

CHAPTER 6

Musjid¹ Nurul Islam: Social Network in the Religious Space

6.1 Introduction

A mosque is one of the most important places within the religious life of a Muslim. In a single day, a Muslim have to pray five times, and if they visit a mosque for praying they will have the chance to meet other Muslims. Nevertheless, socialization among Muslims in a mosque is not only related to religious interests. Before and after the *shalat* (praying), Muslims often discuss issues among themselves at the mosque. This is the case at Nurul Islam Mosque, the oldest and biggest mosque in Mae Sot. Every time I went to visit the mosque, there was always some new item of gossip being discussed among the Muslims, from teenagers talking romance, to adults discussing the Rohingya issue in Thailand's deep south. As well as helping to circulate such information, Nurul Islam is also an area in which a variety of information related to housing, jobs and local knowledge is circulated, from one Muslim to another.

The plurality of the Muslim community in Mae Sot has led to extensive community socialization taking place at Nurul Islam. In the mosque, one can see Thai Muslims interacting with other Muslim communities, like the Burmese Muslims, Bengali or Pathan Muslims. Particular groups are sometimes not able to understand the language of Muslims from other groups, meaning they only get involved in discussions with Muslims from the same community. Apart from this, the *ummah*² principal in Islam removes ethnic barriers among Muslims in Mae Sot, as this creates a new meaning for Muslims and acts as cultural capital. In this sense, religion not only unites Muslims from various different ethnic backgrounds, but also creates a broad social

¹ An arabic term of mosque.

² *Ummah* refers to the community of all Muslims and believers in one God (Marranci 2008), or a community of Islamic believers (Hoffstaedter 2011).

network, one not limited to family and ethnic relations, but also covering a broader religious network.

Research into social network in religious spaces has been limited to date, and has focused mainly on Christianity³. Some of the existing literature shows that churches and congregations play a significant role in revitalizing identities (Gillis 2003, Dias-Stevens 2003), as they provide important services, resources, social support and social networks (Min 1992, Hagan 2002, Smidth 2003). Nevertheless, Coleman (2003) argues that the church is not an institution that gives direct support to a community through resources; it is not only an institution where capital is produced, but also accommodates the construction of social network in particular circles. As a religious center, a church is a space that unites a group of believers. Coming from the socialization that takes place in a church arises a congregation that believes, supports and helps other members – in a social, economic or political context – and within particular norms (Coleman 1990, Coleman 2003). While space here becomes significant at constructing social capital, the existing literature leaves it far behind and prefers to focus on the work of social network in producing other forms of capital.

Currently, most studies on social network in the context of migration in Southeast Asia seem to focus on family relationships and ethnic hubs (Dorairajoo 2002, Prista 2008, Nisakorn 2009). In contrast, Berlie (2000) in his study shows how important religious space is in the construction of social network for Yunnanese Muslim traders in northern Thailand. Each mosque built by the Yunnanese Muslim traders marks the early existence of commercial trades routes running from Yuxi in southern China to Chiang Rai in the northern part of Thailand. The mosques along this route were used by Muslim caravan traders as temporary shelters before they continued on their journeys to other regions. The meeting of Muslim traders who stayed at these mosques created a broader function for the mosques themselves; they were not only places of prayer and worship, but also supported the Yunnanese Muslims in terms of their social and economic networks in northern Thailand. Close to these mosques grew

³ Among the three major monotheistic religions, Christianity is the most complex denomination. There are at least five major groups in Christianity: Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglicans and Baptists. This leads each group to have their own church institution and congregation.

Yunnanese Muslim communities, followed by the development of central economic activities.

The Mosque is the core of the social network developed by the Muslim community in Mae Sot, and has been since Indian Muslim traders arrived in the late nineteenth century. Even so, there is no factual evidence to show any interconnection between the mosques that existed along the trading routes, from India to Mae Sot, used by the Indian Muslims. At the beginning, family relations were the only social capital to have a significant influence on the establishment of the first Muslim community in Mae Sot. The first mosque in Mae Sot, named Nurul Islam, which was established in 1901 was to signal the expansion of social capital among the Indian Muslims at that time. This is shown through the new Muslim migrants who arrived, who were not only from the previous migrants' family circles. These new migrants traveled to Mae Sot due to the inspirational stories emanating from the town about the success of the Indian Muslims who had arrived there earlier. The Indian Muslim residences, and also Nurul Islam, became social network for other Muslim communities that moved to Mae Sot seeking refugee, such as the Pakistanis and Burmese Muslims. Alongside with the more diverse and larger existing Muslim community in Mae Sot, Muslim social capital was also extended, not only based on family relations, but also on inter-ethnicity and internationality.

The renovation of Nurul Islam in around 1970 is believed to be the starting point of the mosque shifting its functions, from merely a place of prayer into one serving social, educational, and economic functions. These functions came about as a result of the number of properties belong to Nurul Islam Mosque, in turn triggered by the progress of *waqf*⁴, or religious practice, made by Muslim Mae Sot. Since then, a committee structure has been a responsible for maintaining the mosque's properties, called the *motowali*, for the sake of *ummah* prosperity in Mae Sot. Changing from an informal Islamic educational institution to a formal school based on Islam was the main focus of the *motowali* at that time, due to the increasing number of Muslims from the new generation. Nowadays, the Mosque's progress in terms of education can be seen

⁴ *Waqf* is an Islamic term meaning a donation made to the mosque and its *Ummah*, with the person donating expected to receive rewards from God continually.

through the three different educational institutions it operates: Islam Suksa School, Nurul Islam Kindergarten and Hafiz Nurul Islam.

As for economic aspects, the *motowali* built a building on land that belongs to the mosque, to be leased to Muslims. In addition to physical buildings, *motowali* also started letting land at more affordable rates, on which non-permanent houses were built by migrants who were financially less secure. The role of the *motowali* and Nurul Islam are also related to socio-cultural aspects, such as Muslim inaugurations, wedding ceremonies and funeral ceremonies. For Burmese Muslims who came during the second period, Nurul Islam and the *motowali* played a significant role in their adaptation and survival in Mae Sot. However, for those who have arrived in Mae Sot in the last ten years, they got some advantages from the mosque, and also additional help from their relatives or other Burmese Muslims.

By using the Nurul Islam as a case study, in this chapter I intend to show the roles played by religious space, as social capital, in the growth of the Muslim communities in Mae Sot. This is unlike Berlie's study, which seems to view the role of the mosque as providing social capital only for a single community - the Yunnanese Muslim traders who built it (2000). This chapter looks at the broader scope by showing how Nurul Islam accommodates Muslim social network, that is, inter-ethnicity relations within the Mae Sot Muslim community as a whole. I start this chapter by relating the history of Nurul Islam, as the turning point in terms of connecting Muslims to one another. After that I describe the formation of the Mosque's committee, an entity responsible for organizing a range of activities, covering religious, educational, and social aspects in the Muslim community. Lastly, by combining the roles of the Mosque as a space and an institution, I also describe in this chapter its work as a religious space, as a source of accumulating and circulating capital by the Burmese Muslim community. In this chapter I argue that for Muslims in Mae Sot, especially the Burmese Muslims, the Mosque is not only used as a center of religious activities, but also as a source of a social network. As social network, the mosque helps unite Muslim, and using resulting connections, a Muslim then has the chance to produce other capital forms.

6.2 Nurul Islam and the Beginning of Social Network Construction

The growth of Islam in Mae Sot has led to an increase in the number of mosques in Mae Sot. When it was first built, there was only a wooden mosque in the town, built in the late nineteenth century, whereas now there are eight mosques in town. Following the pattern of Muslim residences in other Thai regions, the expansion in the number of mosques has been followed by a concomitant growth in Muslim settlements, located around the mosques, and where Muslims' socialize and earn a living. Every mosque usually has its own informal religious school, or *madrassa*, that teaches reading and writing of the Koran for Muslim children. The learning activities in a *Madrassa* are held every evening, between the *Ashr* prayer and the *maghrib* prayer. Most *Madrassas* do not charge their students for tuition because they are operationally supported by the mosque's management and by the Muslim living surrounding.

Table 6.1: List of mosques and mushollas in Mae Sot⁵

No	Mosque Name	Location/ <i>Chumchon</i>	<i>Madhhab</i> ⁶	Status
1	Nurul Islam	Islam-Wat Luang Border	Hanafi	Registered
2	Bengala (Musholla)	Islam	Hanafi	Unregistered
3	Nur (Musholla/Bale)	Islam	Hanafi	Unregistered
4	Lam (Musholla/Bale)	Islam	Hanafi	Unregistered
5	Anshor	Islam	Hanafi	Registered
6	Muhajirin	Islam	Hanafi	Registered
7	Medina (Musholla)	Wat Luang	Hanafi	Unregistered
8	Darul Ulum (Musholla)	Ruam Reeng	Hanafi	Unregistered

Among the current mosques in Mae Sot, Nurul Islam and Bengala are surrounded by the biggest Muslim settlements in town. These mosques are less than one kilometer away from each other, and come under the single management of the *motowali* at Nurul Islam. Due to the over capacity of Nurul Islam, meaning it can no longer provide for the increasing number of Muslims in town, so the committee established the Bengala Mosque. The committee is currently building a new mosque

⁵ The data collected from an interview with one *motowali* member of Nurul Islam Mosque.

⁶ *Madhhab* (an Arabic term "doctrine") is the generic term for a school of taught within *fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence).

with a two-storey building only a few meters away from Bengala Mosque. This new mosque will stand on *waqf* land donated by a successful Arakan Muslim who migrated to Mae Sot many years ago and now has Thai citizenship. This mosque aims to replace Bengala, because the current one is no longer able to accommodate the jama'at (group). In the near future, the old Bengala will be used as a *madrasa* (religion school) for Muslim children in the area. Most of the Muslims living around Bengala are migrants from Burma; they are either Burmese Muslims or Arakan Muslims, and most rent ordinary housing belonging to Mae Sot Muslims or Nurul Islam.

This is different to Bengala, which is located in a small lane in Islam Bamroong, Nurul Islam stands alongside Sripanit road – one of the central economic zones in Mae Sot. Comparing Bengala to the other mosques, Nurul Islam has the most strategic location, so this mosque is easy to find. This two-storey mosque is a permanent building, with a combination of green, white and yellow coloring, like many of the other mosques found in northern Thailand. Nurul Islam Mosque is the oldest mosque in Mae Sot, and has a giant dome and four medium-sized domes decorating the roof. A moon and a star – as the symbols of Islam, are held on an iron stick on top of each dome. There are two *minarets* (towers), approximately five meters in height – built symmetrically on the left and right corners of the roof. Both towers are used as trestles for the medium-sized domes and for loudspeakers which broadcast the *azan*⁷ prayers very loudly. These two towers indicate a Middle East influence, although Nurul Islam is actually under the Indian Muslim ideological framework.

During my first week living in Mae Sot, I visited Nurul Islam to pray as well as to introduce myself to the Muslim community. I then realized that the strong Indian Muslim ideology could be seen through the *madhhab* (sect) it follows, which is the Hanafi. This is one of the Islamic ideologies embraced by most Indian Muslims. The influence of this *madhhab* is indicated through the lack of a female prayer zone at Nurul Islam. Once I met a husband and wife (both around 50 years-old) from Malaysia who were visiting Nurul Islam for the *Dzuhur* prayer. They could not find an ablution space for her, so not long after asked one Mae Sot Muslim at the mosque, but his answer was not as they expected. He sent them behind the mosque and showed some public toilets

⁷ The sound voiced by a Muslim (*muezzin*) to call the people for praying, or indicating the praying time.

for her to carry out her ablutions. After doing her ablutions, he sent her to a room on the first floor and explained that she could pray there by herself. Then he left to join the other men on the second floor, which is the main zone used for praying.

The lack of a space or zone for women proves that Nurul Islam Mosque follows the Hanafi *madhhab*, as agreed by Muhammad (60 years-old), a *Muezzin* at the mosque whom originally from the central of Thailand. When we became involved in a conversation at a sausage stall across from the Mosque, he explained to me with a disappointed face:

Every mosque in Mae Sot, including Nurul Islam, follows the Hanafi *madhhab*, so women cannot join prayers at the mosque. Therefore, no women come to the Mosque; they do their prayers at home.

From our long discussion, he admitted that he follows the *Syafi'i madhhab* and he is quite disappointed with the absence of a space for women at Nurul Islam Mosque. He said this is in contrast to his hometown, where most Muslims follow the *Syafi'i*, and his mosques provide a special zone or space for women who want to join the prayers. Although feeling a bit disappointment, he confirmed that the different *madhhab* do not trigger any conflicts among Muslims in Mae Sot. Every Muslim respects the other, and they keep praying at the same mosque.

Kismatullah is a 35 year-old Thai Muslim who was born in Mae Sot and now works as a religious teacher in Islam Suksa School. During our discussion at the Mosque, he said that the Hanafi *madhhab* dominated mosques in Mae Sot. He mentioned that:

Unlike most mosques in southern Thailand that are influenced by Islam Malay, mosques in Mae Sot are influenced more by Indian Islam. Every mosque follows the Hanafi *madhhab*, because most Muslims in Mae Sot follow it. The Hanafi *Madhhab* itself is a sect followed by most Indian Muslims.

He added that the influence of Indian Muslim ideology in Mae Sot is linked to their ancestors' relations with Indian Islam. On the history of urban development, Islam was introduced to Mae Sot for the first time by an Indian Muslim trader named Sammat Ali, and he later invited his relatives to stay there. Indian Muslim ideology was then

embedded in Mae Sot and it was reflected since the early construction of Nurul Islam Mosque. ‘A historical note of Muslim in Mae Sot’, written by Chalee Sriprasert (nd) states that Nurul Islam was built in 1901 alongside the growing expansion of the Muslim community. The absence of a mosque at that time caused Muslims to cross the border – to Burma, to run *Eid al Fitr* and *Eit al Adh* prayers. The establishment of Nurul Islam was finally possible due to the improved financial situation of the Muslim community, but the first building was very small and was made of wood. It was not a permanent mosque building like exists today.



Figure 6.1: The first Nurul Islam Mosque (left), and after its first renovation (right). Source: Chalee Sriprasert (nd)

Nurul Islam was built on land bought through shared payments given by some caravan traders from India, who decided to settle down in Mae Sot. Based on Chalee Sriprasert’s notes, the land was bought from a Thai Buddhist for only 60 baht. This amount was then split into six and covered by ten people. Asqhal Ali and Muhammad Ali gave ten baht each, and the other 40 baht was split among four: Rahman and Ahmad Ali, Samiya and Amil Hamzah, Nazim and Ulil Ali, and Yousuf Ali and Husein. Construction of the mosque involved mutual cooperation by the Muslim community. Phoso Rahman sent his laborers to clear the land, and he was also the first man to call-out the *Azan* at the mosque. The Mosque was finally named *Musjid* Nurul Islam, and was a single-storey building made of wood. At that time, Nurul Islam could only house 60 to 80 people at a time. The building process cost 850 baht, with 300 baht spent making the aqueduct. All of those expenses were covered by Muslims in Mae Sot.

The establishment of Nurul Islam also marked the first Muslim settlement along Sripanit Road, an area which was surrounded by forest, but was then transformed into a crowded area of houses built by the Muslim. The increasing number of Indian Muslims settling along Sripanit Road highlighted the inadequate capacity of Nurul Islam to accommodate the Muslim community. As a result, a renovation and extension of Nurul Islam was carried out in 1939, with the old mosque destroyed and replaced by a bigger building, but still using wood. This reconstruction cost 10,000 baht and took about two years. The new building could accommodate a larger number of jama'at (group), up to 200 or 300 people by this time. Nurul Islam Mosque served no other function than as a religious building; supporting Muslims in their religious activities.

Mae Sot, which is on the border of Thailand and Burma, then had to accommodate a huge influx of Muslims from Burma, when the military regime took over power there⁸. Nurul Islam could not accommodate the number of jama'at arriving from Burma; therefore, another reconstruction and expansion was carried out in 1970. This second reconstruction started by demolishing the whole building, which was then rebuilt as a permanent two-storey structure. The capacity of the Mosque was also increased - to accommodate 1,500 people, and has some additional facilities. Since then, its function as a mosque for the Muslim community has become even more complex, as now it is not only a religious space, but also an institution that accommodates many social and educational activities.

The first floor is now used as a meeting room, while the prayer room is located on the second floor. The first floor can also be used as a prayer room, if there are too many people (especially during Friday prayers and during Ramadhan). Tablighi Jama'at occupies this floor to hold its annual celebration. This floor also facilitates *musafir*; providing a place for people to stay, such as *da'wa* (missionaries) or those stopping over in Mae Sot. To the south side of this floor, there are two rooms, 5m² and 4m², for the Imam and Muezzin. There are also temporary tents set up in the parking lots at the front of Nurul Islam Mosque, for vehicles. This space is sometimes used to expand the prayer

⁸ After the military regime under General Ne Win took power in 1962, minorities were considered a threat to the national union (Yegar 1972). Muslim minorities then became the target of discriminatory practices by the state and military. This triggered a huge emigration and migration of the Muslim minority.

zone, when the building is unable to house any more jama'at. Moreover, funeral ceremonies (prayers for the dead) are also conducted in front of the Mosque, before the dead are buried in the cemetery.

Behind the Mosque is a yard surrounded by some other buildings. A three-storey building, which is located just behind the mosque, was the first Hafiz School in Thailand, built in 1986. The first floor is a parking area and a garage for school and mosque equipment, and there are classrooms on the second floor. The third floor provides bedrooms for the *alim* (religious teacher) and for students. Next to this building, there is a 5m² kitchen, used to prepare foods for the students. On another side there are seven toilets and three bathrooms. In addition to serving pilgrims (jama'at) and *musafir*, these facilities are used by Hafiz⁹.



Figure 6.2: Nurul Islam Mosque after its second renovation (today)

During the second renovation, the building and land around Nurul Islam were expanded significantly. Some successful Muslims had bought the land and donated it to the mosque for its development purpose, the so-called *waqf*. The total cost of the second project reached 500,000 baht, which was mostly sponsored by Muslims in Mae Sot.

⁹ A student at Hafiz School is called a Hafiz. They live at the school.

Furthermore, the local government also gave financial assistance for the second time, having given approval when requested to by the mosque's committee. Around the same time, the growing number of Muslims in Mae Sot also led to an expansion of the Muslim settlement around Sripanit Road into the south side. The area used to be forest and was famous for being dangerous. It was then turned into a dense area of Muslim settlements called Islam Bamroong Road. In this new area, a small mosque called Bengala was constructed, to serve the overspill from Nurul Islam, although it had been expanded. The increasing number of mosques and Muslim population led to the need for a Muslim committee to be formed later, which was made responsible for property management and Muslim issues in general, both at the mosques and across Mae Sot¹⁰.

As illustrated above, Nurul Islam is not only a symbol of the Muslim community, but was also the first Muslim social construction in Mae Sot. The Mosque was the first communal project constructed by Muslim Mae Sot, and its establishment signified that the Muslims in Mae Sot were no longer limited to a family and ethnic network, but also part of a broader religious community. As for the Muslims, mosques are a public space at which they can gather, and the kind of interaction and socialization among Muslims at Nurul Islam is what creates social capital for the Muslims and links them together as a Muslim community in Mae Sot and beyond.

6.3 Managing *Ummah*: An Imam for Social and Religious Life, and a Committee for Socio-Economic Development

The increasing number of mosque properties and growth in the Muslim population led to the formation of a committee board, to be responsible for Muslim activities at the Mosque and across Mae Sot as general. Before the establishment of the committee, the activities held at Nurul Islam were only related to religious matters, such as prayers, Ramadhan activities and funerals. The Imam was the only one responsible for leading those activities. Therefore, the Imam was not a patron of social life within the Muslim community of Mae Sot. An Imam, defined as a religious leader, is required to have knowledge of Islam, to understand and apply it to his daily life consistently, or

¹⁰The committee of Nurul Islam Mosque (*motowali*) was first established during its second reconstruction.

certainly more than normal Muslims do. At Nurul Islam, the Imam was invited from India and Bangladesh, because Muslim Mae Sot at that time was only populated by traders who lacked knowledge on Islamic values. The time spent being an Imam at Nurul Islam was not specified, because there was a rotation, so if there was a new Imam from India came to Mae Sot, the old Imam would return to India. Some literature records that the first Imam at Nurul Islam was Asi Ullah.

The meaning of and the roles played by the Imam have gradually changed along with the establishment of the *motowali* or committee board of Nurul Islam. The role of the Imam is not only to lead religious services, but also to be a leader of the community and to be responsible for every social aspect within the Muslim community. As well as leading the *shalat* at the Mosque, the Imam is also considered to be a highly knowledgeable person in terms of religious matters, and is the only one authorized to hold marriage rituals, lead funeral ceremonies, and to be a problem solver for various kinds of social problem within the community. Within the hierarchy of Nurul Islam committee, the Imam is on the highest level and supervises two different divisions. The first division is the Mosque's committee board, which is responsible for managing religious services for the Muslim community in Mae Sot. There are two other positions within this division: the *Khatib* and *Bilal*. Both terms are derived from Arabic words, translated and adopted from Islam. *Khatib* is the person who gives worship at various religious events, such as the Friday prayer, *Eid al Fitr* and *Eit al Adh*. In addition, the *Bilal* decides on the prayer times and has to call the *azan* to invite people for prayer.

The second division is also under the Imam's supervision, and is called the mosque committee. This division is responsible for property management and for social development of the Muslim community in Mae Sot. This division consists of some Thai Muslims with different duties. There are at least three important sectors managed by this division: education, the mosque's properties inventory, and Muslim social welfare concerns. There are also two formal Islamic education institutions in Mae Sot under Nurul Islam's management: Islam Suksa School and Nurul Islam Kindergarten. In running these two educational institutions, the mosque's committee maintains a close relationship with the Thai government. Another duty of the Mosque's committee, which is as important as the others, is property management, since the amount of donations is

increasing all the time. Land and buildings are the two most valuable properties, and these are rented to Muslim in Mae Sot. On this matter, the Mosque's committee is responsible for keeping a record of these properties, so as to report annually to the financial division of Nurul Islam Mosque. Some other things related to Muslim welfare, like marriage and death records, are also under the committee's responsibility.

The Imam and the division supervising religious services (*Khatib* and *Bilal*) have a lifetime tenure (as long as they are capable). The first official Imam at Nurul Islam was Ibrahim Dahli, who came immediately after the second mosque renovation, Haji Yousuf Khan is the *Khatib* and Esem Maste the *Bilal*. The members of the first committee board were those who involved in the Mosque's early establishment, such as Fayan Rahman, Abdul Karim and Janmiya. While I was conducting my research, Haji Ibrahim was the Imam and Haji Husein was the *Bilal* (during this research was conducted, there was nobody in the *Khatib* position). The two of them were selected in a closed election by some Muslim figures in Mae Sot, such as the elders and the previous members of the committee. Based on the data I collected during my fieldwork, I concluded that Haji Ibrahim was selected as an Imam because he has two different types of cultural capital. First, he is considered knowledgeable on Islam, more so than other Muslims, due to his educational background having graduated in Egypt. The second reason he was made Imam is his family background, as he is from a respected family (the former Imam's) in Mae Sot. Similar to Haji Husein, he was selected as the *Bilal* due to his knowledge of Islam and also his close relations with one of the most charismatic figures among Mae Sot Muslims: Haji Yousuf Khan.

Apart from the statements above, there is another interesting thing about the Nurul Islam committee; it has two different Imams at the same time. Besides Imam Ibrahim, there is also another one named Imam Daud (30 years-old). He migrated from Burma when he was five, and has spent most of his time living in Mae Sot. Despite Daud's position as an Imam, he is not officially mentioned on the board of Nurul Islam committee, though Imam Ibrahim is. This is related to the duties of Imam Daud, as he is only responsible for religious services, and especially the prayers held at Nurul Islam. As a result, he holds the second Imam position, taking over Imam Ibrahim's role when he is away or absent. In fact, I would say that the second Imam is even more familiar

among the Muslim community in Nurul Islam, because he is always leading the *shalat* (praying), while Imam Ibrahim rarely comes to the Mosque. This is probably due to by his current work in Bangkok, so he only visits Mae Sot at certain times. However, Imam Daud has no power at all on the committee of Nurul Islam, and he is also not the one to deputize in terms of communications with the Thai government, both at the local and national levels.

Unlike the first Imam, who has a life time tenure, the second Imam is selected by the committee and only has a limited tenure. Imam Daud has been an Imam at Nurul Islam two times. The first time was four years ago, before he resigned to devote himself to his further studies in India. The vacancy he left at that time meant the committee had to select a new Imam, who was from Burma, and was recommended by Imam Daud. In 2013, when Imam Daud returned to Mae Sot due to the cancellation of his departure to India, he got his position back as the Imam for Nurul Islam. Based on a conversation I had with Imam Daud at his house, the committee chose the Imam through a closed election, by considering his Islamic knowledge, his fluency at reading the Koran, and some other criteria. He then told me his life story; how he was selected as the Imam at Nurul Islam, as follows:

It was during Ramadhan, four years ago, when I was proposed to lead the *tarawih* prayer at Nurul Islam Mosque; to replace the former Imam due to his absence. After the prayers, people were impressed and complimented me on the way I read the surah from the Koran. After that I was given a chance to keep leading the *tarawih* prayer, and the committee called and offered me the Imam position later on.

He said that he is able to memorize and sing the *surah* fluently because he was sent to the Hafiz Nurul Islam School when he was a child. After graduating from the Hafiz School, he continued his education at a Moulwi school but since there was no Moulwi School in Mae Sot, so he had to go back to Burma. He later returned to Mae Sot to teach Koran reading and writing at one *madrassa* before he was finally selected as an Imam four years ago. After holding his new position as an Imam, he stayed in a room at Nurul Islam Mosque provided by the committee, a facility provided for an Imam. When he got married, he no longer stayed there and decided to rent a place not so far from the mosque. As an Imam, he admitted that he gets a salary from the committee of

around 10,000 Thai Baht per month, his duty being to lead the prayers every day. Moreover, he said that he is sometimes invited to deal with Burmese Muslim marriages in Mae Sot, and lead funeral ceremonies at the mosque.

From the above statement, we can see that the role of Daud as the second Imam is not merely related to leading prayers at the Mosque, as he also deals with Muslim social activities. This is due to the increasing number of Burmese Muslim in Mae Sot. Furthermore, Burmese Muslims often consult with Imam Daud or ask for help if they are going to hold some religious or social event. They know the main Imam at Nurul Islam well, but are not so familiar with him because he rarely comes to the Mosque. Also, I would say an ethnic barrier exists between the people and the first Imam, who is a Thai Muslim, and this is another reason why they prefer to see Imam Daud. Unfortunately, a negative critique of the first Imam's performance has also spread among Muslims in Mae Sot (especially among the Burmese Muslim), which I assume this is another reason. Aidil (40 years old), a Thai Muslim from southern Thailand, but living in Mae Sot, stated:

A Thai Imam can be classified as the state's Imam, because he is the mediator between Muslims and the state. He rarely appears at the mosque, and he looks more interested in reaching out to the "world" than the "hereafter world". He is unlike the Burmese Imam, who is very good at religious aspects and always comes to lead prayers at the mosque.

I heard a more extreme critique from some Burmese Muslims, who compared the quality and performance of the main Imam with the Burmese Imam. Anas (20 years-old), a Burmese Muslim teenager who has been actively involved on the Tablighi Jama'at, told me,

You can see while leading the prayer, the Thai Imam often forgets the *surah* he reads, and it certainly means we cannot focus on our prayer. This never happens with the Burmese Imam when he is the leader. Moreover, the Thai Imam should not shave his beard but keep it growing like the Burmese Imam does. A Muslim has to be as close as possible to the attitude of our Prophet during his life.

For these reasons, we can see a tension has developed within the internal Muslim community in Mae Sot. However, this tension is not that visible and does not trigger any conflict among Muslims. The only thing that has happened is that a negative image

of the Imam has spread, through rumors among the Burmese Muslim. Through these rumors, the Burmese Muslims are trying to empower their position in the community. They are attempting to create a distinction between the Thai and Burmese Imams by consulting and leaving various socio-religious matters to the Burmese Imam. However, the position of the second Imam does not change the hierarchal structure of Nurul Islam; he still has no power, and is only the leader of prayer routines at the mosque.

There is also a committee under the Imam that is responsible for the welfare of the Muslim community in Mae Sot. Unlike the Imam and religious service division that hold a lifetime tenure, the committee has a limited tenure of four years. At the beginning, the members of the Mosque's committee were selected through an internal forum among the key Muslim figures in Mae Sot. According to Suchart (50 years-old), a member of the committee, in recent years the election of the committee has been done democratically. An internal meeting is held by the former committee with some Muslim figures in Mae Sot, to select the most capable candidates. Though it is claimed as more democratic, the selection process still does not involve all Muslims in Mae Sot, and also excludes the non-Thai Muslims. As Suchart stated, the requirements to be a voter and a candidate include holding a Thai ID card, to be registered in the Muslim registration book, to be older than 15 years, and to live in *Cumchon* Islam.

The committee was originally formed to manage Nurul Islam Mosque's second renovation, but when that was finished, the committee continued in order to manage the mosque's properties. After the second renovation and the establishment of the committee, Nurul Islam changed to being an institution mainly concerned with the development of the Muslim community in Mae Sot. As well as its objective to accommodate various religious activities, Nurul Islam and its committee also work to help the *ummah* in many areas, include the social, education and economic sectors. For Muslims, the committee is a patron of many aspects of their social lives, such as when processing marriage documents. There is an Islamic law related to marriage, so people have to meet the requirements before they marry. A knowledgeable and trusted Imam is needed to lead the marriage ceremony, while the committee's role is to record it and issue the relevant documents.

The committee also helps with male circumcision, which is one of the Islamic rites. This ritual is also called *khitan*, which is a compulsory rite for every male Muslim, especially those turning to adulthood. This circumcision aims to purify a person ready for worship perfection. The diverse articulation of Islam within a Muslim's body leads to time differences on doing the circumcision, but it is normally carried out when a boy is between seven and ten years-old. In Mae Sot, this rite is usually held during school break, because the boys need to recover. The role of the committee on these occasions is to prepare the agenda, list the candidates and contact a Muslim doctor from Bangkok. However, many Burmese Muslims prefer to arrange their own ceremony, rather than join the one sponsored by the mosque. They usually invite an *Alim* from Burma to Mae Sot, to do the circumcisions at home, otherwise they take their children to Burma.

Today, there are twelve Muslims on the committee at Nurul Islam Mosque, and as I mentioned previously, they each have their own duties related to Muslim community welfare in Mae Sot. According to Suchart, the current committee is nearing the end of its tenure, so the next vote is being prepared. Based on the Muslim registration book he showed me, there are 1,089 Muslims eligible to vote, though the role of the committee is not political at all. He gave the ID card issue as an example, for the Mosque's committee is not authorized to issue one. Other administrative matters related to Thai politics are under the responsibility of the *Prathan Chumchon* Islam and its board.

6.4 Mosque as a Source of Circulating and Accumulating Capital

Muslims in Mae Sot helped with the Mosque's maintenance on its early establishment, with the budget coming from donations from each person and some agricultural harvests belonging to the mosque. Some communal projects are run from this budget, such as establishing educational institutions, building religious facilities and providing cemetery locations. One factor which has led to an increasing number of properties owned by the Nurul Islam Mosque is the strong awareness and practice of *waqf* among the wealthy Muslims in Mae Sot. Giving *waqf* is a global practice with an absolute reward. As taught in the Koran, as long as the *waqf* is still accessible, the person will keep earning rewards or merit – religiously, forever, even though he may

have died. The *waqf* is usually a donation of land, money or materials for mosque renovation or infrastructure construction on behalf of the needs of *ummah*, such as a school or cemetery. In Mae Sot, the increasing number of people doing the *waqf* reflects the growing faith among the Muslim there, and also is an indication that they are economically and financially better off than previously.

According to Chalee Sripraset (nd), the property own by the mosque used to be only agricultural land purchased by one or two Muslims. Now, the mosque has a Hafiz School (located behind the mosque), six buildings to the left and three others opposite the Mosque. Those three buildings used to be an Islamic School, situated on and donated by two Muslims. Sayit Ahmad initiated this school due to the arrival of a new generation of Muslims, as Islamic education is considered important to be applied at an early age; to ensure the younger generation has a strong faith. The rapid increase in the Muslim population meant this school had to move to Islam Bamroong road, and since then the old school building and the six buildings next to the mosque have been rented by Muslims.

Another property that belongs to the Mosque is a new Islam Suksa School building located on Islam Bamroong road. Since moving there, the school has expanded and has also started to change into a Thai formal school. Though it uses a Thai curriculum nowadays, Islam Suksa School still teaches lessons related to Islam. According to Abdul, the management of the school is the responsibility of the education committee at Nurul Islam. As well as internal funding from Nurul Islam mosque, the school is also supported by the Thai government. Due to its mission; to contribute towards developing a Muslim community educationally, the school has quite affordable tuition fees, when compared to other Thai schools. The school's management is also quite flexible, as they give a chance for all parents (especially those in need) to negotiate the tuition fee. Today, there are 600 students studying on nine different levels at Islam Suksa School.



Figure 6.3: Hafiz Nurul Islam and Islam Suksa School

Islam Suksa School is open to everyone in Mae Sot, whether Thai or migrant, Muslim or non-Muslim. The main requirement to be a student at this school is to be able to show a legal birth certificate. This requirement is what leads the Burmese Muslim migrants to send their children here. Abdul added that of the total number of students at Islam Suksa School, 80% are the Burmese Muslims. He said they are keen to educate their children here, because they wish to have a better future for their children; they hope they will have good Thai language skills and hold a Thai formal education certificate. It is expected that this will facilitate them getting a good job in Thailand. The few Thai students at this school would be interesting to study, as this school is the only Thai formal school in Mae Sot to teach Islam. I collected various different answers from some Thai Muslims, most of who complained about the school's inability to provide the 10th to 12th grades. Some parents said they worry about possible difficulties when moving their children to another school, to continue to the next grade.

Some Thai Muslims told me about the lack of facilities at the school, while others complained that there are too many Burmese students there. Fatimah (60 years-old), a Thai Muslim lady who runs a coffee stall on Sripanit road, told me the following:

... Muslims in Mae Sot used to send their children to Islam Suksa School, but today they prefer to educate their children at Thai schools. The only reason is because there are too many Burmese studying there.

Harun (35 years-old), a Muslim from the south of Thailand, also expressed similar views:

...Many Thai Muslims refuse to send their children to Islam Suksa School because of its inadequate facilities when compared to other Thai Buddhist schools. In addition, there are too many Burmese students there, so the parents do not want to send their children to Islam Suksa. It is not expected for their children to have to associate with the Burmese students.

As well as Islam Suksa School, there is another educational institution under Nurul Islam - a kindergarten. This school is also called Nurul Islam, and is located next to Bengala Mosque. While Islam Suksa School still has some Thai students, the kindergarten only has the children of Burmese migrants. This school focuses on Thai language lessons, because it is the basic need before the students can continue their studies to Islam Suksa School. There are currently 50 students enrolled at this school, and they are split into three different levels. The presence of these two schools certainly advantages the Burmese Muslim migrants in Mae Sot. The first advantage is related to cultural capital accumulation, as this facilitates their lives in the host country, meaning they can easily enroll at a school that is open for everyone. Furthermore, Burmese Muslim migrants are also advantaged by the support provided by the mosque and the Thai government, both of whom charge affordable tuition fees at the school.

Every Burmese Muslim migrant in Mae Sot has a different perspective on sending their children to the school. Some of them think that sending their children to a Thai curriculum school is not that important for their children's future, so many educate their children at an informal religious school, such as the Hafiz school and *madrasa* in Mae Sot. In this case, Nurul Islam definitely gets involved in helping to establish many informal education institutions in Mae Sot. The Hafiz Nurul Islam School; for example, was the first Hafiz school in Thailand, and is located behind Nurul Islam Mosque. This school currently has around 25 students, all of whom are Burmese Muslims of various ages, from nine to fifteen. The students not only come from Mae Sot, but also from other regions in Burma or Thailand. The Hafiz school is a boarding school and provides free tuition, but requires every student to live there. Even though this school belongs to Nurul Islam, its operations and funding are managed by the Haji Yousuf Khan family,

the founders of this school. By sending their children to the Hafiz school, every parent expects their children will grow up to be an *Alim* in their religious specialization.

One Muslim in Mae Sot mentioned to me that the students at Hafiz school are generally from the ‘needy’ or poorer families. Their parents send them to this school due to their inability to afford the fees at regular schools. In addition to providing free tuition, Hafiz Nurul Islam also provides meals for the students. According to Ahlam (60 years-old), an Arakan Muslim works as a cook at Hafiz Nurul Islam, and the school serves three meals per day. For the breakfast menu, he usually serves tea and bread, whereas big meals like rice and other dishes are served at lunch and dinner. Hafiz Nurul Islam has also become a space for every student to build social capital. Socializing among students from different backgrounds might be useful and helpful in the future. This happened to Din, a 30 year-old Burmese Muslim and an alumnae of the Hafiz Nurul Islam school who has mastered three languages: Burmese, Thai and Malay. He admitted that his ability to speak Thai and Malay comes from his interaction with his friends in Hafiz School. At that time, his friends were from Bangkok and Yala, so they became his partners on learning both languages.

The role of Nurul Islam institution is not only to accommodate education facilities, but also to help some Burmese Muslims settle in Mae Sot. In order to add to the Mosque’s finances, the committee manages the *waqf* land and buildings belonging to Nurul Islam by leasing them to Muslims¹¹. Along Sripanit road, there are approximately nine blocks of three-storey buildings - six to the north and three on the east side of the Mosque. All these buildings are leased through long-term contracts. According to Suchart, the contracts state that the tenants can build on the land or renovate the existing buildings, but when the contract ends, the buildings will belong to Nurul Islam. Most of the buildings along Sripanit road are on 40 year leases at a rent of 2,500 baht per month for each block. Today, these buildings are leased by Thai Muslims of Indian descent and to some Burmese Muslims. They use the buildings as their residential and business locations.

¹¹ The income collected from land and building rents covers the operational costs of Nurul Islam Mosque and the Muslim community in Mae Sot. For example, it is used for mosque maintenance, to support the educational sector, and to fund religious activities.



Figure 6.4: Buildings leased by Nurul Islam Mosque

Some other land belongs to Nurul Islam, and this is located along Islam Bamroong road (across from Islam Suksa School), and is also leased. This land is the *waqf* of a Bangladeshi Muslim family, and is rented by Muslims from Bangladesh also. They have built a house and a business space out of their own budget. After the building had been constructed, they were still only required to pay the land rent to the committee (this depends on each contract). The rental charge is the regular one as one principal of the committee is to help the Muslim community in Mae Sot, so it is not money-oriented. As mentioned by Abu (45 years-old), he took on this rent from a Bangladeshi Muslim twelve years ago. The house used to be very ordinary and simple; one storey house without floor tiles. He gradually renovated the house and made it into a two-storey building. He now uses the first floor for his clothes shop and the second floor as a residence. Although he made major renovations to the house, the rent has not increased significantly, it is only the water and electricity bills that have increased.

Other land and buildings belong to Nurul Islam Mosque, and these are leased to Muslims around Bengala (in Islam Bamroong Road, Lane 3). The rent at these places is lower than at the other two areas mentioned above, due to its less strategic location and the smaller land area (it is rented per room). Most of the buildings here are temporary buildings made of wood. A tenant only has to pay 300 to 1,000 baht per month for a room (depending on its size). The cost is certainly far lower than the regular rent in Mae Sot, which can be up to 1,500 baht per month. Most tenants there are Burmese and Arakan Muslims without legal documents, so have few financial resources. Some of them are refugees who have left a camp to find a job and a better way of life in Mae Sot.

They are not registered and they have had to be very mobile, making them very hard to monitor.

In order to get a room or a place to rent, newcomers usually make contact with the tenants who planned to move. They temporarily lived with the tenants, whom are their friends or family. While waiting for the tenants to move, they seek a job at the same time. This happened to Abi, a 35 year-old Burmese Muslim who makes *rotee* at a coffee stall. He came to Mae Sot following his brother, who had arrived earlier. He stayed with his brother at a rented room in the area, but not long after that, took over the room because his brother left for Bangkok. After he got married and had two children, he finally rented a larger room costing 1,000 baht per month. Using such a network to find a room often causes problems. In such cases the tenant does not contact the committee personally to report the move, and often they are the second tenant who has rented a room, at the house of the first tenant. This means the mosque's committee unable to list or record the tenants' information in detail.

Another type of property belonging to Nurul Islam is the *waqf* land used for the Muslim cemetery. This cemetery is located 500 meters away from the Mosque to the east of Mae Sot municipality. Every Muslim in Mae Sot, including the migrants, can access this cemetery by contacting the committee. During my research, I joined at least three funeral ceremonies of Burmese Muslims at the cemetery¹². Before they bury the dead person, they purify the body by cleaning it at the family's house and inviting the Imam. There, some relatives and friends wait to send the corpse to the cemetery. After purification, the body is placed in a coffin (borrowed from Nurul Islam Mosque) and then sent to the front yard of Nurul Islam¹³. The Imam is ready to lead the Muslims to pray for the deceased as one of funeral rites. At the cemetery, the Imam also leads people in prayers, and closes the ceremony shortly after the body is buried.

¹² Of these three people, two were Burmese Muslims who lived in Mae Sot, whereas another came for medical treatment, but was buried in Mae Sot.

¹³ Some people prefer to pray for the deceased at the Bengala Mosque, because their houses are close by.



Figure 6.5: The Muslim public cemetery (left), and a land document belonging to Nurul Islam (right)

The above explanations refer to the role of Nurul Islam as an institution, one that circulates various forms of capital among the Muslim community in Mae Sot. However, Nurul Islam Mosque also serves as a space in which information, knowledge, and many forms of capital are circulated. Nurul Islam Mosque is a meeting point for the whole Muslim community in Mae Sot, especially for prayers. Socialization occurs in the mosque, and is not only limited to religious activities, it is also related to other aspects. Before starting the *shalat* or immediately after, I often saw and heard some small groups of people sitting in a circle to share their stories and experiences. The topics covered might have been anything, like speaking in detail about their daily activities, what they had for dinner, a discussion of the Rohingya issue from the latest TV news, house rental information, or jobs vacancies. Some other groups include gems traders who offer their gems to other Muslims or just share their knowledge on the kinds of gems for sale. Furthermore, while I was there a group of beggars¹⁴ waited in front of the Mosque every Friday afternoon, for the end of Friday prayers, hoping people would share their small change with them¹⁵.

¹⁴ Some people told me that they are Burmese Muslims who crossed the border to Mae Sot every Friday, but eventually stayed in Mae Sot.

¹⁵ Every Friday prayer, the number of jama'at at Nurul Islam Mosque is up to four times more than the regular number. The amount of Muslims who come certainly gives a chance for beggars to make more money.

6.5 Summary

According to my above description, I would like to argue that Nurul Islam Mosque has played a significant role in the expansion of the Burmese Muslim community in Mae Sot. The availability of many religious infrastructures belonging to Nurul Islam has helped Burmese Muslim migrants with their religious routines and social lives. Furthermore, the ability of Nurul Islam to accumulate multiple forms of capital has both a spatial and institutional dimension. On the spatial level, the Mosque is a place that unites all Muslims in various kinds of religious activities, and especially the prayers that take place five times a day. Socialization is not only limited to religious concerns, but also covers social, economic and political life. By meeting other Muslim communities at the mosque, a Burmese Muslim has the opportunity to extend his network to other ethnic groups. Beginning with religious intimacy (a Muslim brotherhood), the gap between different ethnic groups has been blurred.

At the institutional level, the establishment of *Motowali*, a committee responsible for religious activities and the Mosque's properties, has significantly influenced the expansion of the Muslim community. The management of *waqf* land, to build educational infrastructures has allowed Muslims in the town to access both formal Thai and Islamic education. The mosque as an institution also helps with social aspects of the Muslim community, such as hosting Muslim marriage ceremonies, mass circumcisions, and processing and approving the use of the graveyard for funerals. Furthermore, some leased *waqf* land and buildings also help Muslims, particularly migrants looking to get settled. The relatively low rents charged are very helpful for new comers who have just settled in Mae Sot. Through socialization at the mosque, a Muslim network has been constructed and has become the center of information and knowledge among the Muslim community in Mae Sot. This then shows us how the Muslims in the town make a connection between spatial and institutional roles.