

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion: The Flexibility of Ethno-religious Identity as a Social Network

8.1 The Borderland, Migration and Shifting Ethnic Identity

Having experienced migration for over 100 years, Mae Sot in Thailand has grown to become a very plural area. This city is home to a variety of people from different ethnic, religious and national backgrounds. A long history of British colonialism in Burma began a transformation of the Mae Sot landscape, from a forested area into a place which was significantly influenced by transnational trade, connecting as it did India and Siam. As a result, social contact in Mae Sot developed between people living in surrounding areas, whether on the Thai or Burma side. Later, the town was inhabited by Indian Muslims (including Pakistani and Bangladeshi), though their hometowns were located thousands of miles away. These migrants then became the embryo of the current Mae Sot population, and especially the Muslim community. Before becoming Mae Sot people (*chao Mae Sot*), the areas previously fell under two different regimes: the Lanna culture and Siam, which later led a program of Thai-ization during Thailand's nation state building project.

Mae Sot's geo-spatial position on the border with Burma has meant it has been unable to avoid the impacts of Burma's unstable socio-political situation over recent decades, when it has also faced an influx of ethnic migrants from Burma, whether for economic reasons or displaced persons. As result, it is not only the demographic conditions that have changed, but also the socio-cultural landscape of Mae Sot town that has gradually transformed into a more complex one, as migrants have attempted to maintain their own identities. It is easy to see many facets of Burmese identity in town, whether through people's actions, the commodities traded at the markets there, or the people's clothing. Although the Thai state seems to provide space for the socio-cultural systems of the

“other” to grow, it does not simply mean that the state control over its territory is weakened. The Thai state simply aims to: 1) not recognize migrants’ identities as a threat to national identity, 2) maintain a labor surplus.

In previous chapters, I examined the significant roles of: 1) geo-spatial conditions, and 2) multiple agents in Mae Sot, covering the various aspects of Burmese Muslims’ daily lives. According to the relationship between these two factors, Burmese Muslims can be classified as active actors because they are not only an “object of change”, but also a “subject who changed”. With their knowledge and social networks, Burmese Muslims have been able to adopt an adaptive economic strategy by being cooperative in response to the state authorities, and by understanding what people need at the grassroots level. Their presence has helped Mae Sot become an active “transit area”, in which transit commodities (goods and people) are modified and even reproduced, before they are finally redistributed. In the context of ethnic identity, the existence of multiple actors in a similar culture has helped Burmese Muslims to reinvent their identity. It is interesting to see the flexibility of Burmese Muslims when switching between their Burmese and Muslim identities after crossing the national border and dealing with a new social structure. At this stage, one can see their ability to manipulate their ethnic identity as cultural capital, and to access a broader social network.

This thesis has made an important point by questioning the notion of shifting ethnic identity in a migration context. Through the case study of Burmese Muslims, I found that the shifting of ethnic identity could be divided into two different levels: one, related to identity formation, and two, the meaning of identity. In Mae Sot, Burmese Muslims have successfully re-invented their ethno-religious identity. When they lived in Burma, Burmese Muslims seemed to muffle their religious identity by utilizing more their national identity, as part of broader politics, as Burmese nationals. A long history of Muslim discrimination may have been a factor in this matter (see Berlie 2008). After crossing the national border to Mae Sot, their religious identity has become dominant within their Burmese Muslim identity, including their clothing and household decorations. Some informants mentioned that the freedom to practice religion in Mae Sot is one reason why they are confident enough to perform their religious identity. On the other hand, a growing negative image of Burmese migrants in Mae Sot has also

become a recent consideration, and this is why many Burmese Muslims prefer to introduce themselves as Muslims.

For most Burmese Muslims, ethno-religious identity is a key factor in the flexibility of social interactions they have with other communities. In Mae Sot, they also reinvent their place of origin when meeting migrants from Burma, including when constructing ethnic boundaries with other Muslim communities from Burma, for example. Furthermore, they tend to be known as Muslims when they meet people from other ethnicities. Therefore I conclude that one needs to understand the different actors and social structures in a new place, as a background to identifying ethnic identity transformation. In the context of the Burmese Muslims, ethnic identity could not simply be transformed into a new identity as in the case of Bidayuh in Malaysia who move in and out between being Malay in one context and being Bidayuh in another (Chua 2007). Burmese Muslims' identity in Mae Sot is still the same as it was in Burma, but it has become more Muslim and less Burmese. This shows that ethnic identity itself is fixed and embedded (given) in a person, yet it is also flexible; to be performed or not. Moreover, ethnic identity as a production of self and other certainly leads the migrants to completely transform their identities. They decide to switch-on or switch-off their identities based on whether this will be accepted or not by other social structures or actors. In this sense, I argue that in order to completely understand the concept of ethnic identity, we need to combine three different perspectives into one: the primordial, constructivist and instrumentalist.

This thesis has also examined migration that has caused ethnic identity to shift its meaning. Some previous explanations have shown the flexibility exhibited by Burmese Muslims when re-drawing their ethno-religious identity to match their ethnic boundaries with other communities, either in Burma or after they moved to Thailand. For Burmese Muslims, altering their boundaries is related to excluding and including people around them. This takes us back to Barth's argument about boundary maintenance, in which he argues that the meaning of ethnic identity is not only limited to boundaries that imagine "us" and "them", but is also a bridge for social interaction (1969). Similarly in the case of the Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot, the flexibility of their ethno-religious identity is an adaptive strategy used to broaden their social networks.

Reinventing religion as a part of ethnic identity is not only related to the legitimate construction of being different, but also an attempt to be included in the broader Muslim network. This shows, on some levels, that ethnic identity is cultural capital, as it provides a person with access to potential resources (social networks).

8.2 The ‘Contesting Binary Opposition’ Model and its Relevance to Ethnicity Studies

Most ethnicity studies focus their attention on the relationship between ethnic minorities and the context of nation building in a modern state era. They tend to focus on the issue of the state’s hegemony towards its people, which it applies using the dichotomy paradigm, or binary opposition model. In terms of modern nation states in Southeast Asia, they show that the concept of “ethnic classification” is a colonial legacy that has been maintained by states. National identity is subsequently imagined by the state to develop an homogenous nation, and to sustain its domination over ethnic minorities at the same time. National identity is usually constructed based on the identity of the ethnic majority, and this is used to both include and exclude ethnic minorities at the same time. When applied, the state creates an ethnic stigma by using the dichotomy paradigm (us and them), which positions the majority as an ideal citizen and the minority as the opposition. Scholars have come up with terms such as “nationalism vs. ethno-nationalism”, “hill vs. valley”, “modern vs. traditional” and “civilized vs. backward” to describe such a situation. This is interesting, because many scholars also present how those categorized as such still have opportunities to cross dichotomies by engaging or cooperating with the national development project.

In this thesis I try to re-problematize the notion of a dichotomy paradigm, as built by the state. Many scholars have generalized by positioning state dichotomy as fixed, failing to take into account that different places and agencies can produce different state dichotomies over a unit, in order to be more flexible. This is the case with the Muslims in Thailand, where the state dichotomy used in relation to Muslims in the south of the country and those in the north is different. When talking about Muslims in the south of Thailand, the dichotomy or binary opposition is “nation-state vs. ethnic”, or “nationalism vs. ethno-nationalism”. This binary opposition has appeared due to

different interpretations by the state and Muslims, in accordance with building a Thai national identity. Both these parties consider the opposition as a “threat”, in which Muslim separatism is a threat to the nation (the Thai state), while national identity construction is seen as marginalizing Muslim Malay identity (the people). In contrast, state dichotomy does not see Muslims in the north as a threat, but as part of a multi-cultural Thai nation. On the other hand, Muslims in the north also realize they are a product of Thai nation state building, since their ancestors were migrants who completely assimilated into Thai identity, other than their religion.

The dichotomy paradigm as a part of state hegemony seems to be more problematic and strict in some countries, those that construct religion as a part of their national identity. As in the case of Burma, Buddhism is imagined as a national religion, and this often leads people or other religious groups to be excluded from any kinds of rights. For example, every student – even one who are non-Buddhist – is required to learn Buddhist values (*lokaniti*) in public schools, because it is one of the compulsory subjects (Berlie 2008). In an even worse case, the state discriminates against non-Buddhist communities (particularly Hindu and Muslim communities) by referring to them using the term *kala* (foreigner), even though they share a common culture with Burmese Buddhists. For the Hindus, they tend to be more flexible in their religion; therefore, there have been many cases of conversion to Buddhism, in order for them to avoid being marginalized. For Muslims such a conversion would be difficult, because they are usually very strict in their religious adherence. Rather than convert to Buddhism, Muslims would prefer to migrate, or act flexibly when performing their identity.

At this point, I would also like to question the arguments put forward on people’s flexibility toward crossed-over dichotomization in the context of ethnic identity. Many scholars have shown that through assimilation into national identity (including to be engaged in the development project) or the ethnic majority identity, people have a chance to transform their social hierarchies (see Chua 2007). Although I would agree with this argument, there is still one thing to underline; that even a change in ethnic identity requires a relationship to exist between the former identity and the new one. People have an opportunity to transform their ethnic identity if they have a

cultural closeness with the new one (either given or learned). Moreover, when placing the nature of ethnic identity as a product of social interaction, it is also important to notice whether people in the new group could approve other people/group or not. I therefore return back to Barth's argument, that ethnic identity is a dialog between self- and other- ascription (1969).

Finally, in this thesis I would like to present work on the dichotomy paradigm in relation to the transformation of ethnic identity among a migrant minority. Here, I simply state that state hegemony over migrants is similar to the state producing a dichotomy for its ethnic minorities, albeit that without any dichotomy in place, migrants have become the opposition of state, and have been excluded from any rights as citizens. It is certainly true that migrants cannot be a part of a nation, even though they may change their ethnic identity, unless they go through the state's naturalization process. In the case of the Burmese Muslims in Mae Sot, we can see that when migrants try adopting Thai identity, it does not always represent an attempt to become a native. In the case here, migrants transform their ethnic identity into the host identity in order to be more accepted in society. Burmese Muslims assume that assimilating into Thai identity is a choice, as well as an adaptive strategy used to survive in Mae Sot.

8.3 Burmese Muslim Social Networks in the Borderlands: From Boundary Maintenance to Adaptive Strategies for Socio-economic Survival

Some of the explanations given in this thesis lead me to agree with King and Wilder (2003), who say that ethnic identity is a product of state classification, which is then reworked and represented differently by the relevant people or groups. For Burmese Muslims, religion is not only a part of their identity, but also social network that has helped them survive in Mae Sot. Wherever they are, as a Muslim, they will be able to connect with other Muslim communities, globally. Through religious identities, Burmese Muslims have an opportunity to participate in and be approved by the broader Muslim community, without having to consider their nationalities. In Mae Sot; for example, as Muslims they can visit any mosque to conduct their religious routines. While visiting a mosque, they then have a chance to meet, socialize and even build a network with Muslims from different communities, like the Thai, Pakistani,

Bangladeshi or Indian. Furthermore, the principle of *ummah* (Muslim nation) and the growing of the mosque as an institution have both been manipulated by Burmese Muslims to help them survive in Mae Sot.

Based on this thesis, we can see that Burmese Muslims are not part of a homogenous community. Instead, they are very heterogeneous, because they are not from the same native land, having had different reasons for migrating, and they have a variety of occupations. Such kinds of different socio-cultural background have led them to also have different forms of socio-cultural capital. This has certainly influenced the ways in which they have accumulated capital through their Muslim network. Some Burmese Muslims have tended to grow Thai cultural capital on behalf of their children, by educating them at a Thai public school which is associated with the Mosque. Some others prefer to send their children to an Islamic formal school, to educate their children to become religious scholars (*alim*) or religious teachers. On the other hand, some of them have preferred to join an Islamic transnational movement like the Tablighi Jama'at. Although faith is their main motivation for joining this movement, they have also successfully manipulated this activity in order to follow interests beyond religion. Through Tablighi Jama'at, businessmen have an opportunity to make friends or get new customers, ordinary Muslims can learn Thai, and even some undocumented migrants can move around safely on both the national and international levels.

As mentioned previously, the heterogeneity of the Burmese Muslim community has triggered the creation of different forms of cultural capital, plus a variety of social networks. Religious identity is one type of cultural capital that is embedded in every Burmese Muslim, because it is a part of their identity, and also relates them to a broader social network. However, it cannot be denied that their survival in Mae Sot is not only determined by their Muslim network, but also by their family and ethnic network. This network played a significant part in the Burmese Muslims' lives before their early arrival in Mae Sot, and has done since. New comers usually decide to go to Mae Sot because families or friends who live there already encourage them to do so. After arriving, newcomers stay with their relatives for a while and find a job within the same social circle. Having settled down in Mae Sot for a while, they build their own network by making friends with other Burmese Muslims, Burmese migrants, or those in the

other Muslim communities. In this sense, I argue that family-ethnic relations are an important form of social network that helps the Burmese Muslims when they first arrive in Mae Sot. On the other hand, through the religious life they are connected to broader Muslim networks and this helps them accumulate Thai cultural capital.

In addition, it is also important to underline that the survival of Burmese Muslims after their migration is not merely affected by their ethno-religious network, though it is true this network is important for the social and cultural lives of Burmese Muslims. The economic context in which they find themselves is key to their survival in Mae Sot, and this depends on their personal, cultural capital. In this thesis, I have shown that different periods of migration have resulted in different cultural capital being possessed among the Burmese Muslims. Most of them who migrated in the early 1990s seem to have a more stable economic condition, so they have been able to make a good life in Mae Sot. Since they have been living in Mae Sot for many years, they have mastered the Thai language as well as have a good knowledge of socio-economic conditions around the borderlands. With these two elements in place, they have had better economic opportunities when compared to other migrants who arrived only recently.

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