegal, though some have other documents like passports and work permits. The fluctuating numbers and high levels of mobility of such migrants has resulted in a rather disorganized control system being in place.

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**Figure 3.2: Islam Bamroong road; the center of the Muslim community**

The mobility and migration routes used by the Burmese Muslims over the past two decades have led to their identity becoming even more complex. For example, some Burmese Muslim moved to Mae Sot as refugees, staying in refugee camps, and the harsh living condition there forced them to find a way into Mae Sot town. After arriving in town, they lived in relatives' houses or rented a room, while attempting to find a job. For the lucky ones, they found a job and even obtained a work permit through their work. In such cases, we can see how such a person might develop a double identity; recorded in Mae Sot as a refugee, but not living at the camp, but instead working on a work permit. In contrast, others have moved to Mae Sot as laborers or traders, but later moved a refugee camp, their motivation being to obtain a United Nations card<sup>8</sup> or learn English. However, most fail to get a UN card and instead return to town.

Resuming to the discussion about Burmese Muslims, I argue that the different migration periods of the migrants have led to differences in capital ownership. The first Burmese Muslims who moved to Mae Sot were able to obtain a legal status due to the pink-ID card policy for migrants living in the country for over 20 years. These people are now categorized as political migrants who came to Mae Sot without financial

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<sup>8</sup> Based on an interview with a UNHCR employee, resettlement programs are the most attractive target, and also the most possible. Even so, the UN card registration process gives priority to those who arrived earlier, so the more recent refugees have not been able to register. A re-registration process has been put in place to select who can get a UN card, those selected being the families (husbands, wives and children) of those registered previously, those already on their way to a camp. This has motivated many Burmese migrants to move to the camps, either in Mae Sot or in Bangkok.

support, yet were able to survive due to patron-client relations with Mae Sot Muslims. Things are different for the new migrants, those who have arrived over the last two decades, as increased global connectivity had led to a complex migration motif developing in their cases. Theoretically, they might be classified into two different groups; migrants and displaced persons. In fact, both categories are not associated with the Burmese Muslim, due to the open space for negotiation with other agencies that exists in Mae Sot. This has led to a hybrid identity developing for the Burmese Muslims, in which their identity overlaps with their displacement.

### **3.5 Border Cosmopolitanism: Commercial Trade, Migration and Cultural Complexity**

After road was constructed between Mawlamyine and Mae Sot by the British in the mid-eighteenth century, Mae Sot became a meeting point for long distance traders of many nationalities, and the landscape in Mae Sot town was gradually transformed, from being a remote village into a border town. In addition to infrastructure development, Mae Sot also developed an increasingly plural population due to the many long distance traders who built settlements there. However, the social system in Mae Sot became neglected, due to the absence of royal Thai control since the town was on the periphery of the kingdom. This forced traders to construct their own identities in order to maintain their cultural traditions in the town. Though it has since experienced national integration pressure from the modern Thai nation state, the town's plurality has continued to this day, due mainly to the state's flexible stance in terms of opening its borders and encouraging transnational trade activities.

Growing up with many different cultures and identities has turned Mae Sot into one of the most cosmopolitan areas in Thailand. Notar (2008) views cosmopolitanism, not as a “universal morality”, but as a “continuous openness to the world”, “an orientation, a willingness to engage with other” and a “capacity to interact across cultural lines”. Bringing this perspective into the context of a ‘place’ makes me to believe that cosmopolitanism not only refers to places that accommodate interactions with Western culture; a space is cosmopolitan if it accommodates the growth and development of cultural diversity. On this matter, a cosmopolitan area is generally

inhabited by plural communities which are open to one another's cultures. Each of these communities may socialize with another, and at particular stages assimilate a local identity, but each will maintain the wholeness of its identity. In Mae Sot; for example, though it is located in Thai territory, there are some very variant (other) cultures growing alongside the hosts' (Thai). For example, there are many signs and advertising boards written in both Thai and Burmese, there are migrant communities with their own strong identities, and there are also a wide variety of national and transnational products on offer at the local markets.



**Figure 3.3: A billboard publicising an arts festival written in two languages**

Another aspect that places Mae Sot as a cosmopolitan area is the attitude of 'openness' towards other cultures (Hannerz 1996, Tomlinson 1999, Urry 2000, Vertovec and Cohen 2002). From earlier discussions in this chapter, we can see that migrant communities built Mae Sot town; one of them being composed of Indian Muslims. The historical records of Muslim Mae Sot show that their ancestors were traders who arrived in the early eighteenth century, such as Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Chinese. Thai-ization and inter-marriage were the two significant factors that transformed their descendants into Thais. Tracking its historical background, Mae Sot Muslim identity represents a long process of socio-cultural interaction and assimilation from various different cultures, all bound together by Thai identity. In Mae Sot during my research, I often met Thai Muslims who claimed to be descendants of Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Chinese or Burmese. Though they were completely

Thai, they retained a feeling of having had relations with other cultures in the past, as this had been transferred to them over the generations through storytelling.

Situating Mae Sot as a cosmopolitan area, this chapter challenges some scholars who argue that only major cities or metropolitan areas can be classified as truly cosmopolitan (Abbas 2002). Major cities give people the opportunity to engage with others; more so than smaller cities in peripheral areas, because major cities are identically metropolitan, are the center of consumerist societies and the destination of most foreigners. Recently, some scholars have tried to make the argument that minor cities, or border areas, can also have a similarity to major cities in terms of being cosmopolitan, alongside having advanced infrastructures and technologies. For example, Notar (2008) studied cosmopolitanism in the border town of Dali, in Yunnan province, southwest China. Its geographical location in the Himalayan foothills, and close to the border with Burma, has given it an exotic reputation, meaning it has become a key tourist attraction. Notar views the interaction between local people and travelers as the early foundation of the emergence of cosmopolitanism in Dali. This interaction caused the local people to consume the tourists' cultures, if not for themselves, but to be reproduced for the travelers (others).

Unlike Dali, Mae Sot became a cosmopolitan area due to the commercial trade routes in mainland Asia which passed through it. The coming of foreign traders who later built their own homes led Mae Sot to grow from an isolated area into a border town with an existing, pluralist culture. As well as bringing infrastructure and technology, commercial trade also made Mae Sot, as a place and as a community, very open to the world. If we compare this to Dali, cosmopolitanism in Mae Sot was not related to the consumption of Western culture, but more to its capacity to interact across cultural lines (Kendall et al. 2009). In Mae Sot we can see how Thai people live beside and socialize with other ethnicities, nationalities and religions in their daily lives, such as the Burmese, Chinese, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Indians. Moreover, one thing to note here is that the emergence of this cosmopolitanism was did not begin with the interaction of locals and outsiders as in the case of Dali, but the interactions between migrants themselves. From the cases of Mae Sot and Dali, I believe that geographical

conditions are not fundamental to creating a cosmopolitan society, since the interaction and motilities of people or agencies are somewhat more significant.

From the above, we can see that cosmopolitanism not only appears from the perspective of a place, but also within the bodies of the relevant actors. The plurality that exists in Mae Sot has given each actor the opportunity to be cosmopolitan through their interactions with their cultures. As for the Muslims in Mae Sot, cosmopolitanism can be traced back to their ancestors, those who arrived as caravan traders from India. Cosmopolitanism was then extended when their ancestors (the Indian Muslims) came into social contact with traders from other groups' en-route. As fellow traders, cultural interactions also took place with both local people and who they met on their journeys. Since then, they have accumulated their knowledge as traders, which is mainly related to the commodities they need to sell and buy. In the case of Mae Sot, their social contact with local people (Thai Buddhist women) has often ended in marriage. Through inter-marriage, we can see how they, on the one hand have been able to maintain their identities and on the other have also been able to adopt a local identity. They have constructed their identities within their spouses through religious conversion - to Islam, yet have also assimilated Thai identity by speaking Thai and becoming Thai citizens.

To close this section, I would like to say that the Burmese Muslims have also become one of the cosmopolitan actors in Mae Sot, because their identity is actually a product of inter-cultural assimilation, between the global, national and local. Islam, as an identity marker for the Burmese Muslims, is part of a universal morality that has been localized within their culture. Culturally, most of the Burmese Muslims are the descendants of Indian Muslims who came to Burma along with the British. Indian Muslim culture was then assimilated with the local culture in Burma, as reinforced by intermarriage with local women. During the *Tatmadaw* regime, the pressure to assimilate into a national Burma identity based on a singular identity (Burman), brought its own tensions. Also broader discrimination towards Indian migrants forced them to give up their ancestors' identities and become Burman. For the Burmese Muslim migrants in Mae Sot, they definitely have different identities and cultures, but the intensity of their social contact with Thai people has allowed them to assimilate a Thai identity, while still retaining their Burmese persona.

### 3.6 Summary

The history of development in Mae Sot shows that migrant communities from different ethnic groups and nationalities built the town. In Mae Sot, each of these groups maintained its culture and identity, before melting into a single identity based on *Thai-ization*. The origins and cultural backgrounds of the Mae Sot Muslims are varied, whether through physical features or cultural practices. The Thai Muslims who live along Sripanit road and Islam Bamroong road; for example, tend to be physically different from other Thai people; they have more prominent noses and their skin is a bit darker. When asked about their family origins, they give various answers. Some will say their parents are from Burma, while others might say their grandparents were from India, Bangladesh, China or Pakistan. However, they are also completely Thai, because they were born in Mae Sot and have Thai names, have national ID cards, and can only speak the Thai language.

The continuity of state flexibility through its engagement with transnational economic and national development commitments has led the international borderlands refusing to become isolated spaces. These factors have left the borderlands vulnerable to socio-cultural transformation, since they are at the front line of a state which is ready to deal with transnational flows; either of people, commodities or ideologies. In the context of Mae Sot, a long history of migration led the area to grow with a pluralistic identity, one tolerant of others' social systems (Lee Sang Kook 2007). Its continuity and openness to the world means Mae Sot has been able to accommodate multiple identities and multiple cultures, as reflected in its cosmopolitan nature. I therefore argue that no matter how the borderlands are territorially fixed – meaning the state always tries to secure them by constructing state symbols (international check points, immigration offices and border security), their identity may be socio-culturally flexible, fluid, and dynamic.