TOWARDS LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PLURALISM IN THAILAND:
A CASE OF THE MALAY THAIS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Thailand is an anomaly among the South-east Asian nations.
Much of her uniqueness is in large part a result of the lack of a colonial past.
The Thai people are a synthesis of a wide array of cultures. The ability to
assimilate other cultures during different periods of history added to the rich-
ness of Thai customs and traditions. Nevertheless, Thailand shares to a certain
extent an 'identity crisis' of the type that confronted her neighbouring coun-
tries. The Malay Thai minority is a case in point. This paper draws particular
attention to the southern border provinces where the people are mainly of Malay
ethnic origin, and there has been some resistance to integration into the dom-
inant culture of Thai society.

Indeed, this problem is unfortunate for national unity and regional devel-
opment. However, the issue has not been seriously questioned and considered at
the national level. So far only token recognition has been given to linguistic
and cultural differences of the Malay-Thai minority (see, for example,
Brudhiprabha 1978; 1981). I hope that the following analysis will serve as
guidelines for a viable solution to the problem.

The issue of the Malay Thais in the southern border provinces has been
discussed to some extent during the last decade (e.g. Suhrke 1970/71; Banomyong
1974; Haemindra 1977; Forbes 1982), and I am certain that more will appear. The
present paper is an attempt to propose that education is one of the most effec-
tive instruments for national unity. It is hoped that a case of the Malay Thais
will more or less substantiate my theory - that of the "hot 'n' sour-variety-
soup"!

2. THE THAIS

The total population of Thailand today is approaching 50 million. In terms
of the major characteristics of the people, Thailand is one of the most homo-
geneous societies of South-east Asia. The striking uniformity of the Thais is
the centripetal force which keeps the nation more unified and integrated.
Although the Thais comprise an overwhelming majority of some 85 per cent, the
heterogeneous ethnic makeup of the population includes the Chinese (10%), the
Malays (2.5%) and a few other minorities like the Khmers, the Vietnamese, the
Indians and various groups of hill tribes.

The largest ethnic group in Thailand is the Chinese. The second largest
group is the Malays. These two ethnic minorities play a significant role in the

economic and social life of Thailand. The Chinese migrated to Thailand during
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Echikawa (1968) maintains that because
of the similarity between the Chinese and the Thai value systems, they assimi-
lated into Thai society quite easily. The Chinese Thais have been influential
in the economic circle of the country since World War II.

The ethnically Malay inhabitants of the southern vassal states were fully
incorporated into Thailand in 1901, but the Anglo-Siamese treaty on the Thai-
Malaysian frontier was not fixed until 1909. In contrast with the Chinese, the
Malays pose some crucial sociocultural problems for the central government.

Although the large majority of the Thais are Buddhists (about 94 per cent),
an estimated 4 per cent of the total population are Muslims. Only a small per-
centage of the Thais are Christians, Hindus, Sikhs or others. Hence Islam is
the second religion of Thailand. Theravada Buddhism is the official religion
of the country. However, the constitution provides complete freedom in religion
for the Thai citizens. Among the Chinese Thais the popular religious belief is
Hinayana Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism; while the Malay Thais adhere to
Islamic faith.

Thailand is divided into four distinct regions: the Central, the North, the
North-east and the South.

Each region has its own local dialect: namely, Central or Standard Thai
(Siamese) which is the dialect of Bangkok and the literary language of the
country, Northern Thai (Kam Muang or Yuan), North-eastern Thai (Isan or Lao) and
Southern Thai (Paktai). The regional variances in terms of ethnicity, language
and culture pose the problems of pluralism and regionalism in Thailand. The
North-east and the South are areas where these problems arise (Wong 1973).

The people of North-east Thailand are of Lao origin, but it is not always
possible to distinguish a Lao Thai from a Thai. The North-eastern dialect is
distinct from Standard Thai, although it is not entirely unintelligible. Until
very recently the North-east has been relatively isolated and neglected. Hence
the North-easterners are still somewhat hostile to the central government.

The Southerners are different from the majority of the country - physically,
linguistically and culturally. They look like the Malays, and speak Malay as
well as follow firmly the Islamic code of life. Because of their distinct Malay
ethnic makeup, their geographical distance from Bangkok and the closeness to
Malaysia, they lean pervasively towards their immediate neighbour. On many
occasions, a separatist movement has threatened the stability of this area. Hence
Thailand's problems of pluralism and regionalism loom large in the far south.

The Southern dialect is widely spoken in many provinces, except in Pattani,
Yala and Narathiwat where Malay is almost exclusively spoken in their daily life.
It should be noted that the Malay language spoken in the south is known collect-
ively as Pattani Malay. It is a local variety of Malay written in the Jawi
alphabet which is said to be the old Arabic script of the Qur'an.

3. THE MALAY THAIS

'Thai Muslim' or 'Thai Islam' (an erroneous usage) is the official term
used for the Thai who professes Islam, while 'Thai Buddhist', in contrast, refers
to the Thai who follows Buddhism. Personally, I think it is inappropriate to
use religious affiliations for ethnic identifications. Hence, using Thai as a

headword and Malay as a modifier for a new compound noun, the term 'Malay Thai' is proposed in this paper.

The term 'Thai Muslim' reflects the government policy that the various Muslim peoples of Thailand "should see themselves, and be seen, not as Malay, Chinese, or Indian Muslims resident in Thailand, but as a new religio-national group, the Thai Muslim" (Forbes 1982:1068). Of all Thailand's Muslim minorities, the largest group is of Malay origin. They live mainly in Satun, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. In these four provinces they form 83 per cent, 80 per cent, 62 per cent and 78 per cent of the total population.

3.1 The southern border provinces

The provinces of Satun, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat are known officially and collectively in Thai as *Cangwat Chaidaen Paaktai* (southern border provinces). Nevertheless, Satun is perhaps an odd man out. Geographically, it is separate from the rest; historically, it is different; linguistically, the largest numbers of its inhabitants speak Thai (91 per cent), though many are bilingual. Religiously speaking, it leads with an 83 per cent Muslim population. Hence Satun is not included in the following discussion.

Pattani, the historic centre of the south, has a long and glorious past – being a cultural focus and the cradle of Islam in South-east Asia (Wyatt and Teeaw 1970). It was the most important among the vassal Malay states in the south of Thailand.

Collectively, the three provinces now and then pose the problem of secession from Thailand. For example, in 1948 a petition endorsed by the people of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat was addressed to the United Nations requesting to join the Federation of Malaya.

In terms of politics, Pattani has threatened the security of the region by far the most. One of the major separatist factions in the south is the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO). PULO with its Narathiwat-based and other separatist groups advocate the secession of the southern border provinces from Thailand as well as the establishment of an Independent Pattani Republic. Linguistically, in Pattani the 1980 census data indicate 102,220 (24.40 per cent) native speakers of Thai, and 302,733 (72.26 per cent) native speakers of Malay.

Yala is the southernmost province of Thailand adjacent to the Malaysian Peninsula. Although it may not be as sensitive as Pattani, in 1977 the most spectacular political attack by the separatists was carried out during a Royal visit to Yala. Two bombs were exploded within a short distance of the King and Queen. They escaped injury, but some spectators were killed and injured. The attackers were arrested and they confessed to being members of PULO. The 1980 census data of Yala show that Thai was the mother-tongue for a total of 85,681 peoplr or 32.30 per cent of the population. In contrast, Malay had 140,194 native speakers, i.e. 52.85 per cent.

Finally, Narathiwat is located at the far south-east of the country. Politically, PULO operates chiefly in the districts of Rangae, Bacho, Yingo and Ruso. Linguistically speaking, the 1980 census identifies 86,468 (21.73 per cent) Thai native speakers, and 280,008 (70.38 per cent) Malay native speakers in Narathiwat.

On top of the separatist activity in these three provinces, there are some banditry, extortion and cross-border smuggling. The central government still faces considerable difficulties with the separatist movements, bandit gangs, extortionists and smugglers. Moreover, the economic status of the southerners in general is relatively low. The Malay Thais are principally fishermen, subsistence farmers and small rubber planters. This low economic status is a continuing problem of regional inequalities.

To sum up: Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat are politically plagued with the problem of Malay irredentism. The linguistic, cultural, economic and religious problems also loom large. The Malay Thais are the vast majorities amidst the Thai minorities in the three southern border provinces. Hence true integration with the local people and the national mainstream will perhaps remain a long way off.

3.2 National policies and programs

After the nationalist revolution of 1932, and especially when the military nationalist regime of Pibul Songkhram came to power in 1938, the government policies were forcibly assimilative. In this connection, Forbes has this to say:

> Pibul discriminated strongly against the Malay language
> and culture. *Sharī'a* law was set aside in favor of the
> Thai Buddhist laws of marriage and inheritance, *sarongs*
> were banned, and the wearing of western-style long
> trousers and topees was made compulsory for men. The
> chewing of betel and areca nut was prohibited, and it was
> even stipulated that loads should be carried on the
> shoulder (Thai fashion) rather than on the head (Malay
> fashion).   (Forbes 1982:1059)

The assimilationist policies of the government aroused various opposition and the emergence of a Malay separatist movement in Southern Thailand began. When Pibul was returned to power by coup d'état in 1947, further intimidation was continued. Many local leaders were arrested and troops were sent in to suppress an uprising in Narathiwat. There was an exodus to Malaya for sanctuary of some two thousand Malay Thais. However, mounting concern over adverse international opinion forced Pibul to give a number of concessions to the Malay Thais, including the recognition of their separate cultural identity.

Fortunately, Pibul's attempts at forced assimilation were discarded by his successors. Instead, the policies of political integration and socialisation were gradually implemented. However, the damage had already been done under the coercive measures of the Pibul administration. Yet since the overthrow of Pibul Songkhram in the coup d'état of 1957, successive Thai administrations have become aware of the need to reach a peaceful cultural coexistence in the long run.

In line with this policy, some attempts have been made to teach Thai to children of Malay ethnic origin, to teach secular subjects in the traditional Islamic *pondok* schools and to promote adult and non-formal education.

In order to implement the policies and to achieve the goals, the Thai Government launched several projects for political socialisation, minority participation and population transfer. The following are some programs carried out during different periods in the southern border provinces: public television for the district, a Malay-Thai newsletter, private religious schools, a southern

university at Pattani, undergraduate grants for Malay-Thai students, central and local commissions for Islamic affairs, community development and resettlement in Satun, Yala and Narathiwat, and industrial development - to mention but a few.

These projects, to a large extent, indicate that the central government began to take active interest in the development of the southern border provinces. Indeed, it was a good omen for national unity and regional equality.

4. THE NEED FOR UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The need for national unity is greatly felt now. Various policies and programs were developed and carried out for this purpose. The success and failure in the past gave us a viable lesson for the future.

It is apparent that on average the Malay Thais form some 80 per cent of the total population in the southern border provinces of Thailand, and their language, culture and religion set them apart as a separate ethnic group. It is not far from the truth to say that Southern Thailand is a linguistically and culturally plural society.

Past experiences around the world have shown us the myth of the "melting-pot" of American society, and the 1970s brought forth a reality of the "salad-bowl" - because of the 'unmeltable ethnics' (cf. Saville-Troike 1976; Novak 1973). Today it seems inevitable that we must get to grips with the cultural diversity in our midst, by cultivating and increasing mutual respect and understanding for the minorities.

4.1 A plea for cultural pluralism

Theorists in the West have advanced two contrasting approaches to bilingual-bicultural education known as the "melting-pot" and the "salad-bowl" (see Brudhiprabha 1978). It is my intention to propose in this paper a similar theory to the latter for the East which I shall call the "hot 'n' sour-variety-soup". While the "salad-bowl" theory states that carrot, cucumber, lettuce, radish and tomato can all be in the same bowl without losing their own identities; the "hot 'n' sour-variety-soup" theory states that various ingredients and spices such as lobster, mussel, crab, fish, galangal, lemon grass, bergamot leaf and bird pepper can still remain distinguishable in the same pot of this delicious Thai soup! In other words, this approach to education puts great emphasis on ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious identity and integrity of different minority groups.

This theory can be put into practice in terms of a policy known as cultural pluralism. Sociologists theorise that there are two polar positions of inter-group relations: assimilation versus exclusion. The major patterns of assimilation are integration, amalgamation and cultural pluralism. In contrast, the exclusionary patterns are annihilation, expulsion and segregation.

Fur our purposes here, only cultural pluralism will be discussed. By cultural pluralism is meant a peaceful coexistence between the majority and the minority without discrimination against each other - ethnically, linguistically or religiously. The "hot 'n' sour-variety-soup" theory is in perfect harmony with this policy. To my mind, the time is now ripe for its immediate implementation in the region beset by separatist movements as well as by ethnic, linguistic,

cultural and religious differences. For the sake of national integrity, security, solidarity, stability and unity - I therefore make a strong plea for cultural pluralism in the southern border provinces of Thailand.

4.2 Education for national unity

The use of education as an instrument for regional unity is evident in our adjacent and nearby neighbours, Malaysia and Singapore. Even in Thailand, the case of the Chinese - the largest minority group in the country - is a good proof. Many observers theorise that the readiness of the Chinese minorities to assimilate rather quickly into Thai society is because their religion causes no problem. I would rather suggest that education in the real sense of the term perhaps plays a more important role. For example, through education the Chinese master the Thai language, adopt a Thai name and become a Thai citizen (Noss 1967). Moreover, research findings show that the higher the level of education and prestige, the more rapid the rate of integration.

A more relevant example for our purposes is perhaps the case of Satun, where some 83 per cent of the population are Muslims, but with the use of education the literacy rate in Satun is very high (80.1 per cent), and here Thai is spoken almost universally (91.21 per cent). Hence education (and more specifically the fact that the greatest numbers of population in Satun speak Thai) is an effective way to bring about national unity (Wong 1973).

However, as I have mentioned in passing earlier, Satun is in a rather unique position, compared with the other three southern border provinces - Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. In this connection, Smalley (1976:19) makes a very good point: "Certainly education in Thai is most important for Thailand's minority peoples", he asserts, "but what is the best way to bring this education about?" This is a relevant question, I should say, more specifically for the Malay Thais in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.

Of course language can be a great barrier to assimilation. Without a common language, neither an individual nor a group can fully participate in and become members of a given community. At this point, the question of educational language policy arises (cf. Brudhiprabha 1976). Let me quote a little further from Smalley. He goes on to say that:

> ... We would like to see the Thai policy in language
> planning turn firmly to the fostering of bilingualism and
> planned bilingual education. The child learns to read and
> write his own language, preferably using a Thai-based
> script with Thai letters insofar as the sounds of his lan-
> guage match Thai, making adaptations where they do not.
> He already speaks his own language, so his learning process
> is that of learning to read and write the language he speaks
> (the minority language), in a manner analogous to that of
> a Thai child who learns to read and write the language he
> already speaks (Thai).   (Smalley 1976:19)

However, as far as the official language policy of Thailand is concerned, it is stated that Standard Thai must be the medium of instruction at all levels of education. For the sake of what is claimed (by the authority) "national unity and security", Standard Thai is the only language recognised for Thailand. That is to say, Smalley's proposal on what he called "planned bilingual educa- tion" may be quite difficult to implement, if not impossible. However, Wangsotorn

(1980) – and myself as well are in agreement with Smalley; she observes that it is advantageous for the minority language groups to learn to read and write in their own languages using the Thai script so that it will set a solid foundation for their shift to literacy in Standard Thai.

Admittedly, from the 1921 Primary Education Act to the 1978 National Scheme of Education the policies of Thailand inter alia recognise the role of Thai as a common language in the assimilation of different minority linguistic groups. The ultimate goal of the Thai government in trying to unify and assimilate the inhabitants of the South into Thai society is best described by Fraser (1966:105): "creation in the south of full citizen of the Kingdom of Thailand, no longer Malay residents in Thailand but Muslim Thais." Hence a nationally set curriculum and a common-content syllabus and textbooks are required for all. Unfortunately, because of their differences in language, culture and religion, the Malay Thais have strongly resented such an education!

I have discussed this more fully elsewhere (Brudhiprabha 1981:14). Perhaps what I quoted then from Abdul Kadir about linguistic, cultural and religious problems of the Malay-Thai children when they first came to school can provide a vivid example. This is how it goes:

> ... when they have learned to read, the primers are alien
> to their culture and environment. There are pictures of
> monks and monasteries, ... Not only must the children
> endure all this, ... but the parents have to tolerate the
> instilling into their children of the cultural heritage
> of a different religion.

The question at stake now is: how can we use education to bring about national unity in the three southern border provinces? Of course there is no easy answer to the question, but I submit that a policy of cultural pluralism, if resolutely pursued will help us to reach a modus vivendi with the Malay Thais (or any minority groups for that matter).

The first indications of change in line with this policy occurred in 1961 when the central government began to improve the traditional Islamic *pondok* schools. In 1965 a registered *pondok* under official control was first accredited as a private religious school for the study of Islam. Secular subjects have been included in the curriculum and great efforts have been made to teach the Thai language.

Considerable success is evident among these private religious schools. The literacy rates in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat have increased steadily. The 1980 census data indicate that children over 10 years old were 65.74, 70.91 and 63.7 per cent literate, respectively. It is hoped that this type of school, and the government schools in general, will further serve the ultimate end of cultural pluralism which, in turn, will lead to unity in diversity, in the three southern border provinces and in Thailand as a whole.

5. CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this paper to identify the language and cultural problems of Thailand's Muslim minorities in the three southern border provinces. It is apparent that the problems of Southern Thailand are associated with both pluralism and regionalism. In short, the former can be solved by cultivating a peaceful coexistence between the majority and the minority, while the latter can be tackled by a closer liaison with the central government.

Education could help solve both of these problems, because schools are indeed the testing ground for cementing social ties and promoting co-operation among students of different backgrounds - without regard to race, language or creed.

Although the policy of cultural pluralism is strongly advocated for the three southern border provinces of Thailand in this paper, let me *not* suggest that it is a panacea or an end in itself! Rather, I think it is a stage in the process of integration. Whether we like it or not, "a certain amount of cultural and linguistic uniformity is a necessary prerequisite for achieving stability in the process of building a nation-state", Saville-Troike (1976:2) maintains, and she concludes that "Linguistic and cultural differences are a great obstacle to national unity, and to full participation by all groups in the national life." In other words, cultural pluralism entails both promises and problems; in fact, it is quite difficult to maintain! However, since only the Thais and the Malay Thais are the principal groups in Southern Thailand I believe that this policy would be more or less workable. And to a certain extent it has already been evident in my discussion on education for national unity.

Perhaps a word of caution is in order at this point. It goes without saying that cultural pluralism is a sensitive issue, and it will take time to cultivate. The problem may arise from either party. The minority as well as the majority may cause difficulties if any inequities are being sensed. Hence each group must first and foremost learn to accept the other as an equal partner in the game. Misconceptions and stereotypes held by each party must be discarded. Language is indeed the heart of the matter, for communication brings understanding which is essential for full participation in the social community and the national life.

Finally, I submit that while we cannot deny the historical validity of the 'meltable ethnics' like the Chinese in Thailand, we must also recognise the 'unmeltable ethnics' like the Malays in the south. To this end, we should be able to put the "hot 'n' sour-variety-soup" theory into practice in the case of the Malay Thais.

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