

Language Maintenance and The Preservation of Ethnic Identity: A Case of Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand

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Abstract

Language is known to have an effect on ethnic identity. For cultural groups who hold knowledge of ethnic language as a core value, language shift can lead to a loss of ethnic identity, cultural fragmentation and “non-authentic” expressions of ethnicity. The language has played and is still playing a symbolic role in the evolution and maintenance of ethnic identity within the Malay Muslim community in southern Thailand. It is significant to know how the Malay language was used as a symbol to create and sustain the Malay identity on the ways in which Malay Muslims today understand ethnic identity, and how ethnic language fits into their own ethnic self-identifications. This paper attempts to answer the question why Malay language constitutes a vital element in the maintenance of Malay ethnic identity among the Malays of southern Thailand. Two facts have been identified regarding the language and ethnicity link among Malay Muslims. First, Malay language is seen as a relevant ethno-cultural marker and its usage is limited within family, relatives and close friends. Second, Malay language is preserved along with Thai language, making many Malay Muslims bilingual, which is quite typical in the southern border provinces of Thailand.

Keywords: Language, Ethnic identity, Ethnic language, Malay language, Thailand

Abstrak

Bahasa diketahui orang ramai bahawa ia mempunyai kesan ke atas identiti etnik kerana pengekalan bahasa ibunda berfungsi sebagai penghubung yang lebih kukuh untuk masyarakat etnik bagi orang-orang yang memegang kepadanya berbanding dengan orang-orang yang tidak. Bagi kumpulan-kumpulan budaya yang memegang pengetahuan bahasa etnik sebagai nilai teras, peralihan bahasa boleh membawa kepada kelonggaran identiti etnik, pemecahan budaya dan ungkapan kaum 'bukan tulen'. Karya ini cuba untuk menerokai peranan simbolik yang dimainkan oleh bahasa dalam evolusi dan penyelenggaraan identiti etnik dalam masyarakat Melayu Islam di Thailand selatan. Ia membincangkan

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bagaimana bahasa Melayu telah digunakan sebagai simbol untuk mewujudkan dan mengekalkan identiti Melayu dengan cara-cara di mana Melayu Islam hari ini memahami identiti etnik, dan bagaimana bahasa etnik sesuai dengan etnik pengenalan-diri mereka sendiri. Oleh itu, karya ini cuba untuk menjawab soalan kenapa bahasa Melayu merupakan elemen penting dalam mengekalkan identiti etnik Melayu di kalangan orang Melayu Thailand selatan? Dua fakta telah dikenal pasti mengenai bahasa dan hubungan etnik di kalangan Melayu Islam. Pertama, bahasa Melayu dilihat sebagai penanda etno-budaya yang relevan dan penggunaannya adalah terhad kepada kalangan keluarga, saudara-mara dan rakan-rakan rapat. Kedua, bahasa Melayu dikekalkan dengan gabungan dengan bahasa Thailand yang menjadikan kebanyakan Melayu Islam dwibahasa dan ianya agak tipikal di wilayah-wilayah sempadan Thailand selatan.

Kata Kunci: Bahasa, Identiti Etnik, Bahasa Etnik, Bahasa Melayu, Thailand

Introduction

Language is generally regarded as a salient dimension of ethnicity, and as such is one of the most important articulations of ethnic identity both at an individual and at a group level (Sapir, 1956; Giles et al. 1977). This belief has led Lambert (1980) to posit that communicating in a language other than that of one's own group can lead to a sense of not belonging to the same culture as one's own ethnic-heritage group. One's sense of ethnic identity may therefore be threatened or lessened in some way; this is reflected in particular among groups that occupy low-power positions in terms of socioeconomic status when their members use the dominant group's language (Lambert, 1979, 1980; Giles & Johnson, 1981). This is one of the many reasons why many ethnic groups consider the loss of their language as symbolizing the loss of their identity as a group. Wardhaugh (1983) warns that this aspect can have an extreme result. For groups whose language has a profound value as a symbol of their ethnicity or as a clear mark of ethnic identity, its loss is regarded as the loss of their most precious asset and may be followed by complete (not just linguistic) assimilation. In this situation the role of language becomes relevant and significant in maintaining one's ethnic group and that language is so inextricably

bound up with group culture and identity that an attack on a language would naturally be interpreted as an attack on the speakers.

As a minority people living in the political sphere of Thailand as a nation, it is inevitable that the Malay Muslims will come into contact with the culture and language of the majority, particularly when the central government exerts its control through its various institutions upon the Malay Muslim society. Since the official ethnic policy is always implicitly that of assimilation, educational language policy dictates a monolingual, and by implication, monocultural medium of instruction. The government always sees its educational systems as an effective mechanism for socializing and integrating the Malays into Thai national life or, as we call it, Thaification of the Malay ethnic group. It is through the Thai educational system that the Thai language has been able to penetrate into the daily life of the Malays. Thai mass media such as TV play an important role in promoting Thai language and culture. So far the assimilation policy has not been well received nor has it been successful among the Malay Muslims who frequently look at the policy of Thai and even take it as a threat to their ethnic identity (Madmarn 1988, Shurke 1970).

In spite of their persistence in maintaining their ethnic identity, the impact of the education coupled with the pressure of the need for the Thai language, results in the frequent use of Thai among the younger generations, causing great concerns for the Malays who fear that their endangered ethnic identity will eventually face extinction. The apprehension that Malay ethnicity will be washed away by the mainstream Thai culture leads the Malay Muslims to make efforts and adopt strategies to defend their own cultural heritage and sustain their Malay ethnic identity. It is the significant role of Malay language towards the preservation of Malay ethnicity in southern Thailand.

Minority and the Problem of Ethnic Identification

Following Ladd Thomas, a “minority” can be defined as follows:

“A minority consists of a group of people who are ethnically, linguistically, religiously or otherwise

differentiated from the group which is numerically large and which politically dominates the nation-state in which the two groups (and perhaps others) live; the members of the minority often occupy a subordinate position in terms of prestige, privilege and power and members of the minority feel a primordial attachment for their own group which competes with loyalty to the nation-state in which they live”.

Within this definition we can trace several implications which are very much related to the Malays in southern Thailand. Firstly, the term “minority” denotes some kind of status differentiation and as such it expresses the duality of relationships between the dominating groups and the dominated minority groups. Given this, the Malays occupy only a subordinate status within the scheme of relationships between them and the Thai Buddhists. Secondly, the problem of political domination is clearly expressed in the above definition. The Malays of southern Thailand suffer this subordinate position to the extent that they have never been considered a strong contending force in the political arena of the state. Malay political participation external to their community is minimal and it seldom transcends the threshold of the village. Thirdly, the element of “primordial attachments” is clearly relevant to the three most southern provinces with special focus to the case of the Malays at Yala municipal city. As such the term “minority” includes, among other things, the fact of a constant consolidation of the Malays who see themselves and likewise are seen by others as a distinct group within the nationalistic order. Ethnicity in general tends to be very much enforced and stressed because it bears economic, political and social significance.

Throughout the revival of ethnic identity of the past twenty years, many researchers have attempted to understand the link between identity and language in the maintenance of ethnic identity. Much of the debate surrounding this issue has centered on a question: is language a salient marker of ethnic identity? Some scholars have argued that language has little actual significance to the ethnic identity (Renan 1990, p.16). For others, the opposite is true: language is an intrinsic, determining feature of ethnic identity, and a ‘core cultural value’ (Smolicz 1993; 1995). In *Islam and*

Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand, Surin Pitsuwan (1985) gives an overall picture of the reactions of Malay Muslims according to the political changes over different historical eras. Pitsuwan summarizes how the Malay Muslims are not willing to negotiate their identities in order to maintain their language and ethnicity.

There are different factors that can be attributed to the pattern of ethnic survival in the world. The most common factors are political in nature such as the degree of a community's autonomy, its political will to survive and its leadership qualities. Apart from that there are also economic and ecological factors, such as the possession of specific home-land, location, population, and presence of various resources, facilities and skills for the support of a community. Yet another set of factors treat ethnics as networks of communication, and seek to ascertain how custom, language and other symbolic codes bind the members of communities such as ethnic group and minorities, together over generations.

Some ethnic communities can survive, and have survived over long periods without even political autonomy. This suggests that we need to give more attention to the subjective elements in ethnic survival, such as ethnic historical values, symbols and traditions. The reason is that, according to Anthony D. Smith (Paul R. Brass, 1996: 85-90) the long term ethnic survival depends, in the first place, on the active cultivation by specialists and others of a heightened sense of collective distinctiveness and mission. The members of an ethnic group must be made to feel, not only that they form a single "Super-family", but also that their language community is unique, and that they possess what Max Weber called "irreplaceable culture values", that their heritage, language must be preserved from external control, and that the community has a sacred duty to extend its cultural value to next generations. Anthony D. Smith mentioned one pattern of ethnic survival called as the communal-demotic, referring to the community which has usually been conquered and is struggling to preserve its former rights and way of life, claiming that its members are the original inhabitants and their culture is the vernacular. This pattern of ethnic persistence does not pretend to be exhaustive. However, it reveals the importance of belief in their culture, and symbols for ethnic survival. Similarly, the case of the Malay Muslims is quite unique, as they are different from other minorities in Thailand as they are

indigenous. Their territorial concentration is adjacent to their linguistically and culturally related majority group across the border (Wolck, 1983). An often cited phrase in referring to the Malay Muslims as an ethnic minority is that “they did not come to Thailand, rather Thailand came to them” (Forber 1982; 1053, Madmarn 1988, 3). They have been attempting to preserve their ethnic identity and cultural autonomy in the midst of systematic waves of repression and assimilation policies induced by the Thai government. They have also been forced by the government’s policy over six decades, in the name of creating one Thai national identity, to adopt the language, dress code and cultural practices of the Buddhist majority Thais.

One of the primary conclusions of the last three decades of sociological identity studies is that identity is formed as a process of communication with others (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Shotter & Gergen, 1989; Gans, 1979, as cited in Hecht, 1993). In addition, communication is an enactment of identity and even when group identification is not the primary purpose of the communicative act. In the course of everyday life speakers unconsciously utilize communication rituals (i.e. norms, mores) that create and express the group identity, and for Malay Muslims this means communicating in *Bahasa Melayu*. According to Hecht (1993), “not all messages are about identity, but identity is part of all messages.” Members of the Malay Muslim community have together defined a general identity as the indigenous people of southern most provinces and have taught successive generations this ethnic identity through enactment, i.e. through communication in *Bahasa Melayu*. Language is at the core of national identity, and it is a commonly held idea among Malay Muslims that language is at the core of *their* ethnicity. From this debate there has emerged a wider concern for the elements of both ethnic and national identities. The importance of ethnic identity in coping with a variety of life situations, particularly those of a stressful nature, has been a major focus of current literature. While competing between two identities-national identity and ethnic identity-is a complex task for most minorities; it is particularly complicated for minority belonging to ethnic groups. The Malay Muslim community, unlike other minority groups such as the La Na people in the north and the ethnic Lao community in the northeast, has somewhat strong resistance to national integration. There are essential elements of

incompatibility between Malay Muslims and the Thai Buddhists, which can not be easily reconciled by the process of development and modernization. These incompatibilities include the historical reality of the existence of independent Malay kingdom of Patani (1457-1902) and the differences in culture, particularly language, which are frequently used as “symbolic cultural markers” to reinforce their claim to sub-national uniqueness. One of the main resistances that make the integration of ethnic Malays difficult has been – among others- the persistence of their mother tongue. The broad process of modernization – the spread of market economy, increased literacy, and improved social communication- does not lead to a cultural diffusion that produces a homogenous culture within a given territory. As Clifford Geertz argued, “modernization does not do away with ethnocentrism, it merely modernizes it”. Indeed, modernization proves to be less helpful in lessening ethnocentrism.

Brief Review on the Malay Muslims of Southern Provinces

Muslims in Thailand form the second largest ethnic minority after the Chinese. They are between four and six million in a population of about 62 million citizens. They maintain around 2,700 to 2,900 mosques. They make up the largest religious minority in Theravada Buddhist Thailand (Scupin 1998: 229; Gilquin 2005). Thai Muslims comprise two broadly defined categories. First, there are the Malay Muslims who speak the Malay language and reside primarily in the three southern Thailand provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Malay-speaking Muslims comprise more than 70 percent of the total Muslim population in Thailand. The other category of Muslims is the Thai-speaking Muslims who reside in Central, North and Northeast Thailand (Scupin 1998; McCargo 2006: 3).

Although Muslims are a minority in Thailand, Malay Muslims of the south make up over 70 percent of the population in the four southern provinces. Most of the Malay Muslims in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat speak several local varieties of the Malay language while many in Satun have begun using the local southern Thai dialect as their mother tongue. The present-day Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat comprise an ancient Malay kingdom named Patani. The question of 'Malay' is a highly

contested one in academic scholarship. Summing up these contradictions is a recent edited volume *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identities across Boundaries* (Barnard 2004). The authors in this volume refer to the nature of Malay-ness as 'one of the most challenging and confusing terms of Southeast Asia' (p. xiii). Since it is difficult to pinpoint the precise meanings and origins of 'Malay', the authors say that they should focus on the level of everyday life where people in various parts of Southeast Asia explain Malayness differently. This very anthropological understanding of the term 'Malay' can be applied to southern Thailand as well where the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun, as well as the three districts of Songkhla bordering the province of Pattani, are seen by the local Malay-speaking southern Thais as Malay-dominated areas. The inhabitants of this geographical-cultural space are seen by both Thais and Malays alike as speaking Malay, practicing Malay culture and espousing Islam. Though the Malay language is one of the principal markers of Malay identity in this region, Thai is increasingly spoken among the urban Malays. Yet, the Malay language is predominantly spoken amongst Malays themselves, especially in the rural areas of the four provinces. This self-perception of Malay-ness marked by language, cultural practices, religion and an important shared sense of history of being a people conquered by the Siamese and as a distinct ethnic group vis-à-vis Thai Buddhists.

The Dominance of Standard Thai

Since King Vajiravudh's initial directives that standard Thai should be used in schooling throughout the country, eighty years of efforts in national language promotion have resulted in standard Thai coming to hold an extremely prominent and dominant position within Thailand. Standard Thai is a form of central Thai based on the variety of Thai spoken earlier by the elite and now by the educated middle and upper classes in Bangkok. Currently standard Thai is widely understood, primarily due to its dominance in various areas of life. In the domain of education, it is officially decreed that all public schooling has to be provided via the medium of standard Thai, throughout the country. Standard Thai also dominates the media, with the vast majority of T.V and radio programs being broadcast in standard Thai, reinforcing its national

presence. It is also the official language of government, business, public speaking, functions, economic development, and social prestige (Diller 1991). Because of its dominant presence and continual promotion through the media and education, standard Thai is also perceived as an important national symbol, alongside Theravada Buddhist (Smalley 1994: 14).

Other Thai Languages

While standard Thai is indeed heavily dominant in education, the media, commerce and officialdom, many other languages are also widely spoken in Thailand in other domains of daily life. Standard Thai being a language which is primarily learned in school or via the media, the vast majority of the population (nearly 90 percent) actually grew up speaking some other languages at homes. These are central Thai, spoken in the area of the central plains (including Bangkok), Northern Thai (the language of the old kingdom of Lan Na), northeastern Thai known as Isaan language, and southern Thai.

Non- Thai languages in Thailand

In addition to the Thai majority population (90 percent), a large number of non-Tai languages are spoken by the remaining 10 percent of the population of Thailand. Two non-Thai language groups reside in Thailand, who deserve mention because of their links to “none”. The assimilation and identity issues are mainly related to urban Chinese and the Southern Malay speakers

The Thai Chinese

Both king Vajiravodh and Phibul saw the growing identity of this economically dominant Chinese population with nationalism in China rather than Siam as a potential threat to national unity, and moved to force greater integration of the Chinese into the emerging Thai nation. This was essentially achieved in two ways: first, by economic measures which made it significantly more difficult and costly for non-Thai to engage in commerce in Thailand, and second, through the effective control of Chinese language in education, a longer term but nevertheless highly effective means of stimulating integration.

Following the decree that all schools follow the standard Thai curriculum, there was mass closure of private Chinese schools in the Phibun era, and new generation of ethnically Chinese children began to experience their daily education in standard Thai, being presented with images of Thai culture and history rather than learning Chinese (language, culture and history). The result of so much sustained pressure on the Chinese community has been a dramatic assimilation of the Chinese into Thai society. From the Phibun era onwards there was increased intermarriage of Chinese men with Thai women, thus producing offspring who grew up hearing and learning Thai rather than Chinese (Simspon.2004: 403).

In order to maintain their prominence in business, many Chinese adopted Thai names and manners. Now since the economic and educational measures to encourage integration were put in place, the Chinese in Thailand have evolved into a much blurred community referred to as Sino-Thai, with 15-20 percent of the total Thai population, still having significant Chinese heritage. The Sino-Thai are people who have a memory of being partly Chinese, but whose daily life may involve Thai language and culture more significantly than Chinese, and there has been a significant and clear loss in the ability of younger generations to speak Chinese (Morita:2004). The comparative term 'Chinese' in Thailand is commonly described as showing the highest degree of assimilation (Simspon.2004.).

The Malay Speaking Muslims of the Southern Thailand

A strong contrast to the extensive assimilation of the Chinese is represented by the weakly -integrated status of the Malay speaking Muslim population living in Thailand's three southernmost provinces near the border with Malaysia. Approximately one million Malay Muslims inhabit a set of territories which were previously independent Malay states, and which were fully incorporated into Siam only in the 19th century. Being ethnically, historically, and linguistically Malay rather than Thai, and by religion Muslim rather than Buddhist, the population here continues to be significantly distinct in many ways from that of the rest of Thailand, and many amongst the Malay speakers feel that they have much more in common with the inhabitants of

Malaysia in the south than with the Thais in the north (Andrew :403).

Being very much aware of the obvious differences between the Malay speaking community of the south and the national identity promoted elsewhere in the country, the Thai government of Phibun era made vigorous, heavy-handed attempts to assimilate the Malay speakers during the 1940's and 1950's. This however, was met with strong resistance and little success, unlike the successful assimilation of the Chinese. Since the 1960's a more sensitive approach to the Malay Muslims has been adopted, but there has nevertheless been continual government pressure on both language and schooling in the region, and a refusal to accept the existence of the term "Malay" as one ethno-linguistic label for reference to this group, officially replacing the term "Malay-Thai" with "Muslim-Thai" as a designation of the population there. Paralleling their approach to private Chinese school, the government also insisted that education in the Malay speaking area is to be carried out in Standard Thai by teachers with state recognized teaching qualifications. However, despite the institutionalization of the Thai language in the Malay areas, there has been only mixed success in the government's hope for integration of the Malay Muslim population. However, there is still a widespread feeling of not properly belonging to the Thai nation and its dominant culture, and there is also a resentment at the attempts of the government to ban the use of Malay in schools. Malay language is perceived by the Malay Muslims as an important component of their identity alongside Islam and a Malay ethnic social structuring different from that of Thai society.

Although, there had been signs that more of the younger generation were beginning to develop less negative attitude towards Thai language and culture than in the past, there is still a strong feeling among majority of the Malay Muslims that they are generally not treated as equal partners in the Thai nation and its ongoing development, and are discriminated against on the basis of their language, culture and religion. The situation in the borderlands of the far south of Thailand therefore, continues to pose a challenge to the promotion and portrayal of a unified Thai identity based on language, religion and culture.

The vitality of Malay language in the sustenance of Malay ethnicity cannot be denied. The history of the Malay Muslim shows that the use of Malay has been the key factor in maintaining ties with the Malay world. However, due to the political sensitivities of being surrounded by Malay Muslim speaking nations, the Malay language remains to be the important language of the province. Within the Malay community, the Malay language has been a language of communication. The language is so interwoven with the society that it is regarded as the core element in cultural identification of the Malay Muslims here creating fear within the community that Malay Muslims lose their cultural identity with less usage of Malay. The Malay Muslims have several institutions within the mainstream population, which allows for the use of language as a cultural tool for maintaining family values and religious instructions. Many religious subjects are taught in Malay (especially in private religious schools). The Malay language is still regarded also as a tool for the transfer of religious values. The continued existence of '*madrasahs*' or religious schools are also an avenue where Malay language is used widely. To a large degree, religious instruction helps to perpetuate the use of Malay language.

Conclusion

The religion, a geographical location and common ancestors may be the characteristics responsible for initial growth of the Malay Muslim community in Thailand but there is a stronger element as binding force for the community. They do have a common religion but that is part of a greater Muslim *Ummah* and they cannot claim a separate identity by virtue of belonging to Sunni school of thought. In present times, the only common binding force and the factor of their identity as a separate ethnic group is Malay language. The Malay language is also regarded as a vital element in the traditional Malay family structure. Malay Muslim families, for various reasons, are more likely to be organized in a more complex form than Thai families. The traditional joint and extended families are still common among Malay Muslims. In these families, the older generations, who usually speak only Malay or use Malay mainly in daily communication, "force" the younger generations to learn Malay in order to communicate with them. That is why the Malay ethnicity and culture are preserved more effectively and more successfully in a more complex Malay family than in a simpler one.