

# There Are *ponoks*, and There Are *ponoks*: Traditional Religious Boarding Schools in Thailand's Far-South\*

Kee Howe Yong

Department of Anthropology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada  
Email: [yongk@mcmaster.ca](mailto:yongk@mcmaster.ca)

Received May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012; revised June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012; accepted July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012

There has been a vast corpus of literature on Islam and Muslims since 9/11 that sought to locate the basis of Muslimness in some primordial essentialist cultural value. Since then, many Muslim religious boarding schools in predominantly Muslim countries in South and Southeast Asia have been policed and raided. This essay, based on fieldwork conducted in Thailand's far-south, hope to provide a different picture from what has commonly been portrayed about the *ponok* (traditional Muslim schools), as rigidly strict and pious or as the playground for radical Islam. What concern me are the lives and livelihoods of the *ponok* students should the fear about Islam continues unabated, or when these children have no idea why they are being sought after or whose interests they are serving.

*Keywords:* Thailand's Far-South; *ponok*; War on Terror; Violence; Muslims

## Introduction

The Bush administration unilateral declaration of a global war on terror comes with a clear binary choice: "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists"—shaping the discourse that is largely based on the threat of a political enemy, imaginary or exaggerated (Schmitt, 1996)<sup>1</sup>. The political enemy is also indeterminate in the sense that they are never given any formal or legal channel to surrender. Words like militant, extremist, terrorist, Islamo-fascist, and so on have since become the lexicon for talking about the indeterminate enemy. In many ways, the discourse on the war on terror is predicated on a truism of a certain cultural and political theory which goes something like this: the more modern (Westernized) a society becomes, the more its religious tradition decline or, at best, privatized. In such a view of historical development, there is a "myth" in the sense described by Roland Barthes (1972), precisely not in the received sense that it is false, but obscures are the well springs of religiosity running through all societies, including the West<sup>2</sup>.

The goal of my essay is modest. I want to follow the position taken up by Mahmood Mamdani (2002) and others that such binary way of framing the issue has fueled "culture talk" that often ended up offering cultural explanations of political outcomes that tend to avoid certain history and issues. In the case

of Thailand's far south, I am referring the effects of the long-standing state assimilation policies and the current conflict on its diverse Muslim communities. Moreover, by equating political tendencies with entire communities defined in cultural terms it also encourages collective discipline and punishment (2002: p. 767). What is equally crucial, as Talal Asad (2003) points out, is not an analysis on the origin of binary representations of so-called secular and religious societies itself but "the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable" in the concatenations of "the new concept of 'religion', 'ethics', and 'politics'" (2003: pp. 2-7). Such culture talk could very well be called a "leveling crowds" discourse, to borrow the term coined by Tambiah (1996), targeting the diverse Muslim communities in Thailand's far-south with antiterrorist rhetoric, in essence, treating *Muslimness* as an object of criminality. The focus of this essay is on the effects of the current war on terror on the *ponok* (traditional Islamic boarding schools) in the far-south<sup>3</sup>.

Summarily labeled as the bastion of religious conservatism, most Muslim religious boarding schools—(*madrasah*, *ponok* (*pondok*) or *pesantren*)—from Kandahar to other designated Muslim sites have been accused as contemporary "dens of terror" or potential "*jihad* factories". They have become one of the metaphors for Islamic extremist religiosity the so-called West has to confront with, becoming singularly the most dominant metaphor for evil. In predominantly Muslim countries in South and Southeast Asia such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia, as well as at Thailand's far-south, many Muslim religious schools were policed and raided. In many instances some were forced to close. Following the Bali bombing in 2002, Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin was one of the first leaders in Southeast Asia to jump onboard the global war on terror, unleashing its security forces on a hunt for alleged Islamic militants/terrorists in its far-south. Meanwhile, the rest of its

<sup>2</sup>The research for this essay was supported by grants from McMaster University Art Research Board and the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

<sup>1</sup>Coming from Karl Schmitt (1996), the very concept of *the political* is predicated on the existence (fabrication) of an enemy. One could argue that the Bush administration's post-9/11 interventionist posture toward the Middle East represents a longstanding United States bellicose foreign policy. Before there is Terrorism, there was Communism. And just as the threat of Communism was wildly exaggerated 50 years ago, the current war on terror is in practice an American war (including its allies) against a largely imaginary set of enemies. See, also Bradley (2008); Khalidi (2009).

<sup>2</sup>For a review of the unprecedented upsurge in popular and voluntary religious ritual, association, and observation in contemporary Asia and elsewhere, see Hefner (2010). For Africa, see Comaroff and Comaroff (2003). For the rise of religious fundamentalism in the United States, see Crapanzano (2003).

<sup>3</sup>The local pronunciation for these traditional Islamic boarding schools in Thailand's far-south is *ponok* (and not *pondok* as they are called in other parts of the Malay Archipelago).

ASEAN member countries were curiously silent about Thaksin's bloody campaign as they too were likewise engaged in their own anti-terror campaigns.

At the same time we have witnessed the proliferation of a vast corpus of literature—many of them bestsellers—on Islam and Muslims that sought to locate the basis of Muslimness in some primordial essentialist value that is a menace to civilized life and humanity; an antithesis to the so-called modern neo-liberal ethics, serving Samuel Huntington and those that followed in his wake a way of essentializing the Muslim world of its diverse subjects, and thus legible<sup>4</sup>. To be sure, the hysterical global mainstream media is adding more fuel to the fire with their spurious claims about terrorists and terrorism<sup>5</sup>. Written in the context of rising fascism in Germany, Carl Schmitt's philosophical reflections deserve our full attention:

*“When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. As the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy... The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism... It would be more exact to say that politics continues to remain the destiny, but what has occurred is that economics has become political and thereby the destiny”* (1996 (1932): pp. 54-78).

Even though Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1998) that demonized Islam in its entirety has been increasingly discredited, it had been replaced with a modified view that terrorists are predominantly link with Wahabi Islam—never mind its ludicrous interpretation of Wahabism. This view claims that Wahabism, predominantly from Saudi Arabia had been exported to Afghanistan, the United States and elsewhere in recent decades (Mamdani 2002: p. 766). Since then Muslims all over the world have not only been increasingly essentialized but also “Arabicized” and radicalized. It is as if *Allah* is making a comeback, albeit in a very post-modern ecumenical way, so much so that our imagination and understanding of Islam have been increasingly restricted to a few religious lexicon, attire (as in the fullfaced *niqāb* by Muslim women), and gender segregation. What is missing is the pluralism of Muslim politics, its diverse and competing visions of Islam and nation among the Muslim world (Hefner, 2002). In fact, many traditional *ulamas* in Southeast Asia have also, unhelpfully, if not incorrectly,

<sup>4</sup>In the famous “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, Samuel Huntington (1998) declared Islam as enemy number one of the West. See, also, Andrew McCarthy (2010) *The Grand Jihad: How Islam and the Left Sabotage America*, and Dinesh D'Souza (2007) *The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and Its Responsibility for 9/11*.

<sup>5</sup>In the span of sixteen years that bracket September 11, one before and the other after the event (Oklahoma Bombing of 1995 and the Norway massacre of 2011), what you get is the instant, knee-jerk politically motivated racist suspicion by leading American and European news organizations—The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the BBC, The Financial Times, and a wide range of television and radio stations, website, blogs, etc.—that publicized derogatory allegations about Islam before any facts was officially announced. It was as if any heinous crimes have to be committed by a Muslim when in both cases the culprits—American Christian fundamentalist Timothy James McVeigh and Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik—were white, blonde, and blue eye. Recently US congressman Peter King—on the hearings of the “radicalization” of the American Muslim community—refused to widen the scope of the hearings to include other, non-Muslim terrorism threats.

accused the revival of modern Islam as a form of *Wahabism* and extremists<sup>6</sup>.

Lost in the midst of all the paranoia about Islam and Muslims is the economy of the war on terror—the enormous profit for the producers of arms, private security industry, surveillance technologies, and kickbacks given to government and political elites. Let us not forget that the world was still reeling from the East Asian financial crisis of 1998 when the war on terror was declared—which demonstrated in no uncertain terms the vulnerability of a global financial system that was operating with almost no legal and institutional checks and balances. In many ways, the war on terror can be seen as a godsend to many liberal-economic capitalists in both developed and developing world, manifesting, among many things, the development and expansion of an anti-terror industry. Thus enter another chapter for the “international community”, the crepuscular west to continue to give lessons in good management and good behavior to the rest of the world. It is like the Cold War all over again, with Western military hardware and intelligence, economic aids and assistance (read *gifts*) to the rest of the world to curb the spread of terrorism<sup>7</sup>. It should also be clear that despite all the sound bites and talk of mutual partnership and assistance, the power differentials between donor and receiving countries of such *gifts* in the war on terror are painfully real. In some cases it is not entirely clear if the donors are working for or against the receivers' interests.

## Internal Colonialism

The most recent layer of aggression against the Muslims in Thailand's far-south—whether social, economic, political or religious—had roots in the monarchical tradition of Thailand. Back In 1906, in an effort to avoid being colonized by Western imperialists, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) signed a treaty with both Britain and France and pursued a policy of modernization (read “internal colonialism”) through which the entire kingdom, including the Malay far-south was consolidated under a policy of centralized bureaucratization and administration (Wan Kadir Che Man 1990)<sup>8</sup>. A series of stringent assimilation

<sup>6</sup>The term *Wahabism* has often been misappropriated in Southeast Asia since the beginning of the twentieth century. During that time, a group of *Kaum Muda* progressive *ulamas* gathered in the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, and Singapore) to set up their modern *madrasah* and to launch their journals. They were deeply influenced by the writings of Egyptian reformist Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida that Islam is a religion of the intellect and reason; that the time has come to free themselves from the shackles of superstition, chauvinism, and outdated traditional practices that were neither Islamic nor rational. One of their *modus operandi* was to free themselves from the slave mentality of the colonial order. For all that, they were condemned by many traditional *ulamas* as being *Wahabi*. At the same time, the *Kaum Muda* movement was also growing in Indonesia, being led by the *Muhamadiyah* movement that pioneered modern Islamic education that included the hard and social sciences. Likewise, they were also accused of being *Wahabi*. In this respect, the modernists of are no different from the *Kaum Muda* generation, who likewise condemned the belief in shamans and witches. See, Farish Noor (2007).

<sup>7</sup>Thinking along with Nietzsche, the centrality of the *gift*, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), is not exchange and circulation but rather, inscription. The gift violently inscribes, it writes, and it records on bodies, and on debts.

<sup>8</sup>With the Anglo-Siamese treaty, Kelantan, Terengganu, Perlis and parts of Kedah was ceded to Britain. In return, the British recognized Siamese authority in regions situated north to the ceded territories that include Patani (“Patani” with one “t” is used here to denote the former Malay sultanate comprising the present-day Malay Muslim majority provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat), Satun and Trang (see Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud, 1988; Suwannathat-Pian, 1988).

policies were to follow. In 1929 Bangkok insisted that Islamic family and inheritance laws be codified into Thai which, if successfully implemented, could be interpreted by its Muslim subjects as usurping the sacred ground of the *shariah*—the moral code and religious law of Islam—and establishing Thai as the language of Islam (Surin, 1985: p. 136).

With the military takeover by General Phibul Songkram in 1938 and the desire to distinguish ethnic Thais from its ethnic minorities, the kingdom name was changed from Siam to Thailand. With it, a series of ultra-nationalist initiatives were implemented that affected not only the Muslims but also other minorities. The notorious Thai Custom Decree (*Rathaniyom*) imposed Thai “modern” behavior and dress on the minorities, and an allegiance to the trinity of Thai’s nation, king, and Buddhism became the cornerstone to Thai patriotism. Following World War II, the King of Thailand was established as the patron of Islam following the Patronage of Islam Act and the creation of the Chularajamontri (or Shaykh al-Islam), the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand under the Minister of Interior.

Since the 1960s *ponoks* were forced, through legislation, to register as “Private Schools Teaching Islam” and to teach, besides religious subjects, the Thai national curriculum (Madmarn, 1989). As if to add salt to the wound, the Thai government constructed several mosques in the far-south with their minarets resembling the Buddhist lotus flowers (Surin, 1988, cited by Joll, 2011: p. 41). All these efforts resulted not in the state having more but less control over its Muslim subjects as the number of exodus who pursued Islamic education in the Middle East and South Asia increased dramatically. To be sure, the exodus coincided with a range of global developments that have often unhelpfully been bundled together as “Islamic resurgence”—with its genealogy to the Iranian Islamic revolution and Shi’ism on the one hand, and the countering of it by the newly acquired economic power of Saudi Arabia in the form of Wahabism, on the other hand.

The Muslims in the far-south, with its cultural and language dissimilarity with ethnic Thais have historically resisted the legitimacy of these legislations. However, in doing so, they provided plenty of pretexts for the state to accuse their resistance, especially since the late 1940s, with charges of separatism (*baeng yaek dindaen*) (Chaiwat, 2006). It is important to note, as Thai scholar Thanet Aphornsuvan points out, following Thongchai (1994), the idea of equating Malay Muslims in the southern frontier provinces with separatism is an invented “fact” of modern Thai political history that assumed “a prior existence of a territorially *geo-body* with its fixed borders and culturally unified Siamese nation-state borders” (2008: p. 91)<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, in becoming the discursive language in the manufacturing of the proverbial others, charges of separatism violently homogenizes and cuts, metaphorically speaking, the Malay Muslims in the far-south of its diversity. For decades, Bangkok has tried to set the terms and narratives for dealing with separatism in the southern frontier Muslim provinces. But it has since been taken over by events beyond its control. Since the 1940s, Thailand’s Muslim far-south have become a hotbed for

<sup>9</sup>Thanet goes on to argue that “... the cost of historical ignorance and amnesia about the origins of separatism in the South is to prolong and tacitly approve of poor studies of modern Thai political history”, resulting in the often polarized conventions of criticizing the state of its handling of the Malay Muslim south and supporting the rights to self-determination on the one hand, and those conditioned by their loyalty to the state and Thai nationalism, on the other (2008: p. 92).

separatist movements, added life to the specter of separatism that the state helped to create. Since then cases of Muslim separatism have erupted in the far south and continued throughout the 1960s to the 1980s as part of the region-wide phenomena that included the Moros in the Philippines, the Shans, Karens, and Rohingyas in Burma, and the Acehnese in Indonesia. Moreover, separatism might proved to be an inescapable fact in lieu that the far-south is one of the poorest and backwater region in Thailand (Chaiwat, 2009).

It was also at this period that armed separatism in Thailand’s far-south was at its height until the government ceased its assimilation policies when General Prem Tinsulanonda came into power (1980-1988). Various concessions were made to the Thai Muslims: permission to register their Muslim names, the wearing of *niqāb* in government institutions, Muslim prayer rooms at strategic public venues, including the parliament building, state sponsored *Hajj*, and permission for the establishment of Islamic banking. The Prem administration also started negotiating amnesty deals with separatist organizations as well as with the Thai communist parties. Compared to what came before the 1980s, the Prem period, though itself might sound cynical, was, relatively speaking, a semi-spring of freedom for the Muslims in Thailand. However, if indeed that was a period of relative peace in the far-south, the absence of any serious attempt to explain the revival of recent violence, together with some kind of explanation for incidents of unnecessary deaths and injustices remain an important barrier to an understanding between the government and the diverse people of the far-south (Chaiwat, 2008).

Although Thailand’s far-south have been relatively quiet since the mid-1980s under an atmosphere of “corrupt peace”, to use the poignant phrase invoked by political scientist Kasian Tejapira (2006), renewed near-daily attacks began to emerge and became a major concern following clashes between militant Malay Muslims and government forces on April 28, 2004 at the historic Kru Se mosque. Since then, more than 5000 lives have been lost, close to 10,000 injured, and allegations of abuses tar all sides of the conflict<sup>10</sup>. So here we are at the year 2012, entering the eighth year of the conflict. Seven years of drawn out near-daily bombing and shooting in these Muslim provinces of Thailand far-south has seen the establishment and institutionalization of a “peace industry” so far-reaching that it stretch from Bangkok to Hatyai to Pattani to Yala and back to Bangkok and beyond. We are now hampered by conferences and agreements, roadmaps and conditions that create a thicket of red tape. Layer upon layer of superficial “process” obscures the path forward, which is why we are standing quite still.

### **Dek ponoks (ponok Boys and Girls)**

It is against such historical background and the current paranoia surrounding Islam that I met a fifteen years old Malay youth whom I shall called Nar (short for Nararuddin) at the border town of Sungai Golok in the province of Narathiwat. This is one of the most violent sites in the far-south. Like many

<sup>10</sup>Quantifying deaths has become as important as the quest to give meaning to the violent. Like other violent sites, such politics of conflating the number of deaths not only work to give an impression of surging violence but is also needed to classify the far-south as a site of mayhem, perhaps to satisfy the need of so-called experts on terrorism. Some counter-insurgency experts have even claimed it is the most intense insurgency after Iraq and Afghanistan (see, for example, D. Kilcullen, 2009: p. 121). Ironically so, if the politics of number and its corresponding labeling of violent have arrived, the treatment has not.

other boys and girls in the far-south, Nar went through the traditional Islamic boarding school. In fact, Nar is currently enrolled in a prestigious madrasah across the river in Kota Bharu, the state capital of Kelantan, Malaysia. This is the religious seminary boarding school managed by the son of Niz Abdul Aziz bin Haji Nik Mat, better known as Nik Aziz, the spiritual adviser and leader (*tok guru*) of the Malaysian opposition party, Pan Malaysian Islamic Party. Nik Aziz is also the Chief Minister of the state of Kelantan.

I still remember the day I met Nar. Sporting a tight fitting dark jean and a black Metallica t-shirt, wearing sunglasses and smoking under the hot sun, it did not occur to me that Nar was a dek *ponok*. He was quick to point to me that he only smoked when he is back in Thailand and not at the prestigious madrasah where he is currently enrolled. In fact he learned to smoke during his *ponok* school days mostly because, like many dek *ponoks*, they were bored out of their minds. Nar tells me they would rather be playing soccer or the local favorite, *sepak takraw*<sup>11</sup> rather than to be inside the classroom, much like any other schoolchildren at our so-called modern secular schools. According to Nar, the ulamas and ustazs at his *ponok* were fully aware of students smoking, with traces of *daun ro'ko* (leaves of rolling tobaccos) or cigarette butts everywhere. The only thing they cannot tolerate was for students to smoke in their presence. I would say the *ponok* is more “liberal” than the elementary and high schools I went through if the only restriction the dek *ponoks* have to observe is restrict themselves from smoking in front of their teachers.

That was what I witnessed when Nar brought me to his *ponok* located somewhere in Pattani where the standard fare of religious subjects ranging from the Qur'an and Hadith, religious law (*fiqh*), exegesis, ethics and morality, as well as mathematics, geography, and history were taught. Not only were there traces of cigarette butts on the floor, I even saw some dek *ponoks* smoking in between classes. Eager to make contact with the stranger, they threw Nar a series of questions, “Bang dari mana? Apa nama? Buat apa di sini?” (Where is uncle from? What's his name? What is he doing here?). As soon as I gave them the standard replies, I was bombarded with other queries. Calling me “Ajand” (Thai for professor or teacher) they asked what it is like living in North America, what is it like having snow, do we have tsunami, do we have *ponoks*, and so on. Muhammad 1 and 2 playfully asked if I am FBI. And like any boys, they would giggle or laugh loudly, and screamed almost hysterically when the subject of the opposite sex is brought up. Soon Ustaz Sulaiman came for me to give a tour of the girls' section of the *ponok*, a gendered space totally cut off from the other half where the boys are. I noticed it was much cleaner but just as noisy.

As we were heading back to the boy's section, young Ibrahim 1 and 2 tagged along and joined the other dek *ponoks* who were sitting on a bench underneath a tree. They listened attentively as Ustaz Sulaiman and I were conversing in a clumsy creole (Pattani and standard Malay) or more accurately, as Ustaz Sulaiman waxed about the glory days of the Patani kingdom—and that was not the first time I have been introduced to their selective remembering of their history, their midwives of history—as if he seemed ever so inclined, like many others I have met, to return to a certain nostalgic past in order to escape, albeit momentarily, the squalid realities of the present. When it

<sup>11</sup>*Sepak takraw* is a popular sport not only in Thailand but Southeast Asia. It uses a rattan ball but, unlike volleyball, players are only allowing their feet, knee, chest, and head to touch the ball.

comes to the subject of history taught at *ponoks*, as my conversation with Ustaz Sulaiman have shown, the glorious history of “Patani” was the main emphasis as opposed to the Thai Buddhist-centric history.

When asked, most of these dek *ponoks* would tell me they were at the *ponok* to get an education. Besides, their parents, brothers and sisters went through the same system, which prompted Ustaz Sulaiman to declare: “This is tradition. The *ponoks* have coexisted harmoniously with the community for a very long time.” He paused for a few second before reemphasizing his point, “We never forget we are part of the community, partly because we are all equally poor”. It is true that being one of the poorest and backwater parts of Thailand, the *ponoks* is still the cheapest place for an education. There is a certain bond between the *ponoks* and its communities. This was a kinship built upon being poor, about pain, loss, love, humiliation, and survival. I have often asked myself, why can't the authority get it?

When it comes to smoking, Ustaz Sulaiman brushed aside my question as there were bigger issues like joblessness, alcoholism, drug addictions, and the recent upsurge in violence and the militarization of their lives. And of course, there was the kratom phenomenon, the consumption of kratom leaf that has become a major concern not only in rural but also urban districts in the far-south<sup>12</sup>. Many of the Muslims I worked with, including some ustazs and ulamas, were concerned that kratom consumption is getting worse with the absence of law enforcement officer in the region since the unrest, especially after sunset, after the *maghrid* prayers. They call it the “hours of the guerrillas” (*waktu gerilya*) when the other side takes over. Kratom has recently become a lucrative business, in part help by the unrest as soldiers stationed in the area have become not only regular customers but even as “protectors” of the *illegal* business (Anusorn, 2010).

What I saw at this particular *ponok* is a rather different picture from what has commonly been portrayed about *ponoks*, as rigidly strict and pious or as the playground for radical Islam. Similar to Farish Noor's observation of the madrasahs he visited in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, Java, Bali, and southern Thailand (2009), while it is impossible to deny that militant groups might have infiltrated some of the *ponoks* in Thailand's far-south to recruit young members, one should not generalize that making bombs and shooting guns is part of their standard curriculum. As the title of this essay alluded to, “there are *ponoks*, and there are *ponoks*”. The arrival of the current wave of horror, perhaps even to claim these playful children who are still oblivious to what has reemerged, reminds me of Shahla Talebi's recollection about the terror during the Shah and later Islamic regime in Iran, “this contaminating power of violence and money, of the way they both often spoil whoever or whatever comes their way” (2011: p. 11). This brings me to the story of another *ponok*.

### ***Ponok Islam Narathiwat***

Located somewhere in Narathiwat, *Ponok Islam Narathiwat* was one of the largest *ponoks* in the far-south—home to the headmaster, teachers, ulamas, ustazs and their respective families, and close to seven hundred dek *ponoks*. The government

<sup>12</sup>Kratom leaf (*Mitragyna Speciosa*) is classified in category 5 of the Narcotics Acts (1979), in the same category as cannabis and magic mushrooms (the least punitive category). As an addictive substance, it is illegal to possess, distribute, sell, or consume kratom. But the law was not effectively enforced since the tree is indigenous to the country.

has since closed it down in July 2007<sup>13</sup>. What initially gave the government to lay all sorts of trivial accusations or crimes on this particular *ponok* was that two of its ustazs and two of its male students participated in the infamous Tak Bai demonstration. On Oct. 25 2004, a group of local Muslims that include women and children were protesting at the Tak Bai district police station in the province of Narathiwat to demand the release of six youths arrested on the ground that they may have some links with some mysterious militants operating in the area. Witnesses and other reports diverged on what happened when the armies were called in to help control the crowd. Videotapes showing clashes between Muslim youths and the soldiers were banned. The confrontation quickly escalated into violence, resulting in several deaths among the demonstrators. When the soldiers were eventually in control of the crowd, hundreds of young male demonstrators were ordered to strip off their shirts, and with hands tied behind their backs, were forced to lie on the ground under a very hot day. And this was during the *Ramadan*. They were then made to crawl on their bellies to the waiting trucks. Piling on top of one another, packed like livestock, they were driven off to the main army detention facility in Camp Ingkayuthaborihan in Pattani province, some five hours away. When the trucks arrived at the camp, 78 more men were dead—apparently from suffocation or were crushed in the trucks. To this day, the army and the government have rejected all claims of malfeasance during the violence or even errors in transporting the demonstrators.

To be sure, the frustrations of the majority of the Muslims towards the state was exasperated by the most recent coup in Thailand's contemporary history<sup>14</sup>. In 2006, the military government that ousted Thaksin, then acting prime minister Surayud Chulanont traveled to Pattani town (and not to Tak Bai) to issue an apology and reparations to some families of the dead, and the (laughable) dropping of the charges of 92 demonstrators who survived the horrifying journey to the army camp. Initially, most Malay Muslims I spoke to conceded that it could bring some hope and thus, their moral imperative to *forgive*, albeit paradoxical, before *justice* arrives<sup>15</sup>. After all, the general who led the coup is a Muslim and the interim government did signal a willingness "to talk." But such hope has since dissipated. As in the past, the interim government resorted to the establishment of loosely regulated armed proxy groups to work alongside paramilitaries to flush out so-called Muslim extremists.

Invoking Hannah Arendt's reflections that rage arises "when there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not", did the latest coup created "an imaginary of hope" that quickly turned into rage? (1969: p. 63). If so, what kind of explanations could one offer for the surge in violence? Could rage be seen as potentially a productive analysis of identity, one that led to political awareness and activism? Could they be seen as spontaneous action to injustice, one that acts in order to trans-

gress the "law", the "law" that has become an empty signifier to the Malay Muslim communities at Thailand far-south? It may help to ask, along with Carolyn Nordstrom (2004) observation of violent sites in parts of Africa and Sri Lanka, could one live on justice alone in any chaotic and violent atmosphere? Indeed, does the State or the "law" matters to the lives and livelihoods of its subjects in these dire situations. The answer was poignantly reflected by the following respond from the owner of a street vendor. At his home located next to the old mosque in Pattani, he told me, in a tone more of cynicism than contempt, "Here nobody is afraid of the law. We are only afraid of the police". He also commented on the drug situation and corruption by quoting a common rephrase: "If you are caught with the possession of narcotic drugs, with money they will turn into flour".

Five years after the Tak Bai incident, under the pretext of a state of emergency, the judiciary handed out a "not guilty" verdict on the army personnel's handlings of the protests and the transportation of the demonstrators. Obviously that did not sit well with many local Muslims. This phrase by Hanisah, one of the many *mak pasar* (open-air market food vendors) I worked with, pretty much sum up their feelings about the verdict, "Thailand has two states. One for Thais, one for Muslims". To be sure, the Tak Bai incident has become a political imbroglio for the government and the insurgents are using it as a recruiting tool.

Coming back to *Ponok Islam Narathiwat*, the headmaster, Puan (Missus) Shafikah and her ustazs and ulamas all strike me as welcoming, jovial, and hopeful when I first met them to talk about the fate of their *ponok*. But beneath the measure tone of our discussion lays a deep and sinister view about their *ponok* and what the future holds, if any, for their *dek ponoks*. Puan Shafikah tells me how frustrated she would get each time she ran into the parents of her *dek ponoks* as she could not offer any reassurance when their children could return to school. Puan Shafikah and her staff could still remember the sarcastic smiles of the police officers when they came to arrest two of her students and two ustazs for participating at the Tak Bai demonstration. Shafikah reminded me that that was the time when not taking part in the protest was itself an anomaly. Immediately after the students and ustazs were taken away, the first question they asked as they begin their interrogation was the financial situation of the *ponok*. To be more specific, they wanted to know how did the *ponok* manage to operate when it was only charging a meager 150 bahts per student per term. Puan Shafikah tells me that the police officers were either playing dumb or they must have not done their homework. As she puts it across to me, "Everyone here knows that most, if not all *ponoks* received some form of financial assistance, whether they came from the Middle East or from local elites who prefer to remain anonymous<sup>16</sup>".

<sup>13</sup>Despite my attempt of not revealing the real identity of this particular *ponok*, it should be obvious to most Malay Muslims in the far-south which *ponok* I am referring to.

<sup>14</sup>There have been eighteen attempted and successful coups in Thailand since it changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 1932. See, "Thailand: The Calm before Another Storm?" *Crisis Group Asia Briefing*, No. 121, 11 April 2011.

<sup>15</sup>According to Hannah Arendt (2005), there is always the paradoxical and ethical tension with *forgiveness* in that forgivers can be deservedly criticized for failing to remember the injustices they had endured—and remembrance implies, if not vengeance, at least an unwillingness to let go of the desire for vengeance. See, also, Giorgio Agamben (2005).

<sup>16</sup>Many ordinary Malays and Chinese I met confided to me that it is not uncommon for *ponoks* to receive contribution from local elites and businessmen but these transactions cannot be "broadcasted" for fear of getting into trouble, especially under the prevailing paranoia in the far-south. In fact, I have come across several *ponoks* in Pattani that do not charge any tuition at all. All the parents need to do is to pay for the books and stationeries for their children. Besides, it is not even a public secret that *ponoks* and many local NGOs in the far-south are funded by sources from the Middle East. In fact, Thailand's first Islamic University, the Yala Islamic University was sponsored by the Saudi Ministry of Religious Affairs, Saudi-based Islamic Development Bank, the King of Qatar, the King of Kuwait, as well as private donors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. See, Joll (2011: p. 49).

After the headmaster's refusal to divulge any financial information, more police officers arrived that day to search the *ponok*. And the raid continued for months, usually unannounced. In less than a week after the first visit, the police made a horrendous accusation that the *ponok* was a bomb factory because of the presence of some gas tanks. With their hands up in the air to express their exasperation, Puan Shafikah, the ulamas and ustazs point out to me that it was a horrendous accusation. "How else are we going to cook our food?" the headmaster asked before continuing, "This is a *ponok*. We live here. Those children. They lived here, studied here, slept here, washed their own clothes, they cooked here". One of her ustaz added, "They received their *nasihah* here"<sup>17</sup>. Later on, the police officers dropped their initial accusation but insisted that the gas tanks could potentially be used as bombs. Through a series of unending accusations, the headmaster, ulamas, ustazs, and some students were interrogated and to this day the charges against them was still pending in case the government decided to enforce it.

Besides these interrogations and charges by the police, the army was eventually called in. To make matter worse, on one occasion the army dug up some graves at the *ponok's* cemetery in the belief that there were weapons stashed underneath them. This was not only a sign of disrespect but also a violation of Islam (for that matter, any religion), something that not only enraged the folks at the *ponok* but also the entire Muslim communities in the area. In fact, the news reverberated throughout the three Malay Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in the far-south. The army never found any weapons in the cemetery but that did not prevent them from staging further raids. It got worse. On one of those raids, they ordered everyone to evacuate the compound while they did their search. Sure enough, it was during this particular occasion that the army managed to come out with the recovery of illegal weapons. The locals were not amused by it at all. This is a common rephrase I often heard when they lament about their disposition: "kalau kerajaan tak adil, hidup tak senang" (if the government is not fair, life will be difficult).

The last straw happened when the army arrested some students at an abandon *tadika* (kindergarten) and they also dug out several graves. After that, the *ponok* was closed and with its closing, not only have the state created a situation of joblessness for the headmaster, her ustazs and ulamas (and their respective families who lived with them) but also left all the *dek ponoks* without a school, a home and a community. Many folks at the surrounding area were worried that with the closing of the *ponok* their children would become *mat lepak* (young and idle), and indulge themselves in drugs, alcohol, gangsterism, and kratom.

Not too far from the *ponok*, the owner of a teashop, Hamid, asked me why it is only now that the government believes the *ponok* is preaching hate. Why not in the past? Besides, as he puts it, "These mysterious militants, whatever you want to call them. They are the minority. And they are killing not only state agents but also ordinary Muslims. They don't represent us but we are being blame for their violence". Hamid's lament reminds me of Tambiah's "leveling crowd" discourse I mentioned earlier. In targeting the diverse Muslim communities in Thailand's far-south with antiterrorist rhetoric, *Muslimness* has

become an object of criminality.

As we smoked and listened to his songbirds, a convoy of General Motor pick-ups and humvees raced past, bearing men in various uniforms: counter insurgency units, jungle police, paramilitary, paratroopers, and kratom military commandos/users. I asked Hamid if some top brass is visiting the nearby camp, to which he responded, with sarcasm, "Yeah, it sure look like it. But this kind of display, this show of force is *biasa* (normal). We are used to it, checkpoints, army garrison, what have you. *Biasa*". While he was feeding one of his songbirds with a special kind of banana, he gave me this half smile and said, "But such show of force is only for the daytime. Have you ever seen them after dark at the military checkpoints, unless they want to be lame ducks? Day and night is a different world around here. One is *waktu askar* (the hours of the army), the other is *waktu gerilya* (the hours of the guerillas)". Faosee, who has been very quiet the entire afternoon, interrupted Hamid and asked, "Are we *kon Thai* or not? Can we be *kon Thai* without being Buddhist?" I think he is saying why can't Muslims be Thais without being culturally Thais. Faosee suggested we should get going. It was getting dark.

### By Way of Concluding

As anthropologists we should be aware of some of the issues surrounding the usage of culture. Maurice Freedman (1975) once pointed out that culture, and here I may add religion, are not like homogeneous substance with the power to spread like butter, but that is how Muslimness and Islam in Thai's far-south and elsewhere seems to be presented: as a pattern of seepage, of slow over-spill. Freedman points out that there is a tendency to look for order and concurrence once we use these words, blinding us to all its ambiguity, movement, and complexity; and, in the case of the war on terror, focusing on a collection of stereotypical values and behaviors that have been made into this fearful fantasy in the war on terror.

Lately, all across the world, even among Muslim majority countries in Southeast Asia, the governments seem to be obsessed with the threat of Islamic terror. Lost in humanism at a time in history when we insist on the outer binary signs of international conflicts are the inner struggles and suffering of the people, each taken individually, who are the unbreakable core of what really matters. In the case of Thailand and elsewhere, the fact that *ponok* schools, like so many other religious boarding schools, were more than conduits of religious education, that they also maintained a wide range of social and economic functions was never really appreciated nor understood by the authority, both historically and in the contemporaneity of the war on terror (Madmarn, 2003; Narongraksakhet, 2005; Liow, 2009). Since 9/11, "jihad factories" or "dens of terror" thus described the intended, the metaphoric, and the symbolic function of the *ponok*, obscuring other possibilities these terms might entail. With the heightened surveillance and/or closing of several *ponoks* in the far-south, and thus depriving many of a source of affordable education, many of these *dek ponoks* were either forced to seek other alternatives in getting a decent education or dropped out of school altogether.

Of those who dropped out, many became entangled with all sorts of delinquent activities, including the possibilities of being recruited by militants. And of course, much to the encouragement of their parents, many Muslim youth escaped from the violence by doing the thirty days visa-hop to Malaysia, only to

<sup>17</sup>In Arabic, *nasiha* is a central concept in Islamic moral theology. Among many things, *nasiha* is a morally corrective discourse, one that signifies giving advice for someone's good, integrity, honesty, and doing justice to a situation (Asad, 2003).

end up being exploited at *Tom Yum* restaurants. But like the *ponoks*, these restaurants, perhaps because they were operated by Malaysian Malays, and thus Muslims, were accused by the Thai authority as being complicit with the current insurgency, of donating part of their revenues to the insurgency (see, Helbardt, 2011). It seem like the generalization did not stop with the *ponoks*.

But perhaps the main reason why the far-south is now ripe for the recruitment of angry young Muslim men and boys is the underlying poverty and the neglect it has suffered for so long, whose scars run deeper than what is visible. Many Muslims are fed up with talks about development and all the benefits of mega projects that have not trickled down. They would often refer to these so-called development projects with the acronym NATO (No action, talk only).

But more importantly, the peril of the longstanding assimilationist politics are laid bare, and the cost of the denial of coevalness to the Malay Muslims as historical agents in Thailand's far-south is high. And just to make their point, some government elementary schools were burned by those who have turned their back to dialogue because they were never listen to in the first place. These are a bunch of angry, frustrated, and disenfranchised youth who were being both held captive and absence in the narrative of the discourse on the war on terror. In my mind, to miss this is to misrecognize the puzzle to the whole equation as to what is happening to the far-south, that quaint little war that hardly, if ever, makes any headlines in international news coverage, let alone in their own country. It seems to me the answer is there, but the question has yet to be asked. And this is really what concerns me, the lives and future livelihoods of these *dek ponoks* and their teachers should the fear about Islam continues unabated, or when these children have no idea why they are being sought after or whose interests they are serving. These are the local faces of the war on terror.

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (2005). *The time that remains: A commentary on the letter to the Romans*. In P. D. Stanford (Trans.), Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Anusorn, U. (2010). *We love "Mr. King": Exceptional sovereignty, submissive subjectivity, and mediated agency in Islamic Southern Thailand*. Ph.D. Thesis, Washington DC: University of Washington.
- Arendt, H. (1969). *On violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Arendt, H. (2005). The tradition of political thought. In J. Kohn (Ed.), *Arendt, the promise of politics* (pp. 58-59). New York: Schocken.
- Asad, T. (2003). *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Chaiwat, S.-A. (2006). The silence of the bullet monument: Violence and "truth" management, Duson-nyor 1948, and Kru-Ze 2004. *Critical Asian Studies*, 38, 11-38. doi:10.1080/14672710600556411
- Chaiwat, S.-A. (2008). Untying the Gordian knot: The difficulties in solving southern violence. In J. Funston (Ed.), *Divided over Thaksin: Thailand's coup and problematic transition* (pp. 96-109). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Chaiwat, S.-A. (2009). *Imagined land? The state and southern violence in Thailand*. Tokyo: Research Institute for Language and Cultures of Asia and Africa.
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. (2003). Ethnography on an awkward scale: Postcolonial anthropology and the violence of abstraction. *Ethnography*, 4, 147-179. doi:10.1177/14661381030042001
- Crapanzano, V. (2003). *Imaginative horizons: An essay in literary-philosophical anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1983) [1972]. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: The University of Minnesota Press.
- D'Souza, D. (2007). *The enemy at home: The cultural left and its responsibility for 9/11*. New York: Broadway.
- Freedman, M. (1975). An epicycle of Cathay or the southward expansion of the sinologists. In R. J. Smith (Ed.), *Social organization and the applications of anthropology* (pp. 302-332). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Hefner, R. (2002). Global violence and Indonesian Muslim politics. *American Anthropologist*, 104, 754-765. doi:10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.754
- Helbardt, S. (2011). Deciphering Southern Thailand's violence: Organisation and insurgent practices of BRN Coordinate. Ph.D. Thesis, Passau: University of Passau.
- Huntington, S. (1998). *The clash of civilization and the remaking of world order*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Joll, C. (2012). *Muslim merit-making in Thailand's far-south*. New York: Springer.
- Kasian, T. (2006). Toppling Thaksin. *New Left Review*, 39, 5-37.
- Khalidi, R. (2009). *Sowing crisis: The Cold War and American dominance in the Middle East*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Kilcullen, D. (2009). *The accidental guerrilla: Fighting small wars in the midst of a big one*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Liow, J. (2009). *Islam, education and reform in Southern Thailand: tradition and transformation*. Singapore City: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Madmarn, H. (1989). Pondok and change in South Thailand. In R. Scupin (Ed.), *Aspects of developments: Islamic education in Thailand and Malaysia* (pp. 47-92). Bangi: ATMA, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press.
- Madmarn, H. (2003). Secular education, values and development in the context of Islam in Thailand: An outlook on Muslim attitudes towards Thai educational policy. In S. F. Alatas, L. T. Ghee, & K. Kuroda (Eds.), *Asian interfaith dialogue. Perspectives on religion, education and social cohesion* (pp. 66-77). Singapore City: Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA).
- Mamdani, M. (2002). Good Muslim, bad Muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism. *American Anthropologist*, 104, 766-775. doi:10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.766
- McCarthy, A. (2010). *The grand jihad: How Islam and the left Sabotage America*. New York: Encounter Books.
- Narongraksakhet, I. (2005). Pondok and their roles in reserving Muslim identity in Southern Brder Provinces of Thailand. In U. Dulyakasem, & L. Sirichai (Eds.), *Knowledge and conflict resolution: The crisis of the border region of Southern Thailand* (pp. 70-128). Nakhon Sri Thammarat: Walailak University.
- Nik, A. N. M. (1988). *Anglo-Thai relations, 1945-1954*. Ph.D. Thesis, Hull: University of Hull.
- Noor, F. (2007). Pathans to the east! The development of the Tablighi Jama'at movement in Northern Malaysia and Southern Thailand. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 27, 7-25. doi:10.1215/1089201x-2006-040
- Noor, F. (2009). *Qur'an and cricket: Travels through the Madrasahs of Asia and other stories*. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books.
- Nordstrom, C. (2004). *Shadows of war: Violence, power, and international profiteering in the twenty-first century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Surin, P. (1985). *Islam and malay nationalism: A study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand*. Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute.
- Talebi, S. (2011). *Ghosts of revolution: Rekindled memories of imprisonment in Iran*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Thanet, A. (2008). Origins of Malay Muslim "separatism" Southern Thailand. In M. Montesano, & P. Jory (Eds.), *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic interactions on a plural peninsula* (pp. 91-123). Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.
- Thongchai, W. (1994). *Siam mapped: A history of the geo-body of a nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Schmitt, C. (1996) [1932]. *The concept of the political*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Suwannathat-Pian, K. (1988). *Thai-Malay relations. Traditional intra-*

*regional relations from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.* East Asian historical monographs. Singapore City: Oxford University Press.

Tambiah, S. J. (1996). *Leveling crowds: Ethnonationalist conflicts and collective violence in South Asia.* Berkeley: University of California

Press.

Wan, K. C. M. (1990). *Muslim separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand.* Singapore City: Oxford University Press.