

# Movement and Identity Construction Amongst Kelantan's Thai Community<sup>1</sup>

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Tucked away on a hill in the middle of Nakhon Si Thammarat's vast rice fields is an unimposing little temple. Despite its isolated location, the temple is a hive of bustling activity. People arrive here every day, often travelling for miles at a stretch. They come here to be healed of their physical ailments. Here the blind regain their sight and the lame walk effortlessly. Their remarkable treatment is carried out by an otherwise unknown monk who uses a magical wooden wand (*maai thao*) to regain health to those parts of the body where it has suffered. After three consecutive days of treatment coupled by a firm and somewhat mandatory belief in the curative potential of the wand everyone returns home, their attendance only to be replaced by another group of patients.

"They say that the road leading out of the temple is littered with the wheel-chairs, walkers and crutches of the once crippled as they walked out of the temple," marvelled Phii Ruen as we sat watching Italy play Ecuador in the World Cup on Thai television that night. She added that the temple was so popular that visitors who sought treatment were given consultation numbers that went as high as nine-hundred.

Phii Ruen's mother, like many Kelantanese Thais in the twin villages of Baan Yai and Baan Chang Doi where I am currently doing my fieldwork, planned to visit the temple in the next few days with some of her neighbors. They wanted to experience for themselves what has become one of the most talked about topics along the village grapevine.<sup>2</sup> Although the temple and its curative activities have been known in southern Thailand for a few years now, the villagers of Baan Yai and Baan Chang Doi had only just become aware of it. It all began when the story of Na Chau Mai's miraculous cure circulated within the village. The once blind man from Baan Yai was said to have returned from the temple with renewed although blurred vision. It was not long afterwards that these Malaysian villagers were hiring buses and minivans from the Thai border town of Taba to take them to Nakhon Si Thammarat, seven hours away.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I will discuss how Kelantanese Thai villagers construct and articulate narratives of ethno-cultural identity. These social actors manifest their identity at moments of movement through their active participation in processes of border criss-crossing. Borders are not confined to the sovereign demarcations of the nation-state but extend to include symbolic borders and boundaries, constructed in the imagination of the Kelantanese Thais through a reimagining of their past and its histories. Across these frontiers flow not just the people themselves but also information in the form of brochures and invitations announcing upcoming temple fairs, weddings, funerals, ordinations and sightseeing tours. To the younger generation of computer savvy Kelantanese Thais, internet chatrooms such as the very popular Channel Siam on the IRC (Internet Relay Chat) allow them to participate in these ethno-cultural standardisation processes from the comfort of Kelantan's internet cafes. Through constantly engaging in these criss cross movements, Kelantan's small Thai community attempts to consolidate a narrative of Thai-ness that is unique to their experience as modern Thais living along the peripheries of the Malaysian nation-state.

Kelantan is the northeasternmost state of peninsula Malaysia. Although predominantly Malay and Muslim, Thai Buddhist account for about one percent of the state's total population. Most Thais live in ethnically homogeneous villages (baan) in the district of Tumpat along Kelantan's northern frontier. Some Thai settlements are found further south with three extending into Trengganu's border with Kelantan.

Baan Yai and Baan Chaang Doi's villagers, like most Kelantanese Thais, speak the Tumpat-Tak Bai dialect of southern Thai, in addition to standard Thai (thai baangkok) and both Kelantanese (khaek lantan) and standard Malay (khaek nangsu).<sup>4</sup> Largely similar cultural and linguistic enclaves are found in Narathiwat's southernmost regions, separated from their Kelantanese brethren by the international border which demarcates Malaysia from Thailand along the deepest point of the Golok River. Many of Baan Yai and Baan Chaang Doi's residents, like Thais in neighbouring Tumpat villages, have kin in these Narathiwat settlements. Although most of these Tumpat-Tak-bai speaking villages were probably established more than a century ago, some were more recent settlements. In the early nineteen fifties the Thai government encouraged landhungry Kelantanese Thais to take up forested plots in Narathiwat's southern frontier zone for rubber and fruit tree cultivation. These land settlement schemes (nikhom) were initiated in an attempt to boost the province's agrarian economy and to inadvertently populate the deep south area with people who were deemed loyal and docile Thai Buddhists as opposed to the so-called threat of Malay Muslim insurgents and their sympathisers.<sup>5</sup> Prior to this a number of Kelantanese Thais had already migrated to various districts in Narathiwat to purchase cheap and abundant. These communities nevertheless continued to maintain intimate social relations with their cousins in Kelantan. Networks of funerals, weddings, ordinations, and temple fairs on both sides of the Golok river are occasions where kinship ties are symbolically renewed through mutual attendance.

The present border was demarcated by the signing of the Anglo-Siamese treaty in 1909. Although this aquatic frontier is policed by both nation-states with immigration checkpoints and customs units on both banks (and in Kelantan, the ever-popular duty-free shops), it is also easily and regularly breached by both Thais and Malaysians. Long tailed boats ply between Narathiwat and Kelantan, their otherwise illegal courier services transporting people, produce, and ideas between both nation-states. Rice, cows, drugs and women merge with fresh vegetables, counterfeit clothes, motorcycles, dried fish, fruit, pornographic vcds and so forth, in a plethora of activity that never seems to stop on either side of the river. Even in the evenings when border officials formally end their work day and the nation-state is symbolically sealed with the closing of the immigration check points, criss-crossing movement continues. Cattle and rice are often smuggled from Thailand at night to waiting Malaysian vehicles for sale throughout Kelantan. The night is also a time when eager young Kelantanese men seek out the sexual services of Thai girls at the many bars that have sprung up in Taba and Sungai Golok to cater to the rising affluence of Kelantan's rural citizenry. Others go to shop, eat, drink (beer is cheaper in Thailand they say), and gamble, sometimes even bringing with them their prized fighting cocks. A person who often went to the bars across the river was jokingly described by younger Thais as "kaki golok" (a "golok addict") or, if he could not afford the more expensive bar culture of Sungai Golok, as a "kaki taba." The latter were often associated with teenage boys who would go to Taba on the weekends or after school.

The constant movement that criss-crosses the boundaries of the nation-state does not mean that the geopolitical border itself called into question by Kelantanese Thai social actors. Rather, the purposeful knowledge that these individuals have of boundary crossing attest to the national border's pervasive and powerful presence. By crossing the border, Malaysian citizens enter Thailand ? although this is a Thailand that is in many ways remarkably similar to their home environment in rural Malaysia. This is not the Thailand of Bangkok with its different dialect, urban sprawl, movie stars, spicy food, and glittering symbols of Buddhist royalism. The contradictoriness of the regular crossing both legally and illegally of international omnipotence at Kelantan's border zones is what structures Kelantanese Thai perceptions of their ethno-cultural identity.

In the oft cited introduction to his 1969 collection of essays, Frederick Barth rightly pointed out that it was the persistence of the ethnic boundary that should be investigated by scholars rather than "the cultural stuff that is enclosed." Barth's observations that boundary demarcation involved the dual processes of self-ascription and ascription by others was a trendsetter in the anthropological thinking about identity. It shifted attention away from the visible symbols of culture that had until then been the hallmark of the discipline. Nevertheless, Barth's analysis has been critiqued for its lack of consideration of the power differentials in shaping the ascriptive process. To elaborate, Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson, in their recently published book entitled *Borders* (2001), argued that the politico-jural frontier zones of the nation-state and the power play they exuded over their citizenry were just as crucial as the symbolic constructions of borders in the imagination of social actors. Both are related and irreducible practices. Small communities living along international boundaries are not peripheral citizens who merely succumb to the whims and fancies of cultural ascription by larger more powerful social forces. They are active agents who participate in an on-going process of ethno-cultural identity construction through negotiating and dialoging with these forces as well as with their own reimaginings of history and its various meanings.

To the Thais of Baan Yai and Baan Chaang Doi, Thailand is both near and far. From Baan Yai, one need only take a bus ride to the frontier town of Pengkalan Kubor and then a boat or ferry across the Golok River. There are numerous other crossings along the river, such as at Kuala Tat and Bukit Bunga. In the past, before passports and passes were of importance in the administration of border crossings, one could reach Thailand by boarding the weekly train at the Tumpat railway station for Sungai Golok or by boat from the old pier at Baan Yai. Today long tailed boats can be hired from Taba to take individuals all the way to Baan Tuwaa in Kelantan. This is the route taken by illegal pork smugglers who sell their meat to Kelantanese Thai and Chinese buyers each morning. Sometimes wild boar meat is sold to these Thai porksellers by their Kelantanese hunters. This much sought after delicacy is then resold to market vendors, restaurants and villagers in Narathiwat.

Young men from Thailand also regularly enter Kelantan along these lesser policed entrypoints. They come largely from the Tumpat Tak Bai speaking villages in search of wild game, which fetches a hefty price when sold to restaurants throughout Thailand. "When you see two men on a motorcycle with a dog, it's them alright," said Khun Jin, a monk from Baan Yai's temple. "These Thais come in search of monitor lizards, pangolins and civet cats. There are so few left now that it's even hard to find civets anymore," complained my Kelantanese friend as he lamented the loss of these wild delicacies.

Being so close to the Thai border exposes Kelantanese social actors to the images of Thainess that emanate from her national bureaus. Almost every Thai household in Kelantan owns at least one color television. Watching Thai television programmes is an integral part of being Thai in contemporary Kelantan. Malaysian channels are rarely, if ever, watched by Thais. A number of younger Thais may enjoy some of the Hollywood movies screened on Malaysian television but when it came to local productions they complained that "Malay (not Malaysian) programs are never as enjoyable. They are all boring, unlike Thai dramas." Even soccer matches are watched over the Thai channels rather than the Malaysian ones. With the popular media come the many images of a standardised and sanitised Thainess produced in Bangkok. This is the Thainess that the Thai nation state projects through its idealised images of a common citizenry steeped in a shared national history (*prawatsat*) and culture (*watthanatham*), pillared upon the tri-sacred principles of King (*phramahakasat*), Nation (*chat*) and Religion (*sasana*). As Khun Jin cynically pointed out, "these Thais watch only Thai television. They have such a wealth of knowledge about the going ons in Thailand. They know more about Thailand than they do Malaysia."

Watching Thai television each night allows Kelantanese Thai audiences to reflect on their position as a diasporic minority in Malaysia. Images of King Bhumibol and members of the royal family decorate the living room of almost every house in Baan Yai. These postered pictures are often cut from the pages of old calenders or purchased from vendors during temple festivals. The pictures however do not carry the same revered sacredness for these Kelantanese Thais as they do for their friends and relatives in Thailand. When I asked some Baan Yai residents why they displayed these powerful symbols of Thainess, they replied that the pictures themselves were "beautiful" (*ngaam*), just like the glossy posters of Thai pop idols which often shared the living room wall with pictures of the king and his family. Nevertheless, images of the Kelantanese sultan were rarely exhibited in the private space of the house wall.<sup>6</sup> The reason for this was not a false sense of Thai national pride but rather a feeling of neglect by a ruler whose competency was called into question. Unlike the king of Thailand who was ever ready to dirty his hands with the peasantry, the Kelantanese Sultan rarely visited Kelantan's Thai villages. When he did decide to visit his palace at Tumpat, the royal entourage was always in a hurry and never even smiled at his Thai subjects.<sup>7</sup> The positive imagination of the Thai monarch as a non-arrogant and beneficent father figure was derived from the images flashed on Thai television screens every evening. The pictures of Thailand's king are thus displayed out of an intense respect for his actions rather than out of a sense of national patriotism, and as my friend Nuan remarked "because we are Thai, afterall."

These colorful representations of Thailand's official rhetoric also deck the walls of Kelantanese Thai temples. The popular calenders printed enmasse across the border by some Kelantanese temples bear the glamorous potraits of popular soap drama icons, revered Thai monks and Thai Royalty. Kelantanese monks make regular trips to Thailand on sightseeing tours, to purchase ritual paraphernalia, seek medical treatment and so forth. Monks from Thailand also frequently visit Kelantan, with some staying for extended periods in the state as resident monks.

Kelantan's Thai monkhood comes under the administration of the Department of Religious Affairs (*krom sasana*) in Bangkok. Senior monks are officially appointed by the Department although the selection process remains in the hands of the Kelantanese themselves. The Departments' southern precincts (*phaak*) often conducts regular meetings (*prachum*) for monks from the border provinces in both Thailand and Malaysia. These assemblies follow a strict

administrative protocol as set forth by the Department's bureaucrats and its monk administrators in Bangkok. These range from the formal structuring of meetings to the physical arrangement of seats and tables. When Wat Baan Yai hosted this year's meeting of senior monks from the Department's 18th precinct to discuss the measures needed to combat the influx of corrupt Thai monks into Malaysia, senior monks from Wat Baan Yai were invited attend a similar-type meeting on the island of Ko Samui.<sup>8</sup> The contents of the meeting did not concern the Kelantanese guest who had been invited merely as observers to note the proper performance of a monk assembly. A day before the meeting proper, a number of monks from Thailand arrived at Wat Baan Yai to ensure that the Kelantanese monks had adhered to the proper standards of administrative protocol.

Nevertheless in a pre-assembly village meeting at Wat Baan Yai about a month before the assembly proper, Baan Yai villagers enquired with the abbot of the temple as to what food should be prepared for their guests from Thailand. "They are used to spicy food," someone commented. To this the abbot responded matter-of-factly, "just prepare what you always prepare. Let us have kaeng khilek. And kaeng som. They have come to our temple so let them eat our food. There is no need to prepare unusual dishes," replied the abbot. This incident is interesting when studied in the context of Barth's notion of self-ascriptive processes. Through ensuring that the senior monks from Thailand ate local Kelantanese Thai food, the abbot articulated a discourse of a self-contained ethno-cultural identity that powerfully resisted national Thai attempts at cultural standardisation. The Thai nation-states' bureaucratic organisation although extending its way into Kelantan through ensuring that the monk assembly followed the rules of standardized decorum was however never total. The assembly that Sunday morning was a spectacular event. It celebrated a transnational cultural Thainess that transcended the international border yet through the preparation of local food, Kelantanese Thai audiences ensured that this sense of Thainess was domesticated and managed to coincide with the historical imagination of a Thai community living in a Malaysian state. The participants were in Kelantan after all.

This crisscrossing movement across the international frontierzone is not restricted to flows of people. Televised images and ideas transcend the barriers of the nation-state and inadvertently shape the perceptions of its cultural producers and consumers. Buddhist temple fairs on both sides of the border are occasions where Kelantanese Thai and their Narathiwat neighbors interact and forge a sense of local similarity while emphasizing distinct difference. Knowledge of these fairs often comes in the form of temple circulars (sakala) ? paper brochures written in both Thai and Malay which announce the date, venue and activities during the fair. These brochures circulate throughout the Thai villages of Kelantan and lower Narathiwat. Local Narathiwat radio stations such as the popular Luk Thung Pathana with its Tumpat-Tak Bai speaking DJ also broadcast news of upcoming temple fairs paying attention to the entertainments offered as well as to funerals and weddings of listeners who call in to the station. Nevertheless although this information occasions social interaction through mutual attendance, the influence of the nation-state in defining self-ascriptive processes is pervasive. The nation-state remains a powerful too in shaping the discourses of cultural difference that both Kelantanese Thais and their Narathiwat cousins articulate eventhough on the surface, the two groups are recognised as "phii nong kan jah" (just our kin). They may speak the same dialect, dress in an identical manner and enjoy similar foods yet the Kelantanese of Baan Yai and Baan Chaang Doi were quick to point out to

me that they were not like the Thais from across the border. At a festival at Wat Baan Yai last year, a number of Narathiwat Thais were in attendance. I did not know they were from Narathiwat, thinking to myself that they were probably from just another Kelantanese Thai village. But to the Baan Yai residents these were clearly khon muang thai. "They are just different. You can tell. For instance, they wear pants and not sarongs," said Naa Thid who was sitting with me under the shade of the large mango tree observing the group of khon muang thai standing in front of the temple's modest library.

Thailand is a distant reality to many Baan Yai and Baan Chaang Doi residents despite its geographical closeness. Older villagers however, recalled a time when both muang thai and muang rao (our polity) were one and the same. This was prior the policing of the border by the British. The sharp demarcation of the official perimeters of the Thai and Malayan nation-states structured perceptions of local autonomy that remain effective to the present-day. Thailand is perceived as a place fraught with danger and immorality ? of rampant corruption at every level of society, a decaying monkhood, banditry, Muslim insurgents and general political instability. Many of these images which structure local meanings are derived from the flows of images that exude from the Thai mass media. Thailand is an embodied paradise, where innocent but stupid (khon poek) Kelantanese men venture to seek out the sexual services of prostitutes only to return to their wives and families with AIDs. The recent AIDs deaths in Baan Yai are attributed to the dangerous pleasures that characterise a morally decayed muang thai. Eventhough Baan Yai and Baan Chaang Doi villagers readily admitted to the inefficiency of Malaysian bureaucracy and the corruption of its officials who maintain policies of Malay exclusivism, Malaysia was still better than Thailand. Kelantanese Thais unquestioningly asserted their identity as loyal Malaysians (rao khon malaysia) although they actively participated in the practices of border transcendence that emanate from Thailand.

In conclusion, the practices of border crisscrossing which these Kelantanese and Narathiwat villagers constantly engage in and through which they articulate a sense of ethno-cultural identity cannot be analysed without considering the pervasive influence of both nation-states. Borderlands, despite their ambiguous and blurred geopolitical space which allow for easy transcendence are powerful markers of nationhood. These images and imaginations of the nation-state are embodied in the social actors who move back and forth between both nations. It is the exposure to the other that shapes local meanings and its articulation. These meanings, as I have shown with the case of Baan Yai's and Baan Chaang Doi's residents are polysemic and situationally defined yet remain essentialised.

## ***Endnotes***

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<sup>1</sup> All Thai words in this paper as in the Tumpat-Tak bai dialect of Southern Thai as spoken by the majority of Thai villagers in Kelantan and Narathiwat.

<sup>2</sup> Even the teenagers in my English class at Baan Yai's temple had heard about this.

<sup>3</sup> Of course not all Kelantanese Thai villagers are believers in the claimed efficacy of the wand. When I asked Taa Dee why he was not accompanying his father and some villagers from the nearby Thai village of Baan Kao to the temple, he said matter-of-factly, "I don't believe it. It is just like with Baan Kao's mo thewada (spirit doctor) who was so popular a few years ago. Now you never even hear it mentioned. That is how our Thai society (sangkhom thai rao)

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is." Nevertheless, Paa Ngiam, whose son ran a small cafe in Baan Yai where I would occasionally have my breakfast, told me one morning that the key to being healed by the wand was to have faith in it and not question its efficacy. People who did not believe in its power or were just there to test its abilities were struck with skin disease. Yet she added that of the villagers she knew who had gone to the temple all had been cured except for one woman, whose condition deteriorated after the trip.

<sup>4</sup> Depending on their level and type of education, almost all of the younger Thais in both villages can communicate to some degree in English, which they learn as a second language in school. Some are also conversant in Mandarin having attended Chinese (national-type) rather than Malay (national) medium schools.

<sup>5</sup> Although most of the participants in these land settlement projects were Kelantanese Thai, a large number of Malay Muslims from both Kelantan and other southern Thai provinces took up the schemes too. At present the nikhom settlements in lower narathiwat are multiethnic communities with Kelantanese Thais, Malays, and Northeastern Thais living together.

<sup>6</sup> Images of the Sultan and his wife grace the walls of most businesses and all government offices in Kelantan.

<sup>7</sup> In an incident often cited to show the Sultan's lack of concern for his subjects, Khun Uad, a young monk from Wat Baan Yai noted how on the day of the sultan's arrival he merely zopped past the waiting audience waving their little Malaysian flags without even slowing down. "he probably had diarrhea and needed to get to palace immediately," laughed Khun Uad.

<sup>8</sup> This Division encompasses all the provinces south of Nakhon Si Thammarat as well as the Malaysian border states of Kelantan, Kedah and Perlis.