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# The Malay Villagers of Nonthaburi Cultural Notes

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*ABSTRAK*

*Di Thailand tengah di sekitar pinggir ibu kota metropolitan Bangkok, terdapat kelompok-kelompok kecil keturunan Melayu yang berasal dari Selatan Thailand dan negeri-negeri Melayu di utara dan Pantai Timur Semenanjung. Sebahagian besar mereka yang berjumlah kira-kira 250,000 adalah keturunan tawanan perang yang dipaksa berhijrah ke utara di akhir abad ke-18 dan awal abad ke-19. Kajian di dua buah kampung di daerah Nonthanburi, barat-laut Bangkok menunjukkan bahawa beberapa ciri budaya Melayu masih dapat dikenalpasti, walaupun bahasa Melayu yang diwarisi dari generasi dulu sudah dalam keadaan hampir pupus.*

*ABSTRACT*

*In some areas at the outskirts of the capital city of Bangkok, there are to be found pockets of Malay settlements with total population of approximately 250,000. They are descendents of migrants, most of whom were war captives from the northern and East Coast Malay states, forced to travel north sometime in late 18th and early 19th century. Research work conducted among them in two Malay villages of Nonthanburi district, north-west of Bangkok shows that they have managed to retain some of the cultural traits identifying them as Malays, although the Malay language as their mother tongue is almost disappearing.*

## INTRODUCTION

Nonthaburi is a province in central Thailand, just north of Bangkok province, and about 1,000 kilometers north of Malaysia. It has a very mixed population: Thais, Laos, Chinese, Mons, and also a small group of Malays. This group numbers not more than several thousand, and inhabit about a dozen villages, the largest of which is Kapong (Kampung) Tha'i' (from the Thai Tha-it, meaning 'brick jetty').

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The ancestors of these Malay villagers were war captives, taken during conflicts between Siam and some northern Malay sultanates. They had been taken to central Thailand in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, mostly in the aftermath of rebellions against Thai rule. The captives were largely from Patani, but also from Kedah, Terengganu, and Kelantan.

Despite the fact that these villagers have been living in isolation from other Malays for at least 160 years (the last forced migration took place in 1832), they have managed to maintain some aspects of their distinctive culture, and in some respects even develop it. This is indeed a remarkable feat, considering that initially, they were no more than slave labourers, and that they have always constituted a tiny minority of Muslim Malays, surrounded by millions of Buddhist Thais and other non-Muslim groups.

In this paper, I would like to examine some of the cultural features of the Malay villages of Nonthaburi. This will be done under various subheadings: housing, dress, food, etc. The data was collected mostly in two villages: Surau Klang (Middle Mosque) Village, also known as Rong Suat, and Surau Khiau (Green Mosque) Village. Both are located about 40 km northwest of Bangkok.

## HOUSE

Malay villages in Nonthaburi outwardly resemble Thai villages, except, of course, for the presence in the village centre of a mosque instead of a wat (Thai Buddhist temple). Most houses are wooden and built on stilts along canals. The oldest houses show features similar to traditional central Thai houses. They contain a front porch and a single room, covered by a pitched roof which ends in gables. The gable beams are decorated with distinctive outward hooks which give central Thai houses their characteristic appearance. These, however, are very rare; most houses are simpler, and look more Western.

There are three basic types of houses. The first one, which we shall call Type A, is all wood, with the area under the house left open. This area serves as a shelter for small domestic animals, and as retreat from the midday heat. If the family runs into some money, they might add a brick ground floor; let us call this second type as type B1. Some houses are now designed in this fashion from the beginning: they contain a brick ground floor, topped by a wooden second floor (Type B2). Finally, the houses of the wealthiest families are built entirely of brick (Type C), and are Western in style, except for the presence of a crescent and star over the front door, or a plaque with some Qur'an verses hung near the entrance.

The houses, especially types A and B1, usually countain very little in way of furniture: a cupboard for kitchen ware, a glass case for displaying family heirlooms (usually old china and, if a member of the family had

gone the Haj, souvenirs from Mecca), and some racks for hanging clothes. There are no chairs, tables, or beds. On the wall facing Mecca, there are usually some Islamic items such as a Muslim calender, plaques with verses from the Qur'an, or a picture of Kaabah. Wealthier families, or families which have extensive contacts with city folk, will have a set of armchairs and a coffee table, to accommodate guests who are not used to sitting on the floor.

Outhouses are still the norm, and bathing is done in the canal. Only the wealthiest families have indoor bathroom facilities. All houses have electricity, and consequenly practically all families have such modern amenities as electric fans, refrigerators, and television sets. However, few houses have running water; in those that do, it is canal water which is brought into the house by means of an electric pump. That water is not potable; drinking water is kept in large Chinese-style earthen jars decorated with dragon patterns. Generally speaking, there are no telephones in the villages, except in some of the mosques. People from different villages still communicate by messengers and letters, and do not make appointments when going to visit friends and relatives. Some of the village headmen, though, have cellular phones.

## Dress

The Malay villagers of Nonthaburi like to dress traditionally. Men wear plaid sarongs, or more rarely other woven patterns, and plain shirts; women wear flowery batik sarongs and blouses. Most of the sarongs are made in Thailand, some come from Malaysia, and the most prized ones are from Indonesia. Some women also cover their hair with a handkerchief; the most religious ones wear a jilbab. When going to the mosque and on other special occasions (fairs, holidays, etc.), the men also wear a white *kopiah*. Some men also wrap a red-and-white *kaffiyeh* (Arab men's headgear) around it. On such special occasions, some women like to wear various kinds of fancier clothes, patterned after Malaysian, Pakistani, and Arabic styles of dress.

When going out of the village, and especially to an urban area, men prefer to wear pants. Women, though, dress traditionally even when going out of the village. Some youth (both girls and boys) may also wear pants or other Western style clothes even when in the village.

## Food

It appears as though the Malay villagers of Nonthaburi did not preserve much of their culinary traditions. Their cooking resembles quite closely

Thai food, except, of course, for the lack of pork-based dishes. The only dish all villagers agree is an authentic Malay one is *tupa?* is made of sweetened glutinous rice, stuffed with bananas or mung beans, and then wrapped and steamed inside banana leaves. It is prepared only on special occasions, such as weddings and holidays.

The Malay villagers have also developed (apparently after their migration to Thailand) a kind of soup which is now famous among non-Malays, and which they simply call *sup*. The best kind is made out of a beef or carabao breast; next best is oxtail. Usually, however, the villagers use chicken, which is much more readily available. The soup contains about 15 other ingredients: vegetables, herbs, and spices. It is served with plenty of fresh lime juice, chili peppers, and fish sauce.

*Kenduris* have their own set menus. Large, round trays are served to the guests, who then gather around them in groups of four or five. In the middle, there is a pile of white rice, around which are arranged four or five plates, containing *masaman* curry (an Indian style beef curry), the famous local Malay soup, raw vegetables (usually cabbage and cucumbers), fruits, and sweets. The guests use solely their hands for eating, except for the soup, which is eaten with a communal spoon. A bowl of ice water is also provided for washing the hands before and after the meal. However, since no beverage is served with the meal, guests sometimes sneak a swig from this bowl.

In mosque fairs (see below), many kinds of Thai food can be purchased, as well as some Muslim dishes. These include *martabak* (both savoury and sweet), chicken *satai*, and *khao mok gai* - chicken and rice served with a special sauce. Although these are known by Thais as Muslim dishes, the villagers say that they have only started preparing them recently. According to them, these are typical *Keling* foods, *Keling* being the term used by Malays to refer to Muslims originating in the Indian subcontinent. These dishes were adopted apparently as a sign of the new pride in their Muslim heritage that the Malay villagers have been experiencing in the past decade. In the food-oriented society of Thailand, every self-respecting ethnic group is expected to have its own specialty dishes.

## MOSQUES

Almost every Malay village in Nonthaburi has a mosque. Previously, the mosques used to be built out of wood, and resemble large Thai houses. However, during the past decade almost all have been replaced by concrete structures, which incorporate Arabic motifs. Most mosque compounds have, in addition to religious schools, also a Thai government school.

Entrances to country roads leading to mosques, which are usually also the main roads leading to Malay villages, are decorated with an ornamental gate, incorporating Arabic architectural motifs and some Thai and Arabic inscriptions. This practice parallels the Thai Buddhist practice of decorating the entrances of roads leading to temples with gates which incorporate Indo-Thai architectural elements with some Thai inscriptions.

Most mosques have two names: an official Arabic name, and an informal Thai name. Malay villages are usually named by their inhabitants after the mosque. (Interestingly, the villagers use the informal Thai names even when conversing in Malay). Following are the official name of some village mosques in Nonthburi province, along with their informal names and their meanings:

| *Formal name* | *Popular name* | *Meaning* |
|---|---|---|
| Masjid Darussalam | Surau Klang | Middle Mosque |
| Masjid Nurul Islam | Surau Khiau | Green Mosque |
| Masjid Jamalludin | Surau Mai | New Mosque |
| Masjid Darul Abidin | Surau Daeng | Red Mosque |

Other mosques are named after well-known persons, such as the founder of the mosque or the person who donated the money for its construction:

| *Popular name* | *Meaning* |
|---|---|
| Surau Khru Mut | Teacher Mahmud's Mosque |
| Surau Khru So | Teacher Musa's Mosque |
| Surau Phuyai Mut | Headman Mahmud's Mosque |
| Surau Abdullah Nuson | Abdullah Nuson's Mosque |

## Mosque Fairs

A fairly new phenomenon in the Malay village scene is the mosque fair. During the weeks preceding Ramadan, it is customary for many mosques to organize a fund-raising event. A big stage is constructed in the mosque yard, decorated with flowers, Islamic symbols, and verses from the Qur'an. Rows of chairs are arranged in front of the stage. In the remaining open area, stalls are set up, mostly for selling food, but also for selling sarongs, cassettes, and traditional Thai chinaware decorated with Arabic calligraphy.

The fair usually lasts two days. It begins at sunset, and lasts until midnight or even later. Fair patrons include not only local villagers, but also guest from Malay villages and other Muslim communities up to 200 kilometers away. On the stage, both lay and religious leaders give speeches and sermons, which are broadcast over loudspeakers all over the mosque grounds. In the area normally used as the schoolchildren's dining area, tables and chairs are arrange to form a giant outdoor restaurant, and student volunteers serve a variety of Thai ane Muslim dishes from nearby stalls set up by the villagers. All proceeds go to the mosque.

Meanwhile, in a classroom or another large room, the older children set up an Arabian-Nights-style cafe. It is decorated with Arabic-looking fabrics and coloured light bulbs, and Malaysian and Arabic music is played in the background. Patrons may order coffee, tea or sweets.

Honoured guests who arrive at the fair are led to a special reception area and served biscuits, ovaltine, and tea, free of charge. This is done in order to lend the event the air of a *kenduri*. The guests are usually met by important lay and religious leaders of the community, such as governemnt officials, the *iman*, and the *khatib*. After partaking of the refreshments, the guests are expected to proceed to a nearby desk, and donate some money to the mosque, in exchange for a fancy receipt.

Mosque fairs resemble in many ways, and are probably patterned after, Thai Buddhist temple fairs. Invitations to mosque fairs look like invitations to temple fairs, bear similar seals, and use the same wording. Like in Buddhist temple fairs, here, too, there is a blurring of the distinction between the religious and the mundane. Men and women mix freely, and in fact it is the only chance for village boys and girls to 'go out' together. Things are bought and sold at every corner, not only as an act of fundraising, but also by private enterprisers. Some mosques also allow music to be played over the minaret loudspeakers, or even feature singers of Malaysian and Arabic songs as part of the programme, although other mosques consider this practice *haram*. Even the local Malay name for mosque fairs, *khijo suR* (literally 'kerja surau'), is patterned after the Thai term for temple fairs, /nga:n wat/ or 'temple work'.

## Folk Entertainment

Today, the only form of Malay folk entertainment is the mosque fair (see above). However, according to older villagers, in the past they used to have a rich cultural life. In those days, prior to World War II, they only grew rice, which provided them with only three months' worth of work per year. During the remaining months of the year, they were idle, and in order to pass the time, they engaged in various kinds of cultural activities and entertainment.

One popular form of entertainment was the *dike* The word is derived from *dikir*; however, it had nothing to do with religion. It consisted of two persons or two groups of people engaging in a back-and-forth exchange of ad-lib jokes and puns in rhymes. This form of entertainment has totally died out, and is but a faded memory for some older villagers.

Another popular pastime was folk stories, called *baRi:* or *bahRi:* by the villagers. Older informants recall that their grandparents knew dozens of them by heart, and could pass night after night by telling stories. This cultural activity, too, has vanished from village life. One informant, however, managed to recollect one story he heard in his childhood from his grandfather:

A poor man was sleeping in his old ramshackle house. He dreamt he was picking coconuts. When he had gathered enough coconuts, he sold them and bought a chicken. The chicken had chicks, and when they grew he sold them and bought a goat. He sold the goast's milk and kids, and managed to save enough money to buy a cow. Again, he sold the cow's milk and calves, and bought an elephant. Finally he exchanged his elephant for two lovely wives. He was sleeping with one wife on each side. The wife on his right tickled him, and he started. Then the wife on his left tickld him, and he jumped again. Finally, from all the starting and jumping, the sleeping man caused the house to collapse on him.

Checking the story with an informant from Pattani, I found out that this story, in a slightly different and more sophisticated version, is still current among the Malays of southern Thailand.

*Pantuns* apparently used to be very popular. The mere mention of the word *patong* brings a smile to the lips of old villagers. Again, they all say that they cannot remember any. However, after five months of work in one of the villages, a middle-aged couple one day managed, with joined efforts, to recollect about a dozen *pantuns*, which they say they have not heard since their childhood. Three of them are reproduced below, along with a translation.

| | |
|---|---|
| *buRong kwE? kwE?* | The night heron |
| *inga? kayu: mati:* | is perched on a dead tree; |
| *?ade? sango: mOIE?* | Your hair bun is pretty, |
| *?abi@ng l@ka? ati:* | (that's why) I fell for you. |
| | |
| *no: no: papi@ng* | A wooden swing |
| *sile? dai@ng buloh* | is swaying among the bamboos; |
| *tucu: ?adO:lapi@ng* | I have eight grandchildren, |
| *tice? ?adO: s@puloh* | I have ten great-grandchildren |

| | |
|---|---|
| *anO? gajO: J@Ring* | The Prince of Archidendron |
| *maki@ng t@lO: jiRu?* | is eating pickled eggs; |
| *pa?e: supO: hanying* | His benavior is like a dog's, |
| *upO: supO: b@Ru?* | his shape is like a short-tailed monkey. |

In earlier times, villagers also used to know folk songs and chants, which they would sing while walking in processions, accompanied by percussion instruments. Occasions which called for a procession, or *blaRo?*, were weddings, circumcisions, and *tamat al-Qur'an* ceremonies. The singing group would meet to rehearse often, and this is frequently given by the villagers as the reason for the dissapearance of folk singing: in the modern world, they say, there is no time for rehearsals. Today, some villagers can sing Malaysian and Arabic songs which they call (*nase:p*), but these are 'imported' from Malaysia, and usually the singer knows the lyrics by rote, without understanding them. Pre-recorded cassettes from Malaysia are very popular, and are played as often as Thai music tapes in Malay homes.

## NAMING

All Malay villagers have Malayo-Arabic names such as Ismail, Habibah, Nuriah, and Abdullah. Many of these names have regular, set nicknames. Abdullah is always /*dOlOh*/, Ismail becomes / *?E˜:*/, and women's names, which almost always end in *a ta marbutah*, are shortened to their last syllable, for example (*mOh*) for Kadimah, Muslimah, and Fatimah, or (nOh) for Aminah, Mu'minah, and Adinah. Members of the older generation - those over 50 years old - have no Thai names at all. Younger members of the community, who are in their 30's and 40's, usually adopt Thai names of their work or have extensive contacts with Thais. These names are similar in every way to ordinary Thai names, and are often Indec-derived, for example Thawatchai, Nittiya, and Malai.

Young people (under 30 years old) usually have Thai names given to them at birth, alongside with their Malayo-Arabic names. It is the Thai name which is used for registering the birth with the authorities, and it is later used in school and for all official purposes. The Malay name is used only among friends and relatives in the village. This practice has two purposes. First, Thais find the Malay names hard to pronounce or transcribe; for example, one of my informants, whose name is Hamzah, was registered by a Thai official as (*amu:sO?*). He had to go through school being addressed by that strange appellation, and even today it is still his official name. The second reason is that while Malay villagers want to preserve their religion and their culture, they also want themselves to be regarded as full-fledged Thai citizens, with the same rights

and obligations as the rest of the population. They consider having Thai names as one means of achieving that goal.

During the reign of king Rama VI (1910-1925), all Thai citizens who did not already have a last name, were required to adopt one. Those who already had last names at that period were mostly members of the nobility, which naturally did not include the Malay villagers, so it was then that they received their last names. Some Malays chose Thai names with auspicious meanings, such a Mangmi (wealthy), Borisut (pure), and Rakthai (love-Thai). Since the adoption of last names, the traditional patronymic system (X bin/binti Y) has fallen out of use.

## CUSTOMS – *ADAT ISTIADAT*

Few folk traditions survive in the modern Malay villages of Nonthaburi. The villagers are usually well-versed in Islam, the result of education they receive in local pondoks[3] and madrasahs, as well as in religious academies in southern Thailand. They are therefore reluctant to openly admit the existence in their villages of practices which are regarded as non-Islamic or even *syirik*. From my observations, it is indeed the case that most villagers are *saleh*, and reject all practices which they regard as incongruous with Islam. However, some traces of pre-or non-Islamic traditions still presist, and villagers can recall folk traditions practised in the past, which are no longer current.

In the old days, each village had a *bomo*. He was called on to perform rites and ceremonies on important occasions. When a new house was being built, he would prepare an amulet to be hung on a beam inside the house, in order to ward off evil spirits. Some old houses still have these amulets. Before the rice harvest was to begin, the *bomo* was invited to watch an egg which was about to hatch. When the chick broke out of the shell, the *bomo* would see to which directions its head was turned, and instruct the farmers to reap their fields in that direction. This was thought to bring in a good harvest.

In wedding and other special occasions, the *bomo* would say special prayers over *beras kuning*, called [*bRah kuni?*] by the villagers ([*kuni?*] is the local term for turmeric, used to dye the rice). Although there are no longer *bomo, beras kuning* is still used for ceremonial purposes in some remote villages. Another important ceremony was the [*na'nu:*], marking the first month of a baby's life. On that day, a special ceremony was held, during which the *bomo* cut the child's hair. This ceremony parallels the Thai/*ko:n phom fay* ceremony. Some villagers think it is a holdover from pre-Islamic days, while others are of the opinion that it was simply an imitation of the Thai custom. At any rate, it is no longer practised. The most widely practised *adat* is probably the *kenduri*. These are held on

important life cycle events, as well as on other special occasions. Guests at *kenduris* are served, upon arrival, a cup of coffee or ovaltine, some biscuits, and some tea. After all the guests have arrived, they usually worship together, and then the ritual meal itself follows. The menu of the *kenduri* is set; it is described under 'food' above.

## Live Cycle Events

Three important life cycle events are marked by Malay villagers: circumcision, *tamat al-qur'an*, and marriage. Circumcision used to be celebrated in a ceremony called [*maso? jawi:*], which included a procession and a *kenduri*. Nowadays, though, most parents prefer their boys to have the procedure performed at the hospital, or to invite a doctor home. It is no longer accompanied by a public celebration.

The next important event in a boy's life is the *tamat al-Qur'an* ceremony, or [tama?akOri@ng] as it is called by the villagers. When a boy finishes reading the Qur'an for the first time, he has to demonstrate his ability before the village elders, who like to test him by making him pronounce 'hard' Arabic consonants and make the correct distinction between difficult pairs. Sometimes, a procession is organized in the boy's honour. The ceremony is always followed by the ubiquitous *kenduri*.

The wedding ceremony is, of course, significant for women as well as for men. On the morning of the appointed day, relatives and friends gather at the bridegroom's house. The older and honoured guests come inside the house, where they are served the customary biscuits, coffee (or ovaltine), and tea. Others wait outside and under the house. When everyone has arrived, a short prayer is recited, and then the bridegroom's procession leaves for the bride's house. The children march in front, and the first child carries a flag or the Saudi Arabian flag. Following the children are the women relatives of the bridgeroom, carrying gifts, traditional households items such as kitchen utensils. There are also packages of sweets and flowers. They are followed by the bridegroom and his friends, usually dressed in Arabic style; galabiah, kaffiah, and abayah. Last are the male relatives.

If the bride's house is nearby, the procession simply marches there. More often, though, the bride is from another village. In such cases, the bridegroom's family rents buses to transport the guests to the entrance of the bride's village, where the procession is organized again. In the past drummers and singers used to accompany the processions, but this tradition has died out. The villagers say that they no longer have time to rehearse, but another reason for this is no doubt the fact that none of them can remember any folk-songs anymore.

When the procession reaches the bride's house, the bridegroom is led inside. Sometimes, children from the bride's party try to block his way in by holding a piece of rope across the stairs or the door; they have to 'bribe' in order for the bridegroom to gain access to his beloved. This is a Thai wedding custom, which was adopted by the Malays. Mean-while, the guests are seated on mats next to the house, under a shade specially constructed for this purpose. A festive meal is served, while inside the house the marriage ceremony itself takes place. The young couple, along with their parents, are seated on the floor, next to a bed or mattress lavishly decorated with rich fabrics and flowers. Then follows the */khan ma:k/* (betelnut bowl) ceremony, a Thai custom which the Malays adopted together with its Thai name. A tray is prepared with such symbolic objects as stones (signifying the strength and durability of the marriage bond), needles (an industrious household), popped rice (the couple should prosper together like the rice which expands), and betelnuts (they should grow old together). Then the bridegroom's parents present the bride's parents with an ornate betelnut bowl, after which the ceremony is named. It contains the bride-price ([*blanyO:*]), consisting of cash and some gold. Sometimes the bowl is decorated with shiny fabrics and rose petals. The bride's parents examine the gifts, and if it is deemed sufficient (which is invariably the case), the *imam* then performs the short marriage ceremony itself. Then the bride and bridegroom present each other with garlands usually made of *pikake* and pink roses, into which 500-baht notes are inserted. (Buddhist Thai couples also wear similiar garlands, but ones with money are not usually used in weddings).

In the past, large numbers of firecrackers were ignited to mark the occasion. However, the villagers have come to regard this practice as *bazir*, (a waste) and it was discontinued.

After the guests have left, the young couple remains at the bride's house. In wealthier houses, a bedroom is prepared for the young couple, with the bed decorated with flowers and fancy fabrics. In simpler houses, which only consist of one room, just the bed is prepared, or sometimes just a mattress. Parents will gladly give up their bed for this purpose. This is a Thai custom, and the Malays use the Thai name for it, */khaw hOng hO:/*.

Among Thai Buddhist families, the young couple usually moves in with the bride's family. However, the Malays have a different tradition. The couple stays at the bride's house only one or two weeks. Then, they move back to the bridegroom's house. Again, a procession is in order. While the procession to the bride's house is called 'the bridegroom's procession', when they move back to the bridegroom's house, it is the 'bride's percession'. As mentioned above, the bridegroom's procession brings kitchen utensils and other household items as gifts for the bride.

She is now expected to demonstrate that she has learned how to use these utensils by bringing home-made cakes and cookies (*t@pong*) to the bridegroom's family. These are wrapped in multicolored cellophane, and accompanied by flowers, carried by the bride's female relatives. The bridgroom's parents acknowledge their happiness by organizing a lavish reception for the bride, called [*nyamo?*]. It consists of an 'open house' lasting all day long, during which Malaysian and Arabic songs are loudly played, and friends and relative garther to wish the couple well. It is customary to give a little envelope containing some money for the young couple to the bridegroom's father. However, the money will probably be used to cover the high costs of the [*nyamo?*], which usually includes refreshments and a sumptuous meal, as well as a hired entertainment crew to enrich the event, and to play Malaysian music tapes over an elaborate sound system.

## LANGUAGE

A prime factor in facilitating the survival of Malay culture in Nonthaburi was the maintenance of the Malay language. It is indeed remarkable, that after two centuries of geographical isolation from the main body of Malay speakers, these Malay villagers have been able to preserve anything of their original speech. This, despite the fact that they are a tiny minority, surrounded by millions of monolingual Thai speakers.

The Nonthaburi dialect of Malay is spoken in all the Malay villages of Nonthaburi province, as well as in one village (Namai [slingshot] Village) in Pathum Thani province. The dialect is based mostly on the Pattani dialect, which in turn closely resembles the Kelantan dialect.

In the 1930's, compulsory education reached the Malay villages of Nonthaburi (see 'Education' below). The sole medium of instruction in public schools was (as still is) Thai, and this brought about widespread bilingualism. Slowly, the villagers started using more and more Thai, and less and less Malay. This process has continued until today. In some villages only adults can speak the language, while in others, it has all but died out, and is spoken only by the oldest members of the community. This extensive bilingualism (there have not been any monolingual Malay speakers in the villages for at least a generation), together with the shift to Thai, have left a mark on the Malay dialect of Nonthaburi. It has been profoundly influenced by Thai, and has simultaneously shrunk in terms of grammar and lexicon, as it is no longer required to serve all the communicative purposes of the community.

The slow disappearance of the language is accompained by a positive attitude towards it. Although some villagers regard the local dialect as inferior to Pattani Malay and Standard Malay, many have a warm

feeling towards it, and see it as an important cultural asset. Often members of the young genaration are embarrassed of their inability to speak Malay, and pretend to understand it. This positive attitude is not enough, though, to ensure the survival of the dialect. It should be noted that no couple under the age of 40 use Nonthaburi Malay amongst themselves, and no couple under the age of 50 use it with their children. This unique dialect will therefore probably disappear from the Malay villagers of Nonthaburi in another generation.

## EDUCATION

The Compulsory Education Act was passed in Thailand in 1921. However, it was not until after the Revolution of 1932 that actual application of the law began. Before then, education in Thai villages had been entrusted to religious institutions. In Buddhist village, this was the village temple; in Muslim villages, it was the pondok, located in the mosque grounds. When the government began to enforce the Compulsory Educations acts, they simply converted temple schools into government schools.

For the Malay villagers, this presented considerable hardships. First of all, although Muslim children did not have to attend Buddhism classes, parents resented their children being taught in a Buddist atmosphere. Secondly, sometimes the nearest temple school was located several kilometers away from the Malay village, and the children had to walk back and forth to school every day, sometimes for hours. The Malay villagers therefore petitioned the government to build schools in their villages. The government agreed, on condition that community-owned lands, i.e. the mosque grounds, will be used. This paralleled the situation in Buddhist villages, where government schools were built on temple grounds.

In contrast to Buddist villages, where government schools replaced temple schools, the Malay villagers retained their *pondoks* (referred to by the villagers as *balai* or [*balE:*]) side by side with the government schools. In time, many of these developed to become full-fledged madarasahs, which enjoy a high reputation in the Muslim community. Today, many hundreds of Muslim boys from provinces as far away as Phitsanulok in the north, Prachinburi in the east, and Prachuab in the south, are sent to Nonthaburi to receive Islamic education, after having completed the six compulsory years of government education.

And what of the small *balai*, where the younger children used to receive their Islamic education? As the villages expanded, and the old mosque schools developed into madrasahs, new *balais* were established in other parts of the village. Young pupils (up to sixth grade), after finishing

their regular school day at the government school, go to the *balais* in the afternoons to learn Arabic and study the Koran.

One last point which is of interest: even students who do not attend a *balai* or a madrasah, receive some Islamic education. This is ironically due to the lack of separation between church and state in Thailand. Since government schools located in Buddist areas offer classes in Buddhism, it was deemed only fair that government schools located in Muslim areas would offer classes in Islam. Thus all Malay village children receive at least some Islamic education.

## WOMEN'S STATUS

The status of women in Malay villages seems to be undergoing profound changes. In earlier days, the older villagers recall, women rarely ventured out of their village. Even shopping at the market was a task reserved for men. The women stayed home, to clean, cook, take care of the children, raise domestic animals, and perform various other tasks. It is due to this that a generation ago, there were still some monolingual Malay speaking women in the Malay villages of Nonthaburi, while men have been bilingual for at least two generations.

The change started about sixty years ago, when education became compulsory for women as well as men. Before schools were established in the Malay villages, girls for the first time came in daily contact with the outside world, and with Thai society, in which women enjoy a higher status than in many Western societies. Even after the schools were established in Malay villages, the government teachers and teaching materials made sure that girls were no longer isolated from the outside world.

Their education gave women a sense of newly-found power. This sense was strengthened by the fact that they now received religious education as well, as classes in Arabic and Islam were taught in the government schools to girls as well as boys. Even in religious areas, the absolute superiority of men diminished.

Today, Malay women in central Thailand enjoy a status and freedom unparalleled by their sisters in southern Thailand. This in immediately apparent from the fact that men and women freely greet each other by *jabat*, a phenomenon unthinkable in the South. Women also serve in important positions. For example, the Islam and Arabic teacher in one of the balais I have visited is a woman. In fact, the superintendent of all *balais*, who is stationed in Nonthaburi town, is a woman.

The following story will illustrate my point. In Thailand, the headmen *phu-yai-bahn* of all the villages in each subdistrict elect one of themselves to be the chief-headman (*kamnan*). When I first started doing research in Nonthaburi, I wanted to meet the chief-headman of Lahan

Subdistrict, made up entirely of Malay villages, in order to get his approval for my project. One evening, after nearly getting lost on dark country roads, I reached the house of the *kamnan*, and called out a greeting. A young women came out and returned my greeting, and then led me inside the house, where an older man invited me to have a seat. I introduced myself to him, explained the purpose of my visit, and gave him the letter of recommendation which I had received from my host university. He patiently heard me out, and then said with a smile, gesturing towards the young woman: " I am not the *kamnan* - she is". The chief-headman turned out to be a woman! Needless to say, this would be beyond the realm of possibility in a Malay subdistrict in southern Thailand. After this event, I was not surprised in the last general elections to see a Malay woman from Nonthaburi running for parliament. Her picture seemed to be posted on every coconut palm in Bangbuathong District. She received considerable support, but was defeated by a more experienced politician.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt was made to briefly describe some cultural aspects of Malay village life in Nonthaburi. The villagers have been able to maintain much of their heritage, such as their religion and style of dress. Some areas show innovation, ethnic foods for example. Other aspects show some Thai culture over the local Malay culture, as seen in the mosque fair tradition, some *adat*, and the local Malay dialect. As far as the oral tradition is concerned, such as [*dike:*], folk stories, *pantun*, and folksongs, much has been lost. The Nonthaburi Malay dialect, which has developed in its own unique way, is also disappearing. However, because of renewed contacts with their ancestral homeland, facilitated by modern transportation and communication, and coupled by acceptance into mainstream Thai society which reduced the pressure to assimilate, the Malays of Nonthaburi have attained a new sense of pride in their heritage and identity. While some aspects of their culture will continue to change and adapt, their survival as a distinct ethnic and religious group seems certain.

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