

CHAPTER 4

ARRIVAL OF OTHERNESS

“These Muslims in the South,” begins Mongkol’s report to his 9th grade social studies class in central Bangkok, “I don’t think they are one hundred percent Thai.”

He goes on to describe how different southern Thais speak, dress and live. His voice raises slightly when he says, “some of them want to separate from us and create their own country, with their own government.

In fact, my uncle in the military says our government spends a lot of money to solve that problem, because it is a concern of national security.”

After his report, the teacher praises Mongkol. “Very good,” the teacher says.

*Violence in the Mist*³²

Though I am uncertain whether or not the abovementioned description is taken from an actual scenario, I reckon that the details in the dialogue between the teacher and his/her student are the actual reflection of the mindset of Thai people. For the majority Thais, the people in the deep south are somebody or some elements which are “other-ed.” The cause of otherness, in my opinion, primarily stems from three reasons, including historical antagonism, ethnocentrism, and the absence of social connection.

The southern problem is fundamentally related to the pains and agony imprinted in the history. Islam arrived in Southeast Asia at the end of the seventh century.³³ It gradually spread into the land currently known as southern Thailand via Malaya peninsular or Malaysia at present. In the 10th century Arab merchants brought

³² Supara Janchitfah, *Violence in the Mist: Reporting on the Presence of Pain in Southern Thailand* (Bangkok: Kobfai Publishing, 2004), p.101.

³³ Jarun Maluleem, *The Coming of Islam to Thailand*, occasional paper No.15, (Program for Southeast Asian Area Studies, 1998).

Islam into the area, and in 1457 the Kingdom of Patani was established as an Islamic kingdom,³⁴ before the establishment of Ayudhaya kingdom. However, the maritime location of the southern kingdom was attractive so the Ayudhaya kingdom successfully captured the area. The sultanate kingdom was later under the protectorate of the kingdom of Ayudhaya.

After the Chakri dynasty reestablished the kingdom of Siam, the earlier kings of Bangkok maintained rule over the southern political entity. When the Patani Kingdom disobeyed, Bangkok would dispatch troops to suppress uprisings. After defeating the disobedient Muslim rulers, the Muslim subjects in the south were herded into Bangkok to increase the population of the central kingdom while the valuable objects, such as cannons were “confiscated” to mount up military equipment of the ancient kingdom. The legacy of this historical act was the Phaya Tani cannon standing currently in front of Defense Ministry in Bangkok. Those herded Muslims received benevolence from the rulers in the form of land appropriation for resettlement in the capital.

The Patani Kingdom came to an end when King Rama the fifth conducted administrative reform nationwide. The reform replaced the position of rulers for protectorates with governors, senior officials dispatched from the central government in Bangkok. In other words, the southern kingdom was completely annexed by the Siam government due to the administrative reform. The last ruler of Patani Kingdom had to seek refuge in Kelantan state of Malaya, which was under British colonization at that time. The offspring of the last sultanate became leaders of insurgent groups which attempted to transform the current deep south into an Islamic independent state.

In contemporary history, the story of the south has been reproduced over and over in negative light. During the Communist Insurgency of Thailand in 1970's, the southern area was painted as a “red zone” where Communist militants dwelled and actively operated. Although the Communists were suppressed, Thai authorities also possessed a mindset that some roots of separatism remained embedded.

³⁴ Janchitfah, p. 273.

Abductions of Muslim leaders thus became retold stories of pain for Muslim southerners.

From the above account, it is clear that Muslims in the deep south are natives and their land was coercively incorporated into the Kingdom of Siam. What makes them distinct from the majority is their history. Worse, their history is one enclosed with pain and agony imposed by the central government in Bangkok.

Recalling my social studies subject in my junior highschool years, the texts in history class were full of unilateral accusations of the southerners. The texts described the rebellions of seven towns in the south during the early period of Chakri Dynasty. Meanwhile, the study of Thailand during the Cold War also portrayed the country as another political landscape of unrest fuelled by Communist Malaya insurgent groups and later by the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).

In this sense, Thai students are indirectly indoctrinated that people in deep south are not Thais. The people of the southernmost are displayed as those refusing to give their loyalty to the central administration in Bangkok since the southerners staged uprisings and upheavals against the central government. To some extent, I believe that the locals in the south could not help feeling irritated because according to their local history, the authority from Bangkok imposed harsh measures to suppress them and portrayed them in a negative light.³⁵ It is worth recalling that the cannon of Patani Kingdom—the valuable token of their kingdom—was “seized” (or plundered) by Bangkok government. Such practice was a part of the warring norm in historical inter-kingdom relations. Unfortunately, the history of locals in the south has so far never been retold and reviewed in the space of mainstream history to counterbalance the hegemonic history unilaterally retold and reproduced by the triumphant kingdom of Siam. In fact, the people in the south were victimized in their history—near and far—but they were portrayed as the villains who disrupted the peace and stability of the country.

³⁵ One obvious example of this unfair depiction is known as Dusun-nyor case which is going to be elaborated in the following paragraphs.

One remarkable tragedy was the Dusun-nyor incident. On April 28, 1948, villagers of Dusun-ngor were performing a superstitious ceremony to make them invincible so that they could fight the local threatening insurgent groups.³⁶ However, they were mistaken as preparing an attack against local officials. A deadly battle broke out, killing a number of civilians and government officials. Satha-anand suggests that the total casualties of official deaths were confirmed at 30 while there was uncertainty and discrepancy on the number of civilian deaths which varied from 30-100, according to official accounts. Nonetheless, the figures of some Malay Muslims civilian writers gave the number of civilian deaths as up to 600.³⁷

The language labeling the incident was also different. The 1999 Senate Special Committee labeled the incident as a “rebellion,” while the villagers referred to the incident as “war.” Basically, the two words have clear distinction. Rebellion is a form of violent resistance to an established government; and the action of resisting authority or control.³⁸ Meanwhile, the standard dictionary definition asserts that “war” is a state of fighting between nations or groups within a nation using military force. Here, it is obvious that the word “rebellion” connotes the sense of resistance against the governing body while “war” is violent fighting. The discrepancy of both accounts shows that for the authority, the Dusun-nyor incident was the violent act of those disobeying and resisting the power of the government while in the eye of locals, the incident was the struggle of war against the injustice they had to endure.

The historical difference can lead to indifference. History plays a key role in establishing nation-state. History is a key ingredient binding people in the shared territory together. The narration of the history aims at producing the sentiment that people in one area possess the same set of common memory.³⁹ This is the reason why students have to study history in elementary and secondary schools because it is a way to imprint their sense of collectivity.

³⁶ Chaiwat Satha-anand, “The Silence of the Bullet Monument: Violence and Truth Management, Dusun-ngor 1948, and Kru-Ze 2004,” *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 1, (2006): p. 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁸ Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary, 5th ed. (1999), p. 971.

³⁹ The idea of this part is gathered from the discussion in class IR 666.

The historical difference leads to otherness. Normally, history is a tool to bind people in a state. A common memory is required in the establishment of a state. However, in the southern case, the common memory—especially in the form of historical narrative—is absent. The majority of Thais possess one view of history which states that the Patani Kingdom was a conquered kingdom, where Siam kings exercised their competency to incorporate the southern kingdom into a part of the Siam state. Unfortunately, from the perspective of the southerners, the narrative was different. From their standpoint, they felt victimized. Their land was invaded and incorporated into the land of the nonbelievers. Worse still, the experience of victimization was reproduced when Field Marshal Piboonsongkram implemented a policy of assimilation. The field marshal persuaded those living in the northeast to relocate into deep south by allocating plots of land for resettlement. Once again, the locals in the south were the victims.

It is apparent, therefore, that the locals in the south and the rest in the country do not share the same interpretation of history. In other words, there is an invisible wall between the two groups. As a result, they have failed to establish a social connection for each other. The absence of social connection grows with the majority main Thai paradigm of suspicion against people in the south.⁴⁰ This feeling reinforces the otherness against those in the deep south.

Therefore, such a biased report by Mongkol which other-ed the southerners in the aforementioned narrated scenario was not a surprise.

Even worse, Thais also possess a strong level of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to see one's own group, culture, and nation in positive terms and, conversely, other groups in negative terms. The ethnocentric attitude may be passed down from generation to generation via the process of socialization.⁴¹ The education system and media also play a part in nurturing this attitude. "Ethnocentrism,

⁴⁰ Paradigm of suspicion refers to the idea that suspicions will emerge among groups of people who do not share social connection with one another, see Ronen Shamir, 2005. "Without Borders? Notes on Globalization as a Mobility Regime," *Sociology Theory* 23, 2:197-217.

⁴¹ Dictionary of International Relations, (1998), p. 154.

as a tendency, is often found to be contributing to tension and hostilities that occur whenever groups conflict.⁴²

In the Thai case, the country's elites have succeeded in exercising ethnocentrism. Thai students are taught that they should be proud of being Thai or possess Thainess because the two characteristics are unique. One prime example is the motto that Thais are peace-loving, and having no intention to intimidate or invade any other countries. However, if the kingdom was invaded, the Thais would undoubtedly and vehemently fight against the intruders who dare challenge the national dignity and integrity. More importantly, the Kingdom of Thailand, unlike neighboring countries, has never been colonized by any western powers who collected colonies during colonialism. This was because of the wise statesmanship of the previous blue-blooded rulers.⁴³

This ethnocentric attitude fuels the otherness against the southerners. The majority Thais possess the sentiment that the people in the south are different and inferior from the majority Thais because they are "*khaek*"—a Thai pejorative description of physical traits. Thais refer to Malay Muslims as *khaek*. "In the eyes of Thais, *khaek* are ethnocentric lusty (male) lazy, dirty, selfish, untrustworthy, poor, narrow-minded, cruel, uncooperative, stupid, unfriendly and very religious."⁴⁴ Even, a Thai idiom also shows that a *khaek* is not a favorable person. The saying goes: "If you confront a serpent and a *khaek* simultaneously, you better hit the *khaek* first because *khaek* is more dangerous than the serpent." The characteristic of *khaek* is therefore unwelcome in Thai society. This factor regrettably reinforces the sentiment of otherness against the Muslims in the south.

Such existing attitudes are key ingredients which hamper the necessary social awareness for solving the southern violence. In fact, Thailand is a country with

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ I have learnt the idea in this paragraph from a history class in my undergraduate year.

⁴⁴ Chaiwat Satha-anand, "Pattani in the 1980s: Academic Literature as Political Stories," in *The Life of This World: Negotiated Muslim Lives in Thai Society* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005), chap 2., p.33.

impressive political openness in the sense that the movements and activities of global civil society can be openly conducted on any particular issue. The political openness plays a key role for the success of global civil society. Caraway suggests that political openness is determined by three measures including democracy, the presence of nongovernmental organizations, and the free inflow and outflow of information.⁴⁵ In this sense, Thailand enjoys comparatively good political openness. Unfortunately, the incumbent government of Thailand may not be deemed democratic as it is installed by a military junta and is not an elected one; nevertheless, the social structure and social institutions which altogether play key roles in safeguarding democracy remain. Mass media, particularly print media, are relatively independent. The Thais still enjoy free flow of information domestically and internationally. Moreover, nongovernmental organizations can conduct their activities here without obvious state intimidation.

In other words, Thailand is an effective locus for the movements and activities of global civil society. Unfortunately, what makes the movements and activities ineffective is the otherness which has blinded the sympathy of the majority Thais towards the southerners.

⁴⁵ Teri Caraway, "Political Openness and Transnational Activism: Comparative Insights from Labor Activism," *Politics and Society* 34, no. 2 (2006).