

## CHAPTER 5

### Ethno-religious Identity around the Borderland

#### 5.1 Introduction

Once, after Isha'a (evening prayers) in Nurul Islam Mosque, a Burmese Muslim friend approached me and invited me to his house for dinner. He said that his wife had cooked some Burmese food for me. At once I agreed to follow him, both to taste Burmese food and also to get the chance to see their everyday lives close-up. In a medium-sized room, about five meters squared, that he rented, various kinds of dish were served, such as vegetable sour soup, fried anchovies and chicken curry. He took a plate, filled it with rice, dishes and vegetable soup, then gave the plate to me. As I was about to start my meal, I asked him where the spoon was, but he just stared at me and smiled, then showed me his hand. He meant that I should eat with my hands. This was not such a new thing for me, as I had got used to this practice. However, the thing that impressed me was his explanation as to why he eats with his hands, or *sunna rasul*<sup>1</sup>, meaning it is a must for Muslims to eat in this way. Basically, to eat with one's hands is common among most ethnic groups in Burma. In terms of identity, the Burmese Muslims interpretation of this is based on their Islamic beliefs; to attempt to construct bridges with other groups; to have a similar culture.

Islam for Burmese Muslims is not only a religion, but is also a way of life. As a result, Islam forms the core knowledge that informs their everyday lives, for as mentioned previously, we could see how Islamic knowledge has influenced Burmese Muslims to eat with their hands. In addition to this practice, Burmese Muslims also apply other aspects of Islamic culture to their everyday lives, such as eating halal food

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<sup>1</sup> *Sunna* in Arabic literally means 'custom' or 'tradition', while *rasul* means a 'messenger', 'envoy' or 'apostle' used to call the prophets of Islam. In this case, *Sunna Rasul* is a narration about the way of life of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, either through actions (*sirahs*) or the spoken word (*hadists*) (Marranci 2008).

and the *aqiqah* (celebrating a newborn baby) practice. Other interesting aspects of Burmese Muslim culture include the practices of *fatayan* and *dawat*, forms of Islamic localization within their culture. Neither of these can be classified as syncretism practices, since such practices lead more to local interpretations of Islamic values as written in the Koran. Islam is embedded in every Burmese Muslim's body, as can be seen through the adoption of Islamic names instead of Burmese names. Moreover, they also wear Islamic clothing, such as a cap and *kurta*<sup>2</sup> for male, while the female wears a *hijab*<sup>3</sup>. While in Burma, these attributes or performative identities were often only shown in their private spaces, to avoid threats or discrimination.

According to the national censuses held in Burma, Burmese Muslims are not considered an official ethnic group by the Burmese government. Nonetheless, the nature of the Burmese Muslims themselves is strongly related to the building of Burmese national identity since the fall of *Tatmadaw* regime. The introduction of national order based on the major identity, with Burmese as the national language, Buddhism as the state religion and Burman as the national culture, forced the minority groups to face a form of subordination, since they were required to adopt these identities over their own. Assimilation pressure is still applied by the state through policies such as standardization of the national education system, and the issue of national citizenship (Yegar 1972, Berlie 2008). Burmese identity is fundamentally embedded in the Burmese Muslims because they are the mixed married descendent of Muslims and Burmese Buddhists. The increase in Burmese chauvinism, the assimilation pressure applied regarding Burmese national identity, and the birth of new generations, meant that the cultural link to India slowly disappeared from Burmese Muslim identity. They then grew up as community with a similar culture and identity as the Burmans, since they spoke Burmese and used Burman cultural products, such as *longyi*, *thanaka* and *betel nut*.

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<sup>2</sup> *Kurta* is an Urdu and Hindi term for a traditional South Asian item of clothing without a collar, has long sleeves and drops down to the knee. The *Kurta* is worn by both Hindus and Muslims (Wikipedia). In Mae Sot, the *Kurta* is often worn by Muslims (majority from Burma, Pakistani, India and Bangladeshi) either during prayers at the mosque or during the day.

<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, it is not all Burmese Muslim to wear these attributes, for *Kurta* and cap are often used by Burmese Muslim who have been actively involved on *Jamaat Tabligh*.

In this study, I will define Burmese Muslims as an ethno-religious community, since their identity is based on the coming-together of ethnic (Burman) and religious (Muslim) identities. Both identities are embedded in the Burmese Muslims, as they were constructed by the state and then performed – either simultaneously or alternately, and have been transmitted across generations. Burmese identity is embedded in them due to assimilation pressure during the “*Burmanization*” period and from an awareness of Burmans as being their ancestors. Although they have a genealogical link with the Burman ethnic group, the state prevents them from being Burman due to religious differences<sup>4</sup>. As well as being constructed by the state, Islamic identity is directly embedded in the Burmese Muslims, because Islam is passed on to every newborn child from Muslim parents, so they automatically become a Muslim. Under these circumstances, religion is fixed; it is embedded personally through blood traits and will continue to be embedded as long as the Burmese Muslims embrace Islam<sup>5</sup>.

Yegar, in his study of Muslims in Burma (1972), shows that even though Islam is embedded as part of Burmese Muslim identity, it is flexible and situational. He cites the example of a phenomenon in the 1960s when many Burmese Muslims preferred to look Burmese by wearing Burman style clothes in public, though they were Muslims at home. This happened in response to the increasing amount of Burmese discrimination, feelings which eventually triggered riots among some migrant communities in Burma, especially the Indian communities. At that time, being Indian was identified with being a Muslim; therefore, all Muslim communities (without considering their ethnic-nationality) were the target of discrimination. As a result, they preferred to look Burmese in public, in order to avoid any discrimination. On the other hand, many of them joined the Indian migrants’ exodus to the border areas, and even crossed national borders to Thailand and China. In these new locations they met other Muslims, those who had arrived earlier, and built a religious infrastructure. This helped the Burmese Muslims to adapt to the existing socio-culture, plus they had more freedom to practice their religious activities. Moreover, they felt secure in being able to reinvent their religious identities, making them stronger than they were in Burma.

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<sup>4</sup> One facet of being a Burman is to be a Buddhist.

<sup>5</sup> The strong Islamic doctrine implanted early has made religious conversion a rare event among the Burmese Muslim. There is a public stigma to such a move, meaning when Burmese Muslim males married non-Muslim women, it is the women who convert to Islam.

In Mae Sot, some Islam attributes and symbols, such as the *kurta*, the skullcap and the *hijab* are not only used by Burmese Muslims in private areas or for religious activities. Other Islamic identities, such as calendars with pictures of mosques and a variety of calligraphies are also used by Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot. These Islamic accessories are used to decorate the walls of their houses or business locations. This trend cannot be separated from the influence of other Muslim communities who migrated earlier to Mae Sot after the mid-nineteenth century. The current Muslim community developed its Islamic identity, allowing it to grow in Mae Sot, long before the Burmese Muslims arrived. In fact, they were even able to build religious infrastructure elements such as Nurul Islam Mosque and Bengala Mosque, those which accommodate many of the religious, economic and social activities of the Burmese Muslims today. This fact allowed the early Burmese Muslims to display their Islamic attributes during their daily lives.

From the cases above, we can see that identity seems to be fixed genealogically (in blood traits), but it can be flexible practically (in a performative way). No Burmese Muslim chooses to be born a Buddhist or a Muslim, or a Burman or Karen, but each has the chance to choose whether to show it in public or to hide it. This leads me on to the argument made by some anthropologists, who contest whether identity is based on the nature of genealogical relations, for they believe identity cannot be separated from socio-political constructions. As a product of social relations, Barth (1969) argues that the ethnic group is problematic, as it may change over time (cited from Eriksen 1993). Interaction, exchange and information flows among ethnic groups give everyone the chance to cross ethnic boundaries. In this case, we may conclude that migration is a factor triggering the shifting of identity, because when migrating, a person will almost certainly meet new people and new groups, and encounter new social structures. In this case, the Burmese Muslims, preferred to be Burmese while socializing in public in Burma (Yegar 1972), but since moving to Thailand, have tended to reassert their religious identity.

This chapter aims to view how Burmese Muslims have dealt with their ethno-religious identity since living in Mae Sot. To be in a new place has led to the Burmese Muslims having to deal with new actors, new statuses and new social structures, those

different from at home in Burma. Many scholars argue that migration causes migrants to be an object of assimilation, meaning their identity no longer exists – whether modified, disappeared altogether or replaced by the identity of the host country. In contrast, I believe that the Burmese Muslims' identity in Mae Sot has been successfully reinvented and reasserted, and has even grown stronger and more visible when compared to Burma. This fact cannot be separated from two key factors: the plurality of Mae Sot and the presence of other communities with a common culture. Having a Burmese migrant majority in the area has facilitated the consumption of a variety of Burmese cultural products as part of their daily lives. Furthermore, reinventing their religious identity has been accommodated very well by the existing Muslim community, which had already developed facilities and a religious infrastructure. Nonetheless, Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot have not been able to totally resist assimilation pressures from the host country of Thailand.

## **5.2 *'I am Burmese, but I am not Buddhist; I am a Moslem, but I am not Rohingya'***

Mae Sot, which is located on the Thai-Burma border, has long experience of cultural contact with Burma, even from before the modern Thai state era. According to some literature, the Shan and Karen groups were the first from Burma to migrate to Mae Sot. Nevertheless, cultural contact between the Thais and Burmese was reinforced after a road connecting Mandalay and Mae Sot was built by the British in the late nineteenth century. Chalee Sriprasert (nd) mentions that in the last century, there were two Burmese men, U-Ong and U-Mong, who came to Mae Sot (also called *Ngiaaw*). They were the first Burmese people to migrate to Mae Sot, to work in agriculture and to trade, and having settled down in Mae Sot, changed their names to Thai style names and became Thai people. Around the 1960s, cultural contact between Thais and Burmese in Mae Sot was re-invigorated with the coming of other Burmese Muslims seeking refugee status. This contact has been reinforced since the national border was opened in the early 1990s, as a response to economic policy reforms related to the border.

The intensity of cultural contact with Burmese culture over the last two decades has changed the socio-cultural landscape of Mae Sot, and made it very different to most towns and cities in Thailand. One can easily find Burmese migrants at Phajaroen market

working at food stalls, and some Burmese migrant children study at educational institutions. While walking through Mae Sot town, one can also see residents from the Burmese migrant majority, such as along Islam Bamroong road. The large number of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot definitely invites a variety of Burmese identity facets, such as the language, cultural products and behaviors. These identities can be easily seen in public areas, because they have been embedded and are performed by every Burmese migrant, such as the use of Burmese as their everyday language. This is due to the surprisingly large number of Burmese migrants and their dominance of some parts of the city. This situation has led to high levels of socialization among the Burmese migrants, not only within their living environment, but also while working or during their leisure time at food stalls.

The long-standing social contact that has occurred between Burmese migrants and Thai people has often resulted in such Thais being able to speak Burmese; for example, Nuk (50 years-old)<sup>6</sup> who are very fluent. She admitted to me that her Burmese is so fluent because during her childhood she was assisted by a Burmese migrant who worked for her parents. It is not only Nuk who is fluent in Burmese, but also her parents, her daughter and her 8 year-old grandchild. Her parents speak Burmese because they always hire Burmese workers in their fields, while her daughter and grandchildren speak Burmese because their maids are also from Burma. In contrast to Nuk, Kismatullah (34 years-old) and Baidi (around 40 years-old) told me they speak Burmese due to their working environment, surrounded by Burmese migrants. Both of them are teachers at institutions linked to Nurul Islam Mosque foundation, in which the majority of students are the children of Burmese migrants. Although they teach Thai at school, Burmese is often needed to help students who do not have much Thai, or just to control wayward students.

As for the Burmese Muslims, the large number of Burmese migrants in the town means they meet other migrants from Burma rather than meet or interact with Thais. This definitely helps their socialization in Mae Sot, since Burmese is the only language they can speak, particularly for those who have crossed the border over the late two

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<sup>6</sup> A Thai Buddhist woman who works as a nurse at Mae Sot general hospital. Her house is located on the Asian Highway, not far from the Thai-Burma checkpoint.

decades<sup>7</sup>. Their adaptation to Mae Sot becomes has been made easier, since there is no requirement or pressure for them to have Thai language skills. The Burmese language is then used as their everyday communication, whether at home, at their workplace, or even in other public spaces. In addition to being spoken on a daily basis, Burmese is also used as an intermediate language at some informal Islamic schools in Mae Sot, such as Hafiz Nurul Islam and Madrasa Arbia Ta'alimu Quran. As a result, many Burmese Muslims feel that Thai is not that important for their everyday lives, although they live inside Thai territory. They believe that they can survive in Mae Sot without being able to speak Thai, because they live and run businesses with other Burmese. They do not wish to complicate their lives by having to learn Thai, since they think it is a difficult language to learn.

As Aminah (35 years-old), the wife of a Burmese food stall owner in the corner of Phajaroen market, told me during my conversation with her husband:

I have been here almost a year, but I cannot speak Thai, because every day I communicate in Burmese. Everybody in this area comes from Burma, so not being able to speak Thai is not a serious problem. I actually want to be able to speak Thai, but I am afraid of making mistakes when I pronounce it, because people may laugh at me. I think it will be fine if I cannot speak Thai, because once the situation gets better in Burma, I will definitely go back there with my family.

From the above statement, we can see that the high levels of social contact among migrants from Burma significantly affect the construction of Burmese as their daily language. This has also triggered a growing self-awareness among migrants of what is and is not in their comfort zone, although they are no longer in their own country. Aminah's daily routines lead her to meet other migrants from Burma, and to think that Thai is not that important for her, although she actually wants to learn it. Her lack of social contact with Thai people means her knowledge of their language is limited, and reduces her willingness to learn it. These feelings of fear and worry, that the people around might stare at her or make fun of her as she makes mistakes in Thai, are also the reason why she does not want to learn Thai. In addition, her motivation to go back home to Burma is another significant factor feeding her lack of desire to learn Thai. Her

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<sup>7</sup> Some in the generations over 60 years-old spoke Urdu, due to their background as the descendents of mixed marriages.

dream to return home means she sends her children to an informal Islamic school with Burmese as the intermediate language. She thinks they will not use Thai once they go back to Burma.

Burmese is used by Burmese Muslims, not only as their daily language but also to draw the barriers with other Muslims from Burma, such as those from Arakan, Karen and Mon states. Burmese Muslims admit that Burmese language is their mother tongue plus the only language they can speak fluently, which is unlike the three other ethnics that have their own mother tongues. Yuk (40 years-old), is the owner of a shop in the center of Phajaroen market. She told me:

Before I lived in Mae Sot, I was with some Burmese Muslims who lived in a village in Karen state. There we lived with Karen people: Buddhists, Christians and Muslims. They had their own culture and language, which was different from ours. When we socialized, we always used Burmese, because they spoke Burmese and we could not speak Karen.

In line with Yuk, Halim (19 years-old), is a Burmese Muslim who was born in Thailand, and acted as my interpreter during the field research, he told me there is a cultural distinction between Burmese Muslims, Arakan Muslims and Karen Muslims. Although they are both Muslim, their different origins mean they have different cultures. Language is the most visible marker to identify who is Burmese Muslim; who is Arakan and who is Karen. Halim told me:

We are all Muslim (he is referring to Burmese Muslims, Arakan Muslims and Karen Muslims), but Burmese Muslim are not the same as either Arakan Muslims or Karen Muslims. They have different cultures to us. Arakan Muslims come from Arakan state, while Karen Muslims come from Karen state, so they have their own local language that is different to Burmese.

This was proved to me when I visited a friend's house in Mae Tao road to celebrate the birth of a baby. I did not know before that my friend is an Arakan Muslim, as his appearance is the same as other Burmese Muslims, and since he speaks Burmese. I arrived at his house with Halim and two Burmese friends named Sut and Nizam. While waiting for the ceremony to begin, we sat on chairs arranged in front of the house. Not so far from where I was sitting, about five middle-aged men were chatting enthusiastically. Once they laughed loudly, meaning everyone could hear them. This



made me quite curious to know what were they talking about, so I asked Halim to interpret their discussion for me. He whispered to me that he did not understand what they were talking about, because they were not speaking Burmese. He said they were the Arakan Muslims, so they preferred to speak their local language. He said they probably only use Burmese when talking to other Burmese national migrants (non-Arakan).

Several days later, I had an interesting discussion with a friend while we were enjoying a cup of coffee at a Muslim stall, not so far from Nurul Islam Mosque. While chatting, suddenly a Muslim man came to our table. He talked to my friend while ordering a cup of tea and *rotee*. After that, he just left us. My friend immediately told me that he was an Arakan Muslim. I wondered if he was his friend and what they had talked about. My friend said he had no idea who he was; he just came up suddenly and talked about activities at the gems market. My friend claimed that person was an Arakan Muslim because his Burmese accent was so different to most Burmese Muslims.

Among Burmese Muslims, the image of Arakan Muslims in Mae Sot is very diverse, both in a positive and negative way. Some told me that Arakan Muslims are the smartest Muslims among the others from Burma, due to their linguistic abilities, which are better than others. In Mae Sot, as well as speaking Arakan as their mother tongue, and Burmese as their national language, some Arakan Muslims are also fluent in Urdu, Thai and even Malay. I met at least six Arakan Muslims<sup>8</sup> in Mae Sot who are fluent in Malay. As they admitted, they can speak Malay since they used to live and work in Malaysia. Nonetheless, the negative view of Arakan Muslims can often be heard among some Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot. Arakan Muslims are considered to be rude and often arrogant. One friend openly stated that he dislikes Arakan Muslims because they cause all Muslims in Burma to be treated badly by the government.

The open border regulations and the increasing number of Burmese national migrants in Mae Sot have led to many other Burmese cultural products appearing in the market, such as betel nut, *thanaka* and *longyi*. Those products are imported from Burma

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<sup>8</sup> They prefer to introduce themselves as Rohingya rather than Aarakan Muslims.

to meet the demands of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot<sup>9</sup>. For Burmese Muslims, those products, especially betel nut, certainly help their adaptation to Mae Sot. Some Burmese Muslims confessed to me that they could not stop chewing betel nut as they would feel dizzy if they did. In Mae Sot, there are two ways for Burmese Muslims to get hold of betel nut. First, they can make it by themselves, or second they can buy it at stalls selling betel nut. There are at least five small stalls selling betel nuts along Sripanit road and Islam Bamroong road, the owners of which are Burmese Muslims. Even so, their customers are not only limited to Burmese Muslims; all Burmese migrants from various levels buy from them. The basic ingredients required to make betel nut, including the betel and limestone, can be found easily among the Burmese merchants at Phajaroen market. Betel leaves sold there are grown at farms in the neighboring sub-districts to Mae Sot, such as Mae Ramat and Mae Kasa, whereas the herbs and other items are imported directly from Burma.



**Figure 5.1: Cultural products consumed by Burmese Muslims and sold in Mae Sot**

Based on the testimonies I received from a number of Burmese Muslims, the habit of chewing betel nut often triggers tension within Thai people, as they dislike the behavior; with people spitting carelessly while chewing the betel nut. In addition, it is inappropriate to spit in public spaces, as it leaves a red stain everywhere. The Mae Sot local government has also tried to address this issue, having introduced a regulation to fine those caught spitting while chewing betel nut. In order to socialize this policy, they have installed sign boards in some areas warning against spitting, those areas considered central to the Burmese migrants daily activities. However, this regulation has not really

<sup>9</sup> According to Yuk, a Burmese trader at Talaat Yai, some Burmese products she sells like thanaka, longyi and underwear are not only bought at the local market, but are also often shipped to Burmese migrants in other countries.

changed people's behavior, for some betel nut stalls are still open, and have even increased production with the rise in the number of Burmese migrants. The traders only responded to the government policy by installing some warning boards about spitting and by providing bins in which to spit around their stalls. Some consumers are aware of the regulation and prefer not to chew betel nut in public spaces, or have modified their behavior by chewing tobacco flavored gum or sweets (normally among teenagers).

Another Burmese cultural facet that has transferred to Mae Sot is the wearing of the *longyi*, or as more commonly known among Thais, the *saroong*. Various brands and motifs are available in many clothing stores around Phajaroen market, with most of the merchants and customers being Burmese migrants, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The *longyi* is an item which has been adopted inside Burma from the Burman, Karen and Kachin groups. However, the *longyi* of these three ethnics differs, since they have their own traditional motifs. They generally wear the *longyi* with the national motif, which is also worn by the Burmans. For Burmese Muslim males, the *longyi* is not only the clothing they wear on a daily basis, but also what they wear when praying. The ease with which they can buy a Burmese *longyi* in Mae Sot means they have continued wearing them to this day, although there are other varieties, such as the Indian, Thai or Malay style *longyi*.

Among Mae Sot Muslims, the *longyi* from Burma is not only worn by Burmese Muslim migrants, but also by other Muslims like those from Arakan, Bangladesh and Karen state. The motifs of these groups do not vary; they wear *longyi* with similar motifs (usually a plaid), even if it is of the same brand as the Burman Buddhist's. According to Husin (27 years old), a Thai Muslim friend, the *longyi* is an item that has been adopted as identity marker by Muslims from Burma in Mae Sot, as other Muslims in the town do not wear the item. The Burmese usually wear a plaid *longyi* with a *kurta*, while the Pakistanis wear a *kurta* set and pants with an identical cap on their heads. The Thai Muslims prefer to wear casual clothes; just shirt and pants. Even so, Husin admitted it is difficult distinguishing Muslims from Burma and those from Bangladesh based on clothing alone, since both chew betel nut and wear *longyi* and *kurta* on daily basis.

From the various explanations given above, we can see that a large number of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot have had a positive impact on the everyday lives of Burmese Muslims. The presence of migrants has drawn in some cultural products and clothing to the markets, those which represent the basic needs of Burmese Muslims, such as betel nut and *longyi*. This development has certainly encouraged the Burmese Muslims to stay and live in Mae Sot, because they have not been required to fully adapt to a new culture. In addition, their intense social contact with other migrants from Burma has meant that Burmese has remained their daily language, with Thai considered not that significant, even though they are living in Thailand, since they have less interaction with Thai people. The very large number of migrants from Burma, the presence of Burmese products and the use of the Burmese language when socializing, has shortened the distance that exists between home and their host location; therefore, to them Mae Sot feels like home. Another important aspect to note is how the Burmese Muslims have drawn boundaries between themselves and the other Muslim communities in Mae Sot by reinventing their Burmese identity.

### **5.3 From Religious Freedom to a Reinvention and Assertion of Religious Identity**

I want to marry a Thai Muslim girl then buy a house and stay here. It is so much better here when compared to Burma. Running a business here is easy and very promising. The infrastructure here is much better; living here is easier. In my hometown, the electricity does not run 24 hours a day, so it is common for power-cuts to occur very suddenly while cooking rice, or while studying.

These words were uttered by Imron (in his 50s), a Burmese Muslim from Rangoon, while I was visiting his grocery shop in the middle of Phajaroen market. He feels more comfortable living in Mae Sot, due to its better infrastructure when compared to Burma. This level of comfort has even led to him wishing to settle down in Mae Sot and marry a Thai Muslim. Comfort as a feeling cannot be defined objectively, since it is a person's feeling and opinion. Imron's feelings are certainly different to Gyi (37 years-old), the owner of K.T.G visa agency, whose feelings of comfort in Mae Sot are not due to the better infrastructure, but due to him being able to carry out his economic and religious activities safely and securely, whether. He told me:

I feel comfortable here because I can do anything I want. I can run my business and worship safely. I could not do this in Burma, as Muslims cannot run businesses, because the government there dislikes Muslims.

Almost all the Burmese Muslims I spoke to said the same as Gyi above. Being a Muslim in Burma is a risky business due to the discrimination practiced, either by the state or the other multiple forms of power that exist. Gyi mentioned that sometimes Muslims have difficulty accessing formal work, beyond trading and the agricultural sectors. When a Muslim chooses to set up a business, problems will always occur, impeding the process. He also mentioned the riots that have been occurring in Burma recently, such as the burning of mosques in Meikhtila, as this was still a hot issue among the Muslims in Mae Sot when I was conducting my research. According to him, the riot was triggered by a debate about the quality of gold being transacted between the Muslim owner of a gold shop, and a non-Muslim customer. This tension was then stoked by a group of people who disliked the Muslims, leading to the burning of the local mosque and an Islamic school, as well as shops and houses belonging to Muslims. Gyi added that such incidents could happen anytime in the future, across all parts of Burma. This situation has left many Muslims from Burma feeling very insecure, even though Burma is their home.

The description above shows that as well as economic reasons, Burmese Muslims also migrate in search of a better life and for religious reasons. For many, Mae Sot is the most secure destination for them in terms of religious freedom, when compared to Burma. This fact cannot be separated from the long history of migration to Mae Sot that has resulted in the town being full of people who welcome religious diversity. Burmese Muslims assume that the presence of other Muslim communities, those who arrived earlier and set-up residences and religious infrastructures in Mae Sot, will support them in their everyday lives. The presence of Nurul Islam Mosque allows them to practice their religion, while educational institutions based on religion also accommodate their children's educational needs. In addition, Muslim residents have been living in the town for over a century, meaning the Islamic identity there is strong, can be performed, and is accepted.



**Figure 5.2: Burmese Muslim men wearing Islamic clothes**

During the early days of Burmese Muslim migration to Mae Sot (the ‘old’ migrants), the other Muslims there helped them find their feet, and their religious affiliation also helped the Burmese Muslims socialize with the other Muslim communities. During the 1980s, the influence of Islam among Muslims in Mae Sot increased significantly along with the arrival of Tablighi Jama'at. Many Islamic features such as the *kurta* and skull cap began to be traded widely among all the Muslims. This gave an advantage to the Burmese Muslims who came to Mae Sot in the early 1990s (the ‘new’ migrants), and the presence of the old migrants and the advances made in terms of Islamic identity in Mae Sot made them feel very comfortable, although they were no longer in their own country. All this meant they were able to access Islamic features within the public space, unlike in Burma. As a result, their religious identity was able to grow and re-assert itself within their everyday lives.

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**Figure 5.3: Calligraphs decorating a Burmese Muslim restaurant**

Through some Islamic features such as the skullcap and *kurta* for men, and the *hijab* for women, Burmese Muslims are easily noticed among the crowds of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot. If such items were not on display, one would definitely have difficulty identifying them out of the other Burmese migrants. Some of them wear such items, not only during their religious activities, but also while working or during their leisure time. Even so, there are also some Burmese Muslims who do not wear these items and instead prefer to wear a simple shirt with a *longyi* or other casual wear. During my fieldwork, I discovered that among the Burmese Muslims, there are two different groups in terms of clothing: the members of the Tablighi Jama'at and non-members. The members of Tablighi Jama'at wear a *kurta* and skullcap almost the whole time, whereas other Muslims tend to wear such items only while praying at the mosque.

*Sunna Rasul* is the fundamental reason why both groups wear these clothes; however, one could not generalize that this is the reason why some wear them at all time, and others not. One interpretation is that it is part of a self-subjectivity which has caused the perceptions of Muslims to be different among themselves, even though they are part of the same group. In addition to practicing the *Sunna Rasul*, wearing Islamic clothing (especially the *kurta*) is a way for some illegal migrants in Mae Sot to avoid

the curiosity of the police. Ahmad (25 years-old), a Burmese Muslim as well as a member of the Tablighi Jama'at who came to Mae Sot just recently, told me:

Some Muslims wear a kurta; besides their faith it is also related to their security in Mae Sot. If a man wears a kurta then the police will know he is a Muslim, so he will not try to arrest him. This is related to the good relationship that exists between the Muslims in Mae Sot and the government, one developed since His Majesty the King of Thailand visited Mae Sot. He said to Haji Yosouf Khan (one of the Muslim leaders who has since passed away), that if there were any attacks on the Muslims in Mae Sot, to please let him know. It started with this; Muslims in Mae Sot seem to have been granted special rights in the eyes of the state, by the King.

As well as embedded attributes, Burmese Muslims have also constructed an Islamic identity by taking on Muslim names instead of Burmese names. These names are not officially registered in Burmese government documents, since they only circulate at the community level. This means their Muslim names are not printed on the Burmese Muslims' id cards, though the names are often given, along with giving the Burmese name, to a baby when first born. These Muslim names are usually taken from the names of the Prophet's friends or from Arabic words with a good meaning in the holy Koran. As a part of their identity, these names are also reinvented once they are used in Mae Sot. Muslim names tend to be used by Burmese Muslims while interacting with other Muslims, whereas with non-Muslim Burmese migrants they prefer to use their Burmese names. The use of their own names has thus become flexible, as it depends on the situation or who is the interlocutor. As I found during my fieldwork, almost all the Burmese Muslims I met introduced themselves to me with their Muslim names, because they knew I am a Muslim. Their Burmese names were then introduced or mentioned when I asked about them, but some tended to hide them, without giving a reason. From this, we can see how Burmese Muslims have tried to maintain both their ethnic and religion identities, and how they use them flexibly and interchangeably.





**Figure 5.4: Halal symbol at a food stall in Phajaroen Market**

Burmese Muslims also seem to create a distinction for themselves in their Burman food consumption habits. The strong Islamic doctrine of *halal* creates a food barrier between the Burmese Muslims and Burman Buddhists. Fundamentally, both of them eat similar kinds of food, but they are different due to the *halal* concept. Burmese Muslims modified some types of Burmese food that contain pork and blood tofu with some *halal* ingredients, such as chicken, duck, mutton or beef. In Mae Sot, I often saw the *halal* symbol on the signboards of food stalls owned by Burmese or other Muslims. For Burmese Muslims, the *halal* symbol is used to distinguish food stalls owned by Burmese Buddhists from their own, though they have ostensibly the same menus. Nonetheless, the concept of *halal* is not only about controlling what can be eaten, but is also about the process; like how to slaughter the animal, how to keep it and how to cook it<sup>10</sup>. As a result, Burmese Muslims would always prefer to buy their ingredients, including chicken, beef or even fish, from Muslim sellers, as they know such groceries will be *halal*, while those from non-Muslim traders may not be, since the sellers are not Muslim.

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<sup>10</sup> Halal animals/meat can be non-Halal if they are not slaughtered accordingly (in the Islamic way). The animal should have its throat cut while the Basmallah and a prayer are read out. Animals that die naturally are not Halal according to Muslims.

As well as the above, Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot have also reinvented their cultural practices related to religious doctrines, such as the ceremony celebrating a newborn baby. This ceremony is called *aqiqah*<sup>11</sup>, and is usually held on the seventh day after the birth. As mentioned in the *hadits*, when someone gives birth to a son, two sheep have to be slaughtered, whereas for a daughter it is only one. In Islam, this ritual is a part of the parents expressing gratitude to Allah, the Muslim God, at having been granted a baby. During the *aqiqah*, the hair of the baby is cut as a symbolic gesture to clean the dirt from the womb. Moreover, the key part of this ceremony is to offer prayers to the parents, so that the baby will be a good person in the future and will be successful both in the world and the afterlife. Most families invite all their friends and relatives to their houses at such times, where the main dishes are served by the host, usually of mutton. There is no special ritual held for the guests, other than reciting prayers together and enjoying the occasion. Some guests may bring gifts to congratulate the host.

In addition to practicing what it is taught in the Koran and *Hadith*<sup>12</sup>, Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot have also reinvented two cultural practices as the result of Islam localization within the Burmese culture: the *dawat* and *fatayan*. Basically, both of these practices are similar, as during them a Muslim invites another – especially a man, to come to his house, do citations and serve them food. There is a different purpose to the rites though. The *dawat* is aimed more at expressing gratitude over particular goals, while the *fatayan* is generally held as a way to worship and give prayers for the deceased. According to *Imam Ibrahim*, *fatayan* is a local interpretation of a Bangladeshi ritual, but it is also practiced by Burmese Muslims and has been for a long time.

...*Fatayan* is a tradition from Bangladesh, which was then taken on by our Burmese Muslim ancestors a long time ago. Literally, the word *fatayan* is derived from the word *fatihah*, but the term *fatayan* developed because, at that time, people had difficulties pronouncing the word. Every time they pronounced it, it sounded like '*fatayan*'. Since then, it has been called *fatayan*. *Sura Fatihah* itself has been very important in constructing *fatayan* because this *sura* is the opening of the Koran, and one must read

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<sup>11</sup> *Aqiqah* is not compulsory, but requires the parents to be present when able, whereas for those who cannot be present, they can choose not to do it. The timing of this ritual is flexible; it does not always have to be on the seventh day after the baby was born. It can be held anytime when the parents are ready.

<sup>12</sup> The sayings of Prophet transmitted by his followers through a chain of narration (see Marranci 2008).

it during religious rites'. Even so, the term *fatayan* itself is not mentioned in the Koran.

The *Fatayan* funeral rite is held on the third, fifth or seventh day after the person's death. The invited people are generally men, either from the direct family, other relatives and friends, as well as Hafiz students. *Fatayan* is normally held during the period between *Ashr* and *Maghrib*, or between *Maghrib* and *Isha'a*. Holding a Koran or *Juz Amma*, the guests sit cross-legged in a carpeted room. After the guests have all gathered, an *Alim* will lead the prayers from the Koran. There are usually four *sura*<sup>13</sup> in the Koran, these being: *Al-Fatihah*, *Qursi*, *Yaa Sin* and *Thalil*.

During my participation and observation at these three rites, all the invited, male guests came and gathered in the main room; none were younger than 20 years-old, and most were householders. They came wearing Muslim clothes like the *kurta* and cap; some others wore less formal wear like shirts, jeans or a *longyi*. No women joined among the men, either during the praying ritual or while enjoying the food that was served. Sometimes one or two women, usually the hosts, appeared just to check there was enough food and to clean up the dirty plates and utensils. The role of women on these occasions is limited to the private area, where they cook and serve the food. I saw some women on two different *fatayan* and *aqiqah* occasions in informal dress, sit down and chat while preparing the plates, spoons, glasses and food before taking to the main room.

Religious identity is the basis of Burmese Muslim culture, so one sees this dominate during their daily lives rather than their Burmese identity. In Mae Sot, the reinvention of religious identity that has taken place is not only a part of their identity, but it is also used by the Burmese Muslims as a tool to negotiate with the negative stigma of being *khon phama* (the Thai term for Burmese people). The migrants prefer to be known as Muslims from Burma because the term *khon phama* is somewhat sensitive for them and identified with the alien, illegal and dangerous, and with drugs. Muslims are considered to have a better image; as a community they have played a significant part in the development of Mae Sot town. Based on some comments by Thai Muslims I

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<sup>13</sup> *Sura* is a word used to call the chapter in the holy Koran. The Koran consists of 114 *suras* arranged from the longest, with *sura Al-Fatihah* as an exception as the opening of the Koran.

spoke to, the good image Muslims have in Mae Sot is based on the good relationship they have with the government. This can be seen through the public infrastructure put in place, known as Islam Bamroong, by the regional government on land donated by the Muslim community. The government also pays attention to the prosperity of the Muslim community in Mae Sot<sup>14</sup>, and has provided space for Muslims to enter the local government system, plus has included *Chumchon* Islam as one of the twenty *Chumchons* in town<sup>15</sup>.

Within the Muslim community, the majority of Burmese Muslims have increased their levels of self-confidence as Muslims. For some reason, the Burmese Muslims often claim that their form of Islam is better than the other Muslim communities' in Mae Sot. These claims come over as a joke amidst the informal talk among Burmese Muslims. As another example, they always try to show that the Thai Imam, whom basically is the main Imam in the town, is no better than the second Imam, who is a Burmese Muslim. Another comparison that is often invited is the Islamic education in Burma, which is meant to be way more successful than in Mae Sot. This can be seen through some *Alim*, *Hafiz* and *Moulwi* in Mae Sot, who are mostly Burmese Muslims. Since their presence in Mae Sot, religious education and the morals of Muslims have gradually got better, and certainly a lot better than they were in the 1990s. Through the many cases mentioned above, we can conclude that the Burmese Muslims place themselves at the top of their culture, even though there are other Muslim communities in Mae Sot.

#### **5.4 Schooling and Language: Thai identity - between contestation and accommodation**

In Mae Sot, I argue that the ethno-religious identity reconstruction of Burmese Muslims has been successful, and that it cannot be separated from the role of the Thai state. Beginning with border regulations and economic integration, the state's control over its territory has been flexible, allowing the flow of people, goods, capital and even

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<sup>14</sup> This can be seen through the donations given by the state during mosque renovation activities in 1970 (Chalee Sriprasert [nd]) and the state's support of the two schools under Nurul Islam Mosque control.

<sup>15</sup> The presence of Chumchom Islam makes it possible for a Muslim to act as a representative in the Pu Yau Baan. This means he or she is involved in the administration Mae Sot local market.

ideology to move freely. Here I do not mean that state control over Mae Sot has decreased, but that through its agency, the Thai state has been consistent in keeping its territory free from any threat of ideological influence from its neighboring country. As well as checkpoints and border police, the Thai state has used Islamic educational institutions to instill Thai identity, especially language and culture, into the new generation of Burmese Muslims born in Mae Sot. Even so, state control over education has not been strong enough to prevent the coming of private schools which do not use the Thai curriculum<sup>16</sup>. This has allowed parents to choose which school is suitable for their children's future.



**Figure 5.5: Burmese Muslim students at a *Madrasa* in town**

Nurul Islam kindergarten and Islam Suksa School are the two formal educational institutions which operate under the Nurul Islam foundation, which also receives support from the Thai government. The curriculum at both schools follows the national Thai education standards, but adds an Islamic course and minimizes the influence of Buddhist teachings. The intermediary language in both schools is Thai. Though they operate under the Thai curriculum, the uniform they wear is quite different to most Thai schools, as it also has Islamic attributes. The male pupils wear long pants and a cap on their head, while the female pupils wear a skirt and hijab. As it is a Thai school, all the students and teachers line up at 8 a.m. in front of the school for the Thai national

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<sup>16</sup> The presence of various international NGOs focused on education in the last 20 years has led to an expansion of migrant schools in Mae Sot. The intermediate language in those schools is Burmese, and they have their own educational system; they do not follow the Thai curriculum. In addition, there are many informal educational institutions based on Islam, such as Hafiz Nurul Islam and Madrasa. Both types of school teach reading, writing and memorizing the Koran, and also introduce the moral values of Islam; therefore, they do not have a formal degree.

anthem. Furthermore, each day a teacher gives an evaluation or passes out information to the students. Before going to their classes, they pray together in Arabic at the front of the school, as led by a religion teacher. The interesting fact at both schools is that the majority of students are the children of Burmese Muslim migrants, whether born in Burma or Mae Sot.



**Figure 5.6: A teacher and students at Nurul Islam Kindergarten**

All children, Thai or migrant; Muslim or non Muslim, can be students of both schools, as long as they meet the requirements set. For the migrant children, then in addition to filling in the application form, their parents are required to provide other documents, such as their migrant IDs, birth certificates issued by Thai government hospital, and the children's immunization records. Based on these requirements, one can see that the schools indirectly exclude particular groups, such as the children of illegal migrants<sup>17</sup>, children not born in Thailand and those who have not had regular immunizations (do not have a regular medical check-up). However, some teachers told me, that all children, even those not born in Thailand, are allowed to study at the school. This is linked to the fact that the agency that helps them to get birth certificates from the public hospital, does so even when children were born outside Thailand. To obtain an immunization record, a migrant can visit a number of clinics in town. The most interesting case I found was seeing the completed document of a new student in one

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<sup>17</sup> It cannot be denied that the number of illegal migrants exceeds the legal migrants. In the case of Mae Sot, understanding the issue of illegal migrants is itself complex. The first category is the migrants who came legally, but become illegal since they did not return to their country until after the expiry date, and the second is for migrants who enter the country illegally. The third category of migrants includes those who entered the country legally and hold migrant ID cards, but these have expired.

school, for which the parents' ID card had already expired. Such a student should be rejected, as their parents do not meet the requirements, but in this case the student was accepted. From such a case we can see how regulations become flexible and negotiable in the hands of certain agencies.



**Figure 5.7: Burmese Muslim students and teachers at Islam Suksa School**

Before entering Islam Suksa School, Burmese Muslim students are required to attend Nurul Islam kindergarten, which divides the students into three different classes according to their ages, from three to five years-old. Similar to other kindergartens, Nurul Islam teaches the students various skills such as reading, writing, coloring, drawing and making pictures. Of these skills, reading and writing are the main focus of learning at this school. Learning activities at Nurul Islam start at 8 a.m. and finish at 12 midday; then continued after a siesta until 3 p.m. All activities in this school are conducted in Thai, for as mentioned by one teacher, learning a language is a skill and is practical. If the children get used to a language at three years-old, after they are five they will retain it. One teacher told me that Thai language skills are passed to the migrant children because someday they will become Thai citizens. However, the learning process at this school is obstructed by two main issues; the discipline applied and the environment. The same teacher told me:

The discipline at this school is not good, way worse than the Thai Buddhist schools. The students' parents know the school starts at 8 a.m.,

but they send them in 9 or even 10 a.m. They also do not pay attention to their children's schedule, so they often dress them in the wrong uniforms.

He added something about the difficulties he faces when teaching Thai to the Burmese children:

Educating the children to speak Thai here takes extra patience. For example, they have today learned and memorized the names of fruits, but they will have forgotten them tomorrow. This is related to their environment, they live with a family that is using Burmese language as in daily, while playing with other kids they also speak Burmese because the kids are Burmese. Learning language without a practice will not produce a good result.

Based on this teacher's opinion, we can see how the parents and the living environment are keys to influencing the growth of the migrant children. In which direction a child goes depends very much on how the parents lead him or her. In addition to this, different motivations among migrants lead to different perspectives in terms of how much importance is attached to the children's education. Some migrants who want to return to Burma do not care so much for the education in Thailand, as they think that once back in Burma, the Thai education will not be used. There are also some parents who prefer to send their children to Nurul Islam kindegarten, because they are busy working. By sending their children to school, they can focus on work until at least 3 p.m. Different from the previous two groups, those migrants who dream of settling down in Thailand feel that a Thai education is very important, and that by sending their children to Nurul Islam kindegarten and continuing to Islam Suksa School, they will prepare them for a better future in Thailand.

After completing their studies at both schools, the Burmese Muslims have cultural capital not possessed by every Burmese Muslim - a legal education certificate from a Thai school, as well as, of course, the ability to speak Thai. Using both forms of cultural capital, they have a better chance of finding a job in Mae Sot. Some of the alumni from these schools can be found working in Mae Sot as shopkeepers or as receptionists at medical clinics.



Abidin (40 years-old), a teacher from the south of Thailand, explained to me that:

The shops in Mae Sot prefer to employ those who can speak Thai and Burmese, as the customers tend to come from both countries. When a shop has an employee who speak both languages, the customers will receive good service. A shop owner who wants to save on costs will only employ one person. At a medical or health clinic, employees who can speak both Thai and Burmese are much in-demand because most patients are Burmese, while the doctors tend to be Thai. These employees therefore act as liaisons, interpreting and passing on information to the doctor regarding how the patient feels, and passing on instructions from the doctor on what medicines to use.

As cultural capital, the ability to speak Thai not only gives Burmese Muslims access to job vacancies, but also allows them to socialize beyond their own community, allowing their networks to expand ethnically and religiously. As a result, some Burmese Muslims realize that knowing Thai has been very helpful when dealing with state agencies, and this was their main motivation for learning the language. As stated by Isa (24 years-old), a Burmese Muslim from Mawlamyine:

My desire to be able to speak fluent Thai led me to learn Thai everyday from my mom. Thai is very important in case our house is raided by the police, who then interrogate us. If this happens, we will be able to answer them fluently. I envy people who can speak Thai because the police ask them only a few and simple questions. If the police know you do not speak Thai, they make life difficult and ask many, complicated questions.

From the above statements, I can conclude that there are contested meanings between the actors, whether migrant to migrant or migrant to the state, over their attitudes towards learning the Thai language and the Thai education system in Mae Sot. From the state's point of view, the use of a Thai curriculum in Islamic schools with Burmese Muslim students as a majority reflects an effort to construct a Thai identity and expand state power across the entire territory and its people. In this sense, educating 'others' under the Thai curriculum reflects an attempt to counter the potential degradation of Thai identity in Mae Sot due to the free flow of people and ideologies from its neighboring country. The migrants; meanwhile, think that Thai language and Thai schools can act as a tool; to help them negotiate with state agencies and access various forms of capital, those to help their survival in Mae Sot. In this context, I would

like to argue that building Thai identity or *Thai-ization* through educational institutions does not completely subordinate the ‘others’, because at the same time, these ‘others’ try to manipulate the system so that they can accumulate cultural capital.

## 5.5 Summary

The presence of Burmese Muslim identity in particular areas in Mae Sot shows that they have been able to successfully reinvent their own identities, with at least three different actors accommodating this reconstruction process: the Thai state, Burmese migrants and other Muslim communities in Mae Sot. The border economic integration policy introduced by the Thai state has allowed the Burmese Muslims to access their cultural products, leading to a rise in the number of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot town, most of who live in groups. Their dominance in particular areas has made it easy for them to use Burmese as their everyday language, and this makes it seem as if there is no language barrier with the host country. In religious life, Burmese Muslims are in their comfort zone due to the construction of a variety of religious infrastructures, those built by previous Muslim communities. As a result of this, many Islamic facets can be found quite easily and used as part of their daily lives, without any fear of discrimination, criticism or conflict.

I certainly cannot dispute that ethnic identity has physical boundaries, as it is clear that its performance and attributes relate people to their origins. Nonetheless, in this chapter I have argued that ethnic identity is not only related to genealogical traits, which are fixed and embedded in a person’s body since they were born. I argue that ethnic identity is also politically constructed to dominate, control, or merely invoke a hegemonic reaction by those in power. In this sense, ethnic identity is a product of social, cultural or economic interactions in a complex society. As a self-construction, a person would possibly hide his or her identity if to reveal it would invoke a negative reaction from society. Despite its similarity to a territory, ethnic identity transcends and transplants place, due to the mobility of people. As a consequence, it is possible for ethnic identity to experience a transformation of meaning, whether materially or symbolically. Finally, throughout this paper I would like to underline my argument that every actor has his own perspective towards the nature of ethnic identity.