

# **The Barrier of Relationships: Dynamics of Social Interaction and Interethnic Political Relation of People in Na Ngam Subdistrict of Pattani under Violent Situations in the Three Southern Border Provinces**

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## **Abstract**

This research examines the relationship dynamics of coexistence and political relations through people's interactions in social spaces in violent situations from 2004 to 2021. It aims to capture people's lives in a community in the Na Ngam

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Subdistrict of Pattani, which is a *community* with a long history of settlement and coexistence amongst diverse groups of people. These people have played a part in fostering a sense of community through social spaces in everyday life, including agricultural, economic, and educational spaces. Not to mention the fact that they have constantly been facing violent situations that last for more than a decade. This research used the methods of literature review, fieldwork from 2019 to 2021, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with the Thai Buddhist Village Volunteers.

The results have revealed that this ongoing violence, which is progressing toward an intractable conflict, and the government's military operations to manage the area have transformed the identity of the Thai Buddhists into being part of the conflicts within the military and political sphere of interaction. This transformation has ultimately altered the connections between people of different religions at the community level into political relations, which in due course has gradually shattered social relations among the peoples.

**Keywords:** dynamics of social interaction, identity, conflict, politics.

## บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้เป็นการศึกษาเรื่องพลวัตความสัมพันธ์ของการอยู่ร่วมกันสู่ความสัมพันธ์ทางการเมืองผ่านการปฏิสัมพันธ์บนพื้นที่ทางสังคมภายใต้สถานการณ์ความรุนแรงในพื้นที่สามจังหวัดชายแดนใต้ นับตั้งแต่ พ.ศ. 2547-2564 โดยทำการศึกษาในพื้นที่ตำบลนางาม (นามสมมติ) ซึ่งเป็นพื้นที่ที่มีประวัติศาสตร์การตั้งถิ่นฐานและการอยู่ร่วมกันของคนที่หลากหลาย โดยมีผู้คนที่ช่วยกันสร้างความเป็น

ชุมชนผ่านพื้นที่ทางสังคมในชีวิตประจำวัน ทั้งการทำเกษตร การค้าขาย การศึกษา รวมทั้งต้องเผชิญกับความรุนแรงมานานกว่าทศวรรษ โดยใช้วิธีการศึกษาด้วยการ ทบทวนวรรณกรรม ศึกษาภาคสนามในชุมชนระหว่าง พ.ศ. 2562-2564 สังเกตการณ์ แบบมีส่วนร่วม (Participant Observation) รวมถึงการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก (In-dept Interview) ในกลุ่มไทยพุทธราษฎรอาสาสมัครรักษาหมู่บ้าน

ผลการศึกษา พบว่า จากความรุนแรงที่เกิดขึ้นอย่างต่อเนื่องและกำลัง ดำเนินไปสู่ลักษณะของความขัดแย้งที่ตี้อยา (Intractable conflict) รวมถึงวิธีการที่ ทางภาครัฐใช้ยุทธวิธีทางการทหารที่เข้ามาจัดการพื้นที่ได้ส่งผลต่อการเปลี่ยนแปลง อัตลักษณ์ของคนพุทธในพื้นที่ให้กลายเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของความขัดแย้งภายใต้อุดมการณ์ ทางทหารและการเมืองจนกระทั่งทำให้สายสัมพันธ์ในระดับชุมชนของคนต่าง ศาสนาไปสู่ความสัมพันธ์ทางการเมือง จนทำให้ความสัมพันธ์ในชุมชนระหว่างคนต่าง ศาสนาได้แตกหักออกจากกันในท้ายที่สุด

**คำสำคัญ:** พลวัตความสัมพันธ์ อัตลักษณ์ ความขัดแย้ง การเมือง

## Introduction

Amid the violence in Thailand's three southern border provinces that last for more than a decade, the incident of gunmen raiding a military arms depot in 2004 marked the beginning of this violence. This raid has changed the definition of the "three southern border provinces" from a geographical landscape to the region of violence due to the state's policy to enforce special laws to control these areas and the actions of the dissenters against the state.

In this phenomenon, there has been an attempt to understand the background and the situations of these areas in various dimensions. Satha-Anand (1990) stated in his book, which can be literally translated as *Challenging Dilemma:*

*Violence and Non-violent Actions*, that there are many definitions of violence, and more than 2,400 books and articles have been written about it. There have been academic efforts to make broad explanations of the reasons behind violent actions in this region. The two reasons can be explained through the ideological frameworks of national security and nationalism. These ideologies relate to each other through the history of Siam and Patani (Sutthasat, 1976).

In order to examine the underlying roots of conflicts in the three southern border provinces, there have been studies about the conflicts at the levels of social groups and political relations through communities. The studies of ethnic identities garnered more attention since they portrayed people's lives in areas full of conflicts and negotiations. These studies also gave different perspectives on understanding identities, especially among the Malay Muslims and people of diverse cultures, aiming at revealing the complex dimensions of violent situations.

For instance, a study by Sirisakdamkeong (2003) revealed that the Malay Muslims and the Chinese living in the market area of Yala Province adapted themselves to reduce conflicts caused by their coexistence in the same area. The Malay Muslims adjusted their identity by identifying themselves as Malay Muslims of Chinese descent, which could be considered as a negotiation in the economic space, or as Malay people who had received a good education. Aim-Aur-Yut (2008) studied social interactions among the Malay-Muslims in the context of Islamization and the dominant power of the Thai state through experiences and memories of the Malay Muslims. The study aimed to reveal the complexity of the Malay Muslim identity under the situations of violence and the Thai state's manipulation in the area where local people managed to live in coexistence with people of different religions.

A good example of this can be seen in the changes in social spaces, including people's behaviors under religious rules, the migration of the Chinese and the Buddhists in search of safety.

Both studies revealed that people used their identity to deal and negotiate with the government sector and the people of different religions in daily social spaces, especially in economic and community areas. However, the two studies only focused on the Muslims who had interactions with other groups. This article aims at introducing and examining people of different groups who were faced with similar situations of violence by studying the Na Ngam Subdistrict. It is a community with a large Buddhist population and a long history of coexistence among people of diverse cultures who lived amid many waves of violence. In addition, the community has been faced with various forms of violence that broke out and are still going on in the three southern border provinces. As a result of this long-lasting violence, the Na Ngam Subdistrict is regarded as a military control area where there are various levels of military operations. It is hoped that this article will pave the way for the study of the Thai Buddhists' lives in the three southern border provinces, which will ultimately expand important perspectives in understanding military operations and what happened in the southern border provinces through violent actions in this area.

## **Objectives**

To study the dynamics of social relations which lead to political relations through interactions in social spaces in Na Ngam Subdistrict in the context of violent situations in the three southern border provinces.

## Research Methodology

This research is an anthropological study. The Na Ngam Subdistrict has been chosen as the field site since it has a long history of coexistence among people of different religions and long-lasting violence since 2004. Geographically, Na Ngam Subdistrict is located on a plain close to the foothills and has mountain ridges that serve as natural boundaries. These boundaries were considered an important landmark during the time when the area was governed under provincial administration and was under the governorship of Yaring Province. Considering its location that was connected to Saiburi Province at that time, this area served as a trading border city between two major provinces in the past. Thus, this area is full of history and stories regarding the coexistence of multicultural groups, such as the Chinese, the Muslims, and the Thais. An instance of this is the story about the settlement of the Thai Buddhists in this subdistrict. It is said that they came with the Ayutthaya troops to fight a war. It happened that a war elephant escaped the army, so some soldiers volunteered to search for it. Finally, some of them managed to settle down along the route. As a result, these soldiers have been regarded as the ancestors of the Thai Buddhists living in this subdistrict.

At present, Na Ngam Subdistrict is divided into six villages. The majority of its population are Buddhists. There are only two villages that have Muslim households. In the Buddhist community, people communicate in the local vernacular called Phasa Ban, while Muslims communicate in Malay which is their primary language. In the past, all people living in the subdistrict were closely bound together in production and economic areas.

Moreover, rituals functioned as a social tie in which all people in the community were linked as neighbors.

There are two levels of data collection methods. The first level is a review of relevant documents on the issue of the history of interactions between people of different religions in social spaces in the three southern border provinces. It is also an ethnographic study in which formal and informal in-depth interviews were conducted. In addition, the method of participant observation was adopted during the fieldwork from 2019 to 2021.

Key informants selected for this research were the Thai Buddhists living in the community continuously for more than 20 years with experiences in interacting with people of different religions as well as the ability to tell stories about their way of life before the unrest in 2004 and to express their perception of the violent situations in the community. Thus, six key informants were selected among those who worked as farmers, merchants in the Ka Pho market, and public-school teachers, all of whom were Thai Village Volunteers. In addition, the other two key informants were religious leaders who contributed to collecting information from Muslims who could communicate in Thai so that social interactions in various social spaces could be observed. The data collected were analyzed under the concept of an intractable conflict that affected the identity and social interactions to visualize the dynamics of relationships among people in the area. The researcher also reviewed the data through the method of literature review and adopted the method of Triangulation to cross-check the data gained from documents and interviews with various parties as well as to make the data reliable and can be used to confirm the research conclusion. It is

found that when key informants were asked to provide information related to the violent situations in the area, they tended to avoid mentioning those situations when they were in a formal interview. On the other hand, they were more willing to give information if no personal and specific information was required from them. In the research process, the researcher provided the interviewees with the study framework, and they could end the interviews whenever they wished. Therefore, in this research, the fictitious names of the key informants have been used to ensure their safety and prevent any possible impact on the persons and places.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **1. Social Spaces: Coexistence of People of Different Ethnicities**

#### **1.1 Social Spaces in Agricultural Society: Daily Life that Connects People of Different Religions**

Thanks to the subdistrict's flat land and foothills that are important water sources, most locals grow rice or fruits for a living. Rice is the most popular crop in the area. Some farmers grow glutinous rice to make the Tupat or local rice dumplings for local rituals and ceremonies. With a large flat area, a vast area of rice fields extends to the feet of the mountains. So, it is hard to tell precisely who owns what pieces of land by looking superficially. The rice fields occupy most of the area of Moo (Village Number) 6, where the Muslims have densely built their houses. Each family grows rice in small paddies next to each other and grows sugar palms on the rice paddy dykes. On the hills, there are rubber, durian, and coconut plantations covering

the foothills to almost the entire hill area of Moo 4, stretching to the mountain ridges adjacent to Saiburi District.

Rice farming and crop cultivation rely greatly on mutual assistance. People in the neighborhood will always arrange appointments to go uphill and work in the plantations or rice fields together. And mostly, people who live near each other will have their fields and plantations next to each other. These fields and plantations have been divided into smaller plots, each of which is owned by each family, alternating between the plots of their relatives and village neighbors. Each plot is not very large. The way their ancestor divided land has led to mutual assistance among community members. For example, rice farmers have to help each other transplant in the paddy fields or harvest rice by using 'Kae,' a small harvest blade used to cut the ears of rice. Rubber farmers need labor from their neighbors to harvest rubber, and fruit farmers need to borrow monkeys from others to pick up the fruits, especially coconuts. One person may own 10-20 rai of rice fields or plantations. If their fields or plantations are not connected on the same piece of land, these fields will be exchanged with those of their neighbors. This means that the vast area of the community rice fields consists of many smaller plots of fields or plantations belonging to both Thai Buddhists and Muslim neighbors.

In addition, local people domesticate animals for food sources, work purposes, and ales. In every household, cows were raised for plowing. Therefore, apart from helping each other in rice farming, the locals also help each other take care of the livestock. In addition to watching over the rice fields, another daily activity is keeping an eye on the cows while taking them out to graze in various areas around the community and nearby

subdistricts. Many people in the community stated that this daily activity had brought them new acquaintances, who ended up becoming their friends. The friendship started with the request to rest under the owner's house or a visit to have casual conversations while watching cows, and they ended up becoming close and trustworthy friends to trade livestock with each other. In addition, monkeys are also domesticated to collect coconuts on the plantation. It takes time and specialized skills to tame the monkeys, so only a few families can do that, and most of them are Muslims. They are often asked to assist in harvesting the coconuts and get paid with coconuts, rice, labor, or money, whichever is agreed upon.

It is worth noting that almost every house in the community has a small shack in front of the house. An interviewee stated that the evening time was considered a break time in the past so that people would sit at the shack in front of their home. These shacks are also used for welcoming neighbors who would stop by to eat, drink tea, and spend time chattering every day.

"When I was young, I saw people who were older than me. They were even closer to each other. They always shared what they cooked. Our family never liked to eat pork. In the case of older people, they ate similar food. They ate fish, chicken, and beef. Some Buddhists who lived next to the Muslims didn't even eat pork. It was normal for them to eat like the Muslims. When I was young, my Muslim friends went fishing and brought those fish to eat at my home. It was an ordinary thing to do, just without pork. My parents cooked for us to eat like this. There was no such strict thing as having to change the plates. Most people would bring their plates from home to get the shared

food. The house of the Buddhists and the Muslims were scattered throughout the community, and they were never afraid of each other. In Moo 6, three Buddhist households originally lived there from the beginning and they still live there now. When the Buddhists wanted to do anything, the Muslims would always come to help." Mr.Pong (Personal communication, March 10, 2019)

However, in terms of mutual assistance or even the interactions among neighbors with different beliefs, it is found that the locals adapted themselves to each other in their daily living by means of common community resource management. Such learning and understanding of different cultures led to the way of life in which people harmoniously coexisted.

It is similar even in terms of social space belonging to a 'gray area' like alcohol drinking, which is considered sinful by all religions. In this community, the locals would gather to drink Tuak<sup>2</sup>, which is a kind of palm wine. The locals in each village would arrange a drinking party in the evening. In the past, the Tuak party was considered an ordinary activity for people in the community, but it is a special social space nowadays. Only people deemed close friends of the inviter would be invited to the Tuak party. And it is 'known' among the members of each Tuak party about the party's schedule in which they would come to drink and eat together.

The Tuak party in researcher's neighborhood was held every Friday, beginning at noon and ending in the evening before sunset. Most of the people attending the party were Buddhist men. It took me about two months since the start of my

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<sup>2</sup> Tuak, a Malay word meaning a kind of palm wine, an alcoholic beverage produced from the fermentation of sap of palm trees

fieldwork to get invited to join the party by being told that "[t]his Friday, don't buy food to eat." and that I should visit the house of a middle-aged woman near my rented house. When I arrived there, I found that apart from the Tuak, people would bring meat, such as beef and wild pork, vegetables, and rice to share and cook for the party. Thus, it was a fun and relaxing space while also being a space for exchanging news among people within and outside the community. Sometimes there were Muslims joining the party. But most of them had been friends of the community members for a long time. Since drunkenness is known to be a 'gray' activity and considered sinful for the Muslims, the matter of who should be invited to join the party is therefore relatively important and sensitive.

It is found that social interactions in the agricultural society have created a space in which people of different religions are connected in many ways. This includes the spaces for occupation, such as farming and domesticating animals, which require a long period of time to build relationships. In addition, agriculture and livestock farming require the allocation of community areas to accommodate production that needs both environmental and labor management to ensure a management system in the community. Such management would enable all households to make cultivation and harvest plans. More importantly, some relationships are built upon particular interactions based on expertise. For example, borrowing monkeys to collect coconuts on the plantation is an opportunity for people of different religions to visit each other.

The abovementioned information has revealed that the characteristics that contribute to being a neighborhood are related to the spatial dimension, which means a geographical

location, such as the residential area and agricultural area. The way these spaces or areas are managed intimately is an opportunity to create interactions that lead to social intimacy and the sense of belonging to the group and the community, ultimately resulting in social connections that comprise all activities that occur in the community. These connections also reflect the relationships of people in the community (Kraus, 2000), which can be seen in the stories about those relationships that are related to the use of certain spaces, such as the communities of rice farmers, plantation farmers, livestock farmers, and Tuak party members.

The intimacy in terms of space and neighbors' relationships that have fostered the sense of community plays is of importance. Not only does it lead to the development of solid relationships and daily mutual assistance, but it also opens up a possibility for different religions and ways of life to be understood and explained in a different way for peaceful coexistence in the community.

## 1.2 Social Spaces in Commercial Society: From the Economy of the Border City to the Economy of Kapo Market

Kapo Market is a bustling place due to its location flanking the main road. The market is therefore considered a transportation center from the district to downtown Pattani and Narathiwat. One side of the market is adjacent to Na Ngam Subdistrict, and the other side is adjacent to Khao District, in which the majority of its population is Muslims. But people still manage to travel across districts to trade and exchange goods.

Mr. Som (Personal communication, February 3, 2020), aged 81, told about the Kapo market in his memories.

"This market was big. Many Chinese people owned the businesses in the market. People in this neighborhood used to call this shop 'Ran Chin Seua Klam,' translated as the 'Chinese who wears a vest,' which reflects the dressing style of the Chinese in those days. The name of the shop owner is unknown until now. The Chinese could speak Malay and actively ran a variety of trading businesses, including buying rubber, coconuts, and rice, opening a pharmacy, a gold shop, and a grocery store. The Buddhists and the Muslims worked as their employees and communicated with each other in ungrammatical Malay and Panare (the local vernacular spoken by people in the subdistrict). In addition, young Buddhist men made a living by riding a rickshaw to take passengers to the market. I rode a rickshaw when I was 15 years old. This allowed me to enter Muslim villages and get to know all people in the subdistrict."

In addition, an Imam (Personal communication, March 15, 2019) described the arrival of the Chinese who later became the owners of the market area.

"The Sino<sup>3</sup> have been here for quite a long time. They came to live in local communities first and later began to buy more lands from the Nayu<sup>4</sup>. At that time, the Si-a<sup>5</sup> raised pigs in upstream areas, so the water flowed down into the fields of the Nayu. The Nayu at that time lived a comfortable life. Because they did not want to use the water contaminated by pig farming, they decided to stop farming in that area. Their fields were abandoned for a long time until the Sino purchased them from the Nayu. Then, the main road was built on those fields and that

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<sup>3</sup> Sino is a pronoun that the Malay Muslims use to refer to the local Chinese

<sup>4</sup> Nayu is a pronoun people use to refer to the Malay Muslims

<sup>5</sup> Si-a, derived from Siam, is a pronoun that the Malay Muslims use to refer to the Thai Buddhists

area become the market now. So it is not surprising that most of the land in the market area today is owned by Chinese people."

In the market, some Chinese people own businesses and almost all of the rental rowhouses while the Buddhists and the Muslims are either their employees or tenants. Mr. Aminoh (Personal communication June 7, 2019) is a Muslim who makes a living by selling sports equipment. He said that there were many Buddhist households in the market when he was young. Most Buddhists living in this neighborhood understood Malay even though they could not speak the language.

"When we talked about them or teased them, most of them understood although they couldn't speak Malay. Only some of them could. My father would always sell coconuts to the Chinese and get other goods as in exchange from time to time. It's like you make a deposit in the bank, but you withdraw goods with no interest instead of money." In the same way, the Imam of the mosque said that in the past, dogs could be seen here and there, and there were many Si-a and Sino people. The house I am renting belongs to a Buddhist police officer, but he moved to Hat Yai after 2004."

There is a wide variety of goods at the market, originally from downtown Pattani and Saiburi. People come to shop in this market. It has everything you need, including pork butcher shops. From the interviews with the Buddhists in many areas, many pork butcher shops were in the market before the incident in 2004. But the pork had to be put in a black plastic bag. If it was put in a transparent plastic bag, it would be wrapped in another layer of paper. The locals did this out of respect for the Muslims to prevent them from accidentally touching the pork.

These descriptions of Kapo Market reflect that the market area is not the space where people exchange goods and money only, but also their cultures. An instance of this is the use of black plastic bags when buying pork out of respect for the Muslims, the purchase of land from Muslims whose property was close to pig farming areas, or the use of Malay as the main language of communication, which even the Chinese and the Buddhists could communicate in their daily life at least by listening. The commercial area is also an important space for social interactions and cultural learning, in accordance with the explanation of Sirisakdamkeong (2003) that gave a picture of the Sai Klang market in downtown Yala, a space of interactions between the Chinese and the Malay Muslims that the commercial area has been a space for social interactions among different groups of people since the old days. It served as a space where people bought and sold goods and made negotiations although they came from different walks of life and had different roles, whether buyers, sellers, service providers, or service recipients. This context contributed to constant and consistent interdependence and interactions, especially economic relations without any connection to politics, since merchants who came from other places, such as Chinese people, had to learn the languages and beliefs of their customers for convenience and commercial benefits. Therefore, the relationship under the economic system may be the relationship in which people are unequal, and bargaining is always necessary. It is also found that people's adaptability to coexist with people of other cultures is another form of relationship that could be seen in the area.

### 1.3 Social Spaces in Education: Interactions in the Areas in Representation of the State

In addition to being a large agricultural and commercial area of Panare District, Na Ngam Subdistrict has also been an important subdistrict of Pattani Province in terms of educational development. The establishment of schools spread to significant districts, including Na Ngam, which was an important border district. According to a document of the donation to establish a school at Wat Na Ngam in Pattani Province in 1909, the Pattani Provincial Governor requested the establishment of a school that taught in Thai at the pavilion of Wat Na Ngam Temple. A Buddhist monk known as Phra Daeng was invited to teach students following the curriculum of the Department of Education at that time. Ten monks were invited to pray the Buddha's mantra to celebrate the school's opening. Phrakhru Phinitsonnaphara presided over the ceremony. Important government officers also attended the event, including Mr. Thong, soon-to-be Provincial Education Officer and Luang Nomajkitphiboon, Permanent Secretary of Yaring Province. In this event, donations were offered from both the government and the people in the community. The names listed in the donation document included the names of the Chinese, the Thai Buddhists, and the Muslims, such as Mr. Cheng, Awang, Mr. Lee, Mae, Kimli, Chin Choo, Chin Chai, Chin Thong, Thong, Eiad, Mr. Dam, etc. (Notification No. Hor Jor Chor. Sor Thor. 51.9/5 Subject: Donation for the establishment of a school at Wat Kuan Nok of Monthon Pattani (1 October - 16 December B.E. 2452/ C.E. 1909))

According to the document recording the establishment and management of the school, although the school is the space belonging to the government, its establishment indicates that at one time, the Thai state used to rule the three provinces with the ideology of development. This ideology has opened up an

opportunity for the locals to adapt to each other due to the Buddhists' need to coexist with the Malay Muslims, who were the majority of the population in the region. The fact that people in the community welcomed the development initiated by the Thai state can be seen from the list of racially diverse donors. Therefore, the school has been a space with a dual status, one being a space for enhancing people's quality of life and the other being the space of the Thai state's administrative power that came into the Malay land.

Miss Chinda (Personal communication, June 20, 2019), aged 67, told about how people studied in those days.

“Some of the elderly here used to attend the same school with Thai Buddhists. At that time this temple school taught up to 4th grade. We learned the Thai language and met Thai Buddhist friends at school. Children often taught Malay to each other, so people in that era could communicate with each other. The Buddhists could listen to and understand Malay. Sometimes they even replied in Malay and sometimes replied in Thai. But when in the class, only Thai was allowed.

At that time, students had to bring food from home to eat at school. The kids always shared what they had, and the Buddhist students wouldn't eat pork at school. Mostly they ate eggs or fish. Outside of school, I would go out to play with other kids. We picked up guavas or different kinds of fruits. I also played at the houses of both Muslim and Buddhist friends, where we could go in and out comfortably. I could understand some Malay but was not fluent. Fortunately, I had (a) friend(s) who taught me one Malay word a day. Most of my Muslim friends who furthered their studies in secondary school came from a civil servant's family. Their parents were teachers, soldiers, or

police. Most of my friends quit school to work in the fields after finishing grade 7.

The memories of a retired public-school teacher (Personal communication, February 5, 2020), aged 79, reflect the way of life of a retired public-school teacher who is a native of Na Ngam Subdistrict.

“At that time, I was a teacher at a secondary school that was known as a place full of dangerous people because it was in a Muslim community like it is today. No one dared to come, but I was never afraid. I was a teacher, so I tried to think that all people I taught were my students. I rode the bicycle wherever I went. It was not until later that I had a motorcycle. People would greet or Wai me as I passed by. All the school teachers were the Thai Buddhists. In school, everything was taught in Thai to enable the students to speak Thai. Malay was forbidden in classes, but students might talk to their friends in Malay. Sometimes, the very strict teachers would punish students who spoke Malay by hitting them or asking them to pay a small fine or do school work. At that time, I just thought that if we taught them well, they would speak Thai clearly and fluently so they could contact government offices by themselves and further their studies. The student’s parents also entrusted their children’s ability to speak Thai to the teachers.

I could speak Malay from the beginning, while other people in the community could understand some Malay if unable to speak it. Once they understood us, we would respond in our language. But in trading here, we had to help Thai people. Most Chinese in the market could speak Malay. Even if they had never been in school, they could sell goods or do business. At that time,

Muslims rarely let their children come to school. They said that school was not necessary.”

In terms of social interactions in the educational space, although the school area belonged to the Thai government, nobody expressed the frozen Thai identity at school. Students could talk amongst themselves in Malay to foster relationships within the school. In addition, in terms of attitude towards the use of the Thai language, nobody viewed it as a means of expressing Thai nationalism nor an act of assimilating. But the learning of the Thai language was solely for the purpose of communication with the government authorities. This is because, in everyday life, people still had to use the Malay language for the most part.

The fieldwork data revealed that the relationships among people in Na Ngam Subdistrict are diverse due to their different social spaces in the community, including residential and production areas. The management of the area where people lived closely helped foster a relationship in which people were closely interdependent. In an economic space, there was a pattern of relationships in which people learned about different cultures and used what they learned to make negotiations for profits. Even the relationships among people in the community could cut across the state’s space, such as the educational space. This is consistent with the description of Kraus (2000), who has defined the meaning of neighborhood. In addition to physical space, there must also be interaction at another axis, a temporal relation that means a long history of coexistence. This type of relationship cannot be changed overnight or by just a few events.

The sense of community is reflected through the role of neighborhood life (Kraus, 2000). Its elements include physical

surroundings, whether in occupation or education, and individual development, such as language learning, behaviors, or the decisions to behave in a way that would affect the trust of neighbors. Not to mention the social group identity, which includes the act of referring to themselves as one of the Na Ngam people, the use of Malay in combination with the Panare language, interracial communications, carefree commutes within the community, and the participation in local rituals, such as the La Sang. These elements reflect the sense of community that still existed. The meaning of the Na Ngam community was much more than what had been defined by geographic administrative boundaries. The stories about people's way of life in these social spaces reveal how people of different races and ethnicities coexisted before the violence in 2004, which has changed the relationships among Na Ngam people.

## 2. The Barriers of Relationship: The Transformation of Community Relations to Political Relations of the Thai State

### 2.1 Relationships under the ideology of National Security of the Thai State and Muslim citizens

Social relations at the community level were under the state policies on development and military in different periods. The three southern border provinces have been areas in dispute with the Thai state in terms of public administration at various levels. At a macro level, there has been an attempt to drive the ideology of separatism and the discrimination against local people in favor of government authorities is still going on.

The narratives at the community level are mostly found to be about the insurgents or criminals. There have also been rumors about the Muslims who live in a neighboring subdistrict adjacent to Na Ngam separated by a two-lane road. The locals

often asked me if I had ever heard of a group of people whose last name was derived from the name of that subdistrict. It is a story that the locals who shared the same experience of the year 1967 always raised to compare it with today's violence.

Mr.Mai (Personal communication, February 11, 2020), aged 81, said that:

"People in Na Ngam lived with the insurgents even before the raid in 2004. In the past 30-40 years, people in this neighborhood were acquainted with the criminals like Ji Ma-ae Seng from Tha Nam Subdistrict and Ma E-so from Mayo District. We all knew that they were the kidnappers holding people for ransom on the mountain. They would write what they wanted on paper and leave the ransom note to whom they targeted, mostly those well-off Chinese living downtown. Nothing would happen if the ransoms were paid. Those who refused to pay would be taken and confined in the mountain. But no one died because of that. Violence was only used against government officials. There would be deaths only when they and police officers fired bullets to kill each other.

The violence in those narratives about violent actions can be seen in the form of threatening or bullying, which caused nonserious trouble to the victim's daily life. Deaths were only caused by the clashes with the police and the District Chief, who were the administrative authorities regarded as their direct adversaries This is the kind of violence that Stewart (2008) considered a form of violent conflict that clearly reflects the inequalities in the political context in which the state is targeted. The state is regarded as the opponent who has a direct conflict with influential Muslims without interference in community relations or social groups.

The narratives of the violence about people who were not affiliated with the Administrative or even the teachers who represented the state's ideology do not end in fatal violence. The predictable level of violence and the knowledge about who were their targets make the narratives about these insurgents mixed with either laughter or respect for their protectors who have exercised their power in the area. This is why those family names can still exist in the community where economic resources have been managed systematically and fairly. People in the community all know that the threats to take resources of the rich are for helping the poor and the political separatists who are not yet economically strong and rely primarily on assistance from the locals. However, the relationship under violence in this economic structure does not affect the way of life and daily living of the community and does not reflect horizontal inequalities in people's relationships.

A study of the Committee on Strategic Nonviolence of the National Security Council, which later transformed into the Strategic Nonviolence Working Group (2018), has revealed that in addition to the violence fueled by bullying and bias from some people in the government sector, disrespect for diverse cultures, history, and beliefs also plays an important role.

From the above information, the conflicts that prevailed before 2004 could be divided into two levels. The first level is the relationships under the Thai state's ideology of national security and the Muslim citizens' ideology of separatism. At another level is the conflicts between Thai government officials and Muslim citizens, which is the level of operations in the area due to cultural differences. Consequently, a conflict is a set of relationships, according to Bodtker and Jameson (2001), that

operate on both the individual and social levels. It also serves as a political tool that has an impact on both vertical and horizontal relationships.

Although these conflicts arise at different levels, all the explanations have led to the national security ideology, making the conflicts tend to be protracted and hard to negotiate and reach a settlement although there was previously demand for a settlement at the national level. The existence of this kind of conflict is one of the starting points for the development of the intractable conflict as defined by Coleman (2011). This conflict has been perceived as non-negotiable, and thus, it is an operation on a daily level. It has affected people's perception and self-identity through the self-recognition of their positions or the places they belong by means of the process of othering that divides "Us" from "Them." And this is also part of the conflict. Although it may take place on the individual level, this intractable conflict can intensify the degree of otherness and cause endless conflicts until they become a shared experience and memory of society as well as a characteristic of the political relations between the Malay Muslims and the Thai state.

## 2.2 Military Power and Changing Violent Landscape within the Buddhist Community

Due to the unrest caused by ongoing violence throughout the three southern border provinces and hidden conflicts at various levels, people have also been faced with confusion over the unrest and the practices of government authorities as well as different forms of political relations that dominate and intensely govern the Buddhist communities. This aims to eliminate violence through military measures and operations as a means of state response to the violence caused

by the insurgent movement both in the form of sieges and clashes with higher intensity and greater frequency.

The military officers are considered newcomers who came to interact with the locals in the community during the same period with the new political and administrative restructuring in 2004. Amid the outbreak of violence throughout the three southern border provinces, an emergency decree was announced, allowing the Thai state to exercise its powers and limit the rights of local people. The violence caused a stir to the Thai state and the perception of Thai people through violent actions in the area. However, local people still believed that the adversaries in this conflict were the Thai state and the Malay Muslims, who have been engaged in the conflict for a century.

"At that time, we weren't scared at all. We knew there was violence, but it was an issue between the Muslims and the soldiers. After the Krue Se incident, we still didn't feel scared. We never thought that the violence would be spreading like it is today. But it didn't stop. More incidents took place. I had never thought it would happen to our community. We had heard the news about bombings elsewhere, but most of the injured or killed were soldiers. One day the soldiers came to be stationed at the temple. The first group was the green soldiers from the northeastern region. They came to talk to the abbot and the village headman to ask for permission to set up a camp here because this place was a Thai Buddhist community. The abbot of Wat Nai refused them because most soldiers would drink alcohol in the camp. So, they ended up in Wat Nok. At that time, I made a lot of money from selling. In the evening, soldiers would come to buy spicy salads at my shop. They also bought food and liquor. We made a lot of money then." Mrs.Tai (Personal communication, February 16, 2020)

This interview reflects the atmosphere in the early days of the arrival of the military and the role of local people who still had jobs and had not been consolidated with military power.

Until the military began to play an important role in creating and disseminating news and information to the district office, which was the administrative authorities. They would have weekly meetings during serious situations. At the district level, meetings would be held to communicate with the subdistrict headmen, village headmen, and all government offices. This news-seeking process was one of the military operations and military warnings were the most important ones at the government level.

From the interviews with public-school teachers who were sent out to teach in schools throughout Pattani Province, it is found that the teachers would receive this kind of news from the school principals who had previously attended meetings with the district office. Often, the news was spread among the Thai Buddhist teachers themselves. It was not until the incident at Wat Phrom Prasit<sup>6</sup> in 2005 that the violence began to shift its

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<sup>6</sup> This is the first incident marked as important in the feelings of Buddhists. An old monk and the temple boys were murdered and burned on the night of October 16, 2005. Three people in total were killed in this incident. Phra Kaew Kosaro, aged 78, was beaten with a stick and slashed with a big knife, and his body was burned. Mr. Hannarong Kamong, aged 17, and Mr. Sathaporn Suwannarat, aged 15, who were temple boys, were shot by firearm and slashed by a big knife to death. Then their bodies were taken to the Kuti (a monk's house) before the criminal(s) used oil as fuel to set fire and destroy the Kuti. The criminal(s) also used a stick, a stone, a knife, and a firearm to destroy the objects inside the Buddhist sanctuary, making (an) old giant

target to the Buddhists and started to cause paranoia. When the situation improved, the Buddhist monks started to ask for alms again while the Buddhists started to suspect and know the culprits' identity. Rumors went around among the locals about whose sons were the "allies," but no one dared to report to the authorities. Whether the Buddhists or the Muslims, everyone decided to keep silent because they needed to survive. Although no one said anything, everyone in the community always kept their eye on every incident that happened during inspections. Whenever a violent incident occurred, they had no idea who did it or what really happened, but they witnessed it when authorities came to inspect houses and arrest people. Some of them were released and some never returned. However, the protection measures of the military might not be enough to provide a sense of security. This violent situation resulted in some Buddhist monks and community members moving out of the community. At the same time, security measures have caused the military area to overlap with religious and communal areas.

By considering the phenomena that occurred, the fieldwork has revealed consistent data that the 2004-2006 period was a time of changes in the relationships of the locals. The first one is the change in the relationship pattern between the civil work sector, such as the police, the prosecutors, as well as the judicial process, and local people. In fact, this sector was reduced its role, while the role of the military's authority was increased with special laws. As a result, the relationship between the military and people in the community is a kind of relationship that is linked to security and safety. It has played a

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statue(s) in front of the sanctuary door and the statue of Phra Phrom enshrined in the sanctuary being damaged.

vital role in leading to an intractable conflict by changing the pattern of the conflict response process (Coleman, 2012). Secondly is the state of the intractable conflict that has led to habituation, affecting people at the psychological level, and changing the relationships between different social groups. In Na Ngam Subdistrict, it has been found that there were some changes in social interactions among the Buddhists in the social space. Examples of this can be seen in the transformation of the temple area into a military camp, the announcement of access control measures, as well as the control of the community area utilization in daily life. It is this phenomenon of isolation from social spaces that Kraus (2000) considered as a process of transformation from being neighbors to having a political relationship through social isolation, whether the isolation from political, geographical, or economic spaces. This ultimately led to a change in people's relationships within the community in terms of a new perception and understanding of the conflict among the Buddhists. In fact, the conflict in their perception has been changed from being the relationship between the Thai state and the Malay Muslims who followed the ideology of separatism to the polarization of the Buddhists and the Muslims in abnormal situations. Moreover, new patterns of social interactions in the area of daily violence could also be found.

### 2.3 Thai Buddhists' Transformation to a Political Identity

During the time of continuous violence, various projects have been carried out at the community level, such as the Village Security Team Network (VST) and the Volunteer Defense Corps (VDC). An important project that went into every Buddhist community was the Village Civil Volunteer Project, initiated by deploying a military structure. Those who wanted to

become a Village Civil Volunteer needed to receive training every year. The Village Civil Volunteer welfare fund was also established. These volunteers had to undergo pieces of training on firearm use, village guarding and inspecting, and suspect monitoring, all of which were trained by the military. When they were in the community, it was necessary to have their eyes and ears open to look after things for the military. They all would have a red walkie-talkie radio using a specific frequency range to send the news to the rangers.

Therefore, the Village Civil Volunteer Project aimed not only to improve the quality of life and safety of the local Buddhists but also to transform the locals' Buddhist identity to the Thai state identity. At the same time, the Buddhist citizens have been transferred the status of being adversaries of the Muslims, thus transforming relationships within the area into a political dichotomy in such a way that the Buddhists have become a main force of the Thai state. On the other hand, it was impossible to avoid the violent actions against the Buddhists in the area. Until 2007, the operations of the separatists and that of the Thai state had led to the clashes that frequently occurred in the community area.

Mr.Mai (Personal communication, February 11, 2020) said that:

"That year, there was a man called Uncle Ruam, who had a crippled leg. He went to his coconut plantation as usual. Uncle Ruam could speak Malay, and his coconut plantation was next to that of the Muslims, so they always helped each other. But in the end, Uncle Ruam was killed, with his throat being cut off with an ax. The killer(s) took his head. We had no idea whom we were protecting ourselves from. We thought that probably in

one day, it could be us who was the victim. Uncle Ruam never harmed anyone. He was disabled and could even speak their language."

This was the incident that many people referred to as the violence that made them feel that the fields and plantations were no longer a safe place.

This is the reason why the Buddhist farmers chose to work in the fields and plantations adjacent to the Buddhist neighbors. The plots next to those belonging to the Muslims were abandoned. In addition, they adjusted the time to cut the rubber to be the time before dawn breaks and to transplant rice seedlings late in the morning. Before that, they would sometimes transplant rice early in the evening as people in the past did. Moreover, the Buddhists also sold their fields and plantations in areas where violence had occurred. Some were willing to sell them to the Muslims at the break-even prices, especially the rice fields in Village No. 1 and Village No. 6, which were located in Muslim communities. More Buddhist people announced to sell their houses and land that were located in Muslim communities. Therefore, the remaining Buddhist farming lands were enough only for family consumption, not for making income as in the past.

In 2007, the incidents of bombings and shootings in the market area drove Chinese vendors to leave. Later, the Buddhists went to do business there, but they often encountered similar events, namely the burning of a shophouse rented for selling goods and the threats, so they decided to leave the market as well. Due to the ongoing violence, the Ka Pho market is filled almost entirely with Muslims. This transformation of the use of space resulted in most Buddhists adjusting their way of life, such as avoiding going to the Kapo market or Muslim villages. This

has even affected the religious space in which the light-waving rite is held during the day instead of at night.

The ongoing violence has created a gap in the relationship between people in Na Ngam Subdistrict. The incidents often occurred on main roads and the areas connected to the Muslim communities. But during the investigations, it happened that no Muslims came to testify to the police. These are the things that affect the feelings of people. However, many stories have revealed that some Buddhists could survive violent incidents thanks to the warnings of their Muslim friends. The dilemma of the situation resulted in a relationship in which people were not certain whether their neighbors could be trusted entirely amid these violent situations. While the relationship between Buddhist and Muslim neighbors had changed, the Buddhist neighbors became a small military unit, causing suspicions towards each other. The intimacy and sociality between these two groups of people who followed different religions became something unusual and needed to be kept an eye on.

What happened in the community is people reduced or refrained from physical contact or separate their areas of occupation, education, and self-development at an individual level through the creation of boundaries in communication. But in order to maintain a relationship, they would send things to participate in important rituals but did not dare to visit each other and spend time together. All of these are what they have learned and developed themselves in a new way to live in the midst of these violent situations.

The transformation from the Thai Buddhist identity into the political identity led to polarization, which intensified

the conflict. This is connected with the expansion of conflicting issues, leading to more confrontation between the two sides. This is what contributed to the formation of the conflict in the first place. All of these led to a new perception and belief that came with the preparation for collisions or violent actions from the opposite side. As a result, the relationship between the two groups was broken off. People avoided face-to-face interactions and all kinds of communication, such as avoiding giving information or mentioning the other side in a negative way (Mitchell, 2005). And it was this situation that led to the relationship dynamics in which some Buddhist groups chose to cut off ties with their Muslim neighbors and opted for a new identity, such as by becoming a village volunteer.

In the situation of violence that went hand in hand with the victim's loss, Armed (2014) argues that in this conflict and violence, the political conflict was shrunk and embodied into their identity, resulting in the frozen identity of being an adversary. What remains is the political adversaries through the limitation in terms of the use of space in the Buddhists' daily lives. This demonstrates that they had already embraced the identity of the Thai state as a political adversary in the context of political conflicts and embodied such identity into themselves.

Therefore, these changes in the way of life led to changes in the identity of the Buddhists in the three southern provinces that they became a 'Thai Buddhist,' with a new meaning and the status of being a political adversary who served in the militia group in the area of the Thai military.

All of these situations have led to a change in the sense of community, both in the spatial dimension and daily

interactions, in which people have shifted their role from being a neighbor to being a 'non' neighbor. In other words, the community identity that people once shared has changed because of the phrase 'Buddhist community.' It is a relationship dynamic that is like a barrier in the relationship among the people of Na Ngam Subdistrict that continues to break apart in the midst of violence.

Probably, there are many situations in which the stories of coexistence among different groups of people become a mere account of the 'lives in the past.' The violence that happened to Buddhists has gradually destroyed the relationship of Na Ngam people over and over. Every time I interviewed people about their livelihood in the past that they shared with the Muslims, the first answer would always be that how they lived in the past was not different from today, living separately without interdependence. If I continued asking how they lived together in the old days, most of them would need time to think. It took them different amounts of time to return to their memories. But from discussions with them throughout the research period, I found that the Buddhists were more or less able to tell stories about their relationship with their Muslim friends who lived in the same community. As a researcher who has been studying and exploring the relationship capital of this community, I would like to present what I have found in the hope that this capital still exists and one day it will be revived.

## **Conclusion**

The violence that began with the incident of gunmen raiding a military arms depot in 2004 has caused the Thai state to focus on the military process and the enforcement of special

laws in order to control the area and the Thai state's dissenters to cause ongoing violence. This situation contributed to the changes in the landscape of the three southern border provinces into the region of violence. This prolonged situation of violence has brought the conflicts that arose in the three provinces into the state of intractable conflict. These intractable conflicts have led to the state of being habituated and have affected people's minds and behaviors on a psychological level. As a result, there have been changes in people's individual identities and the relationships between different groups of people through the process of identity change. In fact, their identity has been transformed from being the Buddhists in the community to being the Thai Buddhists or part of the Thai state's militia by joining the village security volunteers, which is a political identity. This led to changes in social interactions on individual and group levels, from being neighbors who had interactions in agricultural, commercial, and educational spaces to being adversaries who followed different political ideologies. This has contributed to social isolation and broken social relations within the community. As a result, the barriers in the relationship between the Buddhists and the Muslims have been formed in a new way of life, resulting in the shrinking of spaces and political relations to the level of people's daily lives.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Policy Recommendations**

From these situations, the Thai government, the Ministry of Defense, and the Separatist movement must abolish political and military operations involving the tactic of community infiltration. The communities and people should not

be brought into part of the militia in order to restore the identity of being a community member of the locals.

## 2. Action Recommendations

2.1 Government agencies, the Separatist movement, the civil society, and people in the three southern border provinces must create safe social spaces, such as community areas, commercial areas, and religious places so that people in the area can have confidence in fostering social interactions between different groups of people without the control of the military and political authorities from all parties.

2.2 The public sector has the right to access, search for, and examine facts and information about incidents of violence and loss. The local public should be informed of all facts in detail as soon as possible and the state should not monopolize the provision of information because only a thorough examination of the situation and comprehensive presentation of information will lead to a resolution and an understanding of these intractable conflicts in the area.

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