

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Thailand has been regarded as a homogeneous-structured society, despite the fact that there are various degrees of ethno-cultural diversity embedded in such structure. (Farouk, 1999:210; Hayami, 2006: 283; Selway, 2007: 53) Ever since the age of modernism in the twentieth century, the trinity of Nation, Religion (Buddhism) and Kingship (Chakri Monarchy) has been perceived as an official discourse of the national identity of the country in the process of nation-building. (Sulak Sivaraksa, 2002: 35; Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, 2008: 63-164) Such a process helps construct the standard meaning of Thai cultural identity. However, the promotion of a certain cultural identity as a norm naturally subordinates, represses and ignores the differences of those who do not fit such a criteria or standard.

In reality, Thailand and its citizen are made of various groups of people from different ethno-religious backgrounds. The statistics provided by Thai Census (1992) could be the proof of this fact as it shows that 93.47% of Thai people are Buddhists, followed by 3.96% who are Muslims. (Census, 1992 quoted in Mahidol University, 1996) The remaining are Christians 0.52%, Hindhus-sikhs 0.01%, and unidentified 2.04%. (Census, 1992 quoted in Mahidol University, 1996) In terms of race, the main ethnic group of Thailand is Thai, accounting for 75% of the total population, followed by Chinese 11%, Malay 3.5%, and the rest who are identified as Mon, Khmer, Phuan and Karen. (Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office, 2009)

The situation is reversed for the three southernmost provinces of Thailand – Pattani, Yala, Naratiwat¹ – since the Malay Muslim ethnicity is the majority, constituting approximately 80 % of the population. (Thanet Aphornsuvan, 2007: 79)

¹ In this study, the terms ‘southernmost provinces’ and ‘the deep south’ will be used interchangeably and will refer to the three provinces Pattani, Yala, and Naratiwat.

The remaining groups are made up of Thai and Chinese Buddhists and a small number of Christians. (Thailand, National Statistical office, 1982 quoted in Sabur, 2005: 2) The abovestatistics mark the flexible characteristics of Thai society, showing that the composition of Thai population is by no means homogenous, or made up only of Thai Buddhists as many may recognize.

Historically, the attempt to ascribe the definition of Thai-ness came to climax when the Field Marshall Phibunsongkram launched a strong nationalist program called “Ratthaniyom” (Thanet Aphornsuvan, 2007: 36) between 1938 and 1944. Based on the dominant Thai national ideology, such nationalist policy directly affected the lives of Malay Muslims in the deep south, who are considered to be the most distinct from the Thai ethnicity, largely because they are of Malay descent, speak Malayu, and follow the religion of Islam. As their identity is not depicted as a part of Thai national identity, strong resistances were made by the Malay Muslims there in an attempt to be autonomous of and separated from Thai nation state. Since this time, there has been some relief from the tension, as later governments have employed a softer policy aimed at integrating the Muslims into a part of Thai society. However, it is evident that to date, the original structure of Thai-ness is still retained. (Saichol, n.d.: 1) Such a structure indirectly forces other groups of people to assimilate to, or otherwise become alienated from the Thai cultural construct. This has resulted in a crisis of identity which may be seen as a part of a major factor of the ongoing intensified insurgencies in the deep south to the present day.

In the midst of the violent situation there, Thailand Knowledge Park (TK Park) opened local branches in Yala province in 2006. (TK Park Yala, 2008) As one of the crisis areas, TK Park has come up with the children’s literature project for its local branches in four regions (โครงการสมุดภาพนิทานพื้นบ้าน 4 ภาค), but specifically aimed first at Yala.² The books were finally published in the early year of 2007 in the hope that they could be a medium to help reduce the conflicts and bring back a united and multicultural environment to the south. It is in this sense that the books should not be

² TK Park Yala is one of the local campuses of TK Park that is established and finished first. The book project for TK Park Yala is also the first one that is approved, published in 2007, and already distributed and promoted in many public libraries in the South and also the other regions of Thailand. The book projects for the North and the North East are approved, and published later in 2008, although their main sites in Chiangmai and Mahasarakam are still under construction.

considered as a simple narrative, but a discourse articulated with specific intention and ideology. From this perspective, it can be said that this children's literature is political in nature.

Since TK Park is one of the state agencies under supervision of The Office of the Prime Minister, it is possible that the project could serve as a political tool of the central Thai government to cultivate a certain perspective among the readers in the region. In this sense, the books are worth studying in order to find out if and to what degree their content has been manipulated by Thai national ideology or not.

1.1 Research Rationale

This research proposal aims to investigate the potentially unequal representations between Thai-ness and Malay Muslim identity in TK Park children's books published for its local library in Yala. In general, the books aim to serve as a learning object to develop reading habits of children in different ranges of age and encourage those young generations in Yala and neighboring districts to learn more about their own local history, wisdom and culture. Considering the current situation in the deep south, the selection of these children's books can also be seen as an important strategy aimed to promote and cultivate a better understanding of cultural diversity, and develop a sense of harmony among three different ethnic groups; Thai Muslims, Thai Buddhists, and Sino Thais, living together in the southernmost provinces of Thailand.

Children's literature has the potential to help form powerful didactic lessons to children about interethnic relationships. According to Dalhouse-Walker, the impact of the use of multicultural literature clearly "teaches young children about differences and similarities between people and while it will not singularly ensure a more gentle and tolerant society, it might act as a prerequisite to one." (Dalhouse-Walker, 1992 quoted in Cole and Valentine, 2000: 306) Based on fantasy and imagination on the one hand, but still reflecting realistic social conditions on the other, literature is a cultural artifact which can be seen as crucial vehicle for ideas, even as sites of ideological struggle, thus carrying particular point of views, attitudes, values, norms and ideologies reflected in its form and content. Literature, therefore, is a discourse

which can be employed by public institutions for political purposes in exercising its soft power to dominate and hegemonize people's behavior and ideas, thus maintaining the status quo of the intellectual-ethnic leadership. Banfield (1985 quoted in Rogers and Christian, 2007: 26) asserts that:

...children's trade books and textbooks must be viewed as one of the most effective tools of oppression employed by a dominant majority against powerless minorities. The effectiveness of the educational institutions in socializing students to accept racist values guarantees that there will be an ever-renewing supply of persons from which the creators, editors and publishers of materials which espouse these ideas will be drawn. This has important implications, both for the methodology and criteria employed in analyzing such materials and to counteract their damaging effects on all children.

Though the selection of these children's books can be considered as well-crafted reconciliation discourse, their storytelling about ethnic issues might possibly presuppose knowledge and beliefs of storytellers about ethnic affairs and, in turn, implement, enact, legitimate, or challenge group knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, which could contribute to the reproduction of ethnic prejudices, discrimination and indirectly condition ethnic inequality. (van Dijk, 1993: 122) In this regard, books could reproduce and perpetuate the hegemonic view of Thai-ness, maintaining unequal representation between the different cultures and identities and masking the "differences" as inferior under the dominant meaning of Thai-ness disguised as multicultural children's books.

The point of concern for this research is to examine those conveyed messages through the representation of different ethnic characters and their relationships as expressed in the stories. The research is an attempt to expose any particular stereotypes, biases or myths serving as a part of racist or hegemonic ideology. The ideology may be intentionally or unintentionally enacted in, and reproduced by the literature, which in turn might create the asymmetrical representation and relationship

between the dominant Thai culture and the Malay Muslim periphery in the form of their own local story books.

In order to analyze those discursive elements depicting the certain types of ideology that create the unequal representation of ethnic cultures and identities in these books, the following connected analytical tools are employed. This includes a general framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and socio cognitive approach (SCA). In specific, the systemic functional grammar (SFG) will be adopted under the critical perspective in order to analyze the books textually. In addition, the basic semiotic analysis and social semiotics will be employed if there are any signs and symbols representing dominant picture of Thai cultural identity in these children's books.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the message of the stories whether it is dominated by Thai cultural identity over the local Muslim.
2. To analyze texts and visuals in order to understand how media discourse depicts dominant representation of three main different ethno-religious groups in the books; Thai Buddhist, Chinese, and Malay Muslim.

1.3 Research Questions

1. Are there any discursive features employed to promote Thai-ness over the Malay Muslim identity in these local stories? And if any, what are they?
2. How are such discursive features employed to promote Thai-ness over the Malay Muslim culture and identity?
3. What are the key characteristics of the three main ethnic identities; Thai Buddhist, Chinese, Muslim, as represented in the stories?
4. How is the Malay Muslim identity constructed and represented in the books?

1.4 Definition of Key Terms

1.4.1 Islam and Malay Muslim Culture and Identity

The Islamic culture in this study will be referred to the fundamental principles of Islam, the source of Muslim culture and identity in general. Though “Malay” is the most contentious term to precisely define, the Malay cultures here will be referred to all cultural products of the predominant Malay, or *Nayu* people in the southernmost provinces of Thailand. Contrary to the central Thai culture and Thai national identity, the basis of Malay Muslim culture and identity in this study will be based on the discursive elements of *nayu* (Malay race), *baso* (Malay language) and *agama* (Islam). (Yusuf, 2007a: 4) These elements are shaped, reshaped, and negotiated by two camps of thought of the Muslims there: the traditionalists, or *khana kao*, and the modernists, or *khana mai*. In this study, the terms “local identity,” “Islamic and Malay Muslim identity,” and “Malay Muslim identity” will be used interchangeably throughout.

1.4.2 Thai-ness and Thai National Identity

The definition of Thai-ness and Thai national identity is highly debatable and has long been discursively defined. Though it might be slightly different, many scholars argue that the heart of Thai-ness is mainly constructed on the trinity pillars of nation (Thai language, Thai history, ethnic Thai), religion (Buddhism and also Brahmanism), and Chakri monarchy. To be Thai, in a general sense, is to be ethnic Thai and to be Buddhist under the legitimacy of the Chakri court. The representation of this definition of Thai-ness will be a focus in this study.

1.4.3 Standard Thai Cultural Hegemony

In this study, the term central Thai and standard Thai will be used interchangeably. These two terms refers to the dominant set of linguistic variety in Thai language. (Diller, 2002: 76) The term standard Thai introduced by Nidhi Aewsriwong is preferred since it implies a strong sense of obligation and measurement. Nidhi considers standard Thai as deeply rooted in an earlier high form of central Thai associated with class-based social division, but which has become

naturalized and legitimated over the past century by means of mass media, education and changing political attitudes. (Nidhi Aewsriwong, 1984 quoted in Diller, 2002: 76) Combined with the concept of hegemony, the standard Thai cultural hegemony will be used in a broad sense, encompassing all the cultural products of central Thai people, including Thai language, Thai history, and most importantly, the dominant definition of Thai-ness and Thai national identity—the criteria for dividing Thai from non-Thai, and standard Thai and non-standard Thai citizenship.