

A Socio-Anthropological Survey in Songkhla Province

A Preliminary Report

Toru YANO

1

My study in the southern part of Thailand is being made with the purpose of investigating the social and cultural traits of a typical "Thai Islam" community.

Over the past years many scholars have studied this important country in Asia, and recently a number of anthropologists have engaged in field work on Thailand. However, nearly all of these scholars' interests have been limited to the areas of Thailand north of Bangkok. Only late in 1960, did an American anthropologist from Cornell University publish a monograph on a small Islam community in the province of Pattani (c. f. *Rusembilan: A Malayan Fishery Village in Southern Thailand* by Thomas M. Frazer, Jr., Cornell University Press, 1960). This book constituted an original contribution to studies on Thailand, for it dealt with that part of the country which, until now, is neglected in the main trend of Thai studies.

Irrespective of this earlier lack of interest, the southern part of Thailand is significant, sociologically, and worthy of more attention. One of the important topics about which little is known is the social and cultural organization of the "Thai Islam" communities.

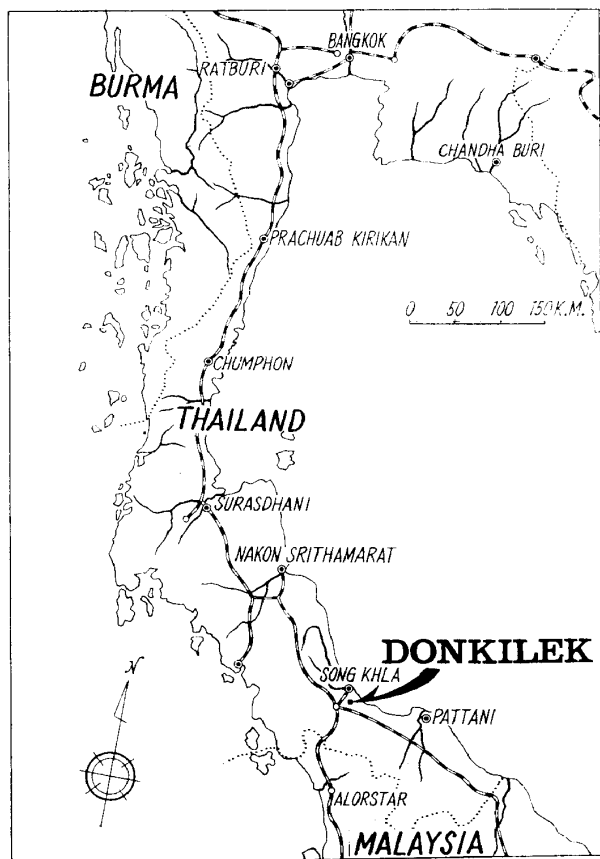
Moslems occupy nearly 4 per cent of the total population of Thailand, and constitute a significant minority within the Southern population. Moslems of Thailand are separable into two categories, Thai Islam and Thai Malay. Officially, the Government of Thailand refers to all members

of the Moslem group as "Thai Islam" in order to stress the national unity of all citizens regardless of race or language. But a distinction should be made between two categories within the Islam community of Thailand.

The Thai Malay Moslems are concentrated in the area directly adjacent to Malaysia. They are essentially Malay and differ from the rest of Thai nation not only in religion and language, but also in over-all culture and behavior. The term "Thai Islam" should be applied to the second category of Moslems which are scattered in about twenty of the country's other provinces, especially in the province of Songkhla. The "Thai Islam" Moslems are regarded as Thais. They speak Thai dialects for daily use.

The "Thai Islam" are descendants of slaves and prisoners of war who were moved north from Malayan provinces. It seems, however, that this explanation about their origin applies only to the Moslems in the Central Plain. The Thai Islam people located in the South, for instance those in Songkhla, should be thought of as natives of the area with Malayan origin who have become Thai in the long process of history.

In spite of their different origins, Thai Islam as a whole offers an answer to the problem of Thaiization of Moslems in the southern border areas. In recent years, the Thai government has become increasingly aware of the need to integrate Moslems. Therefore a case study of a group of Moslems already Thaiized provides empirical evidence to define the principles of their integration.



2

My concern about Thai Islam as well as problem of cultural fusion caused me to select Songkhla. In July 1964 I traveled in the principal districts of the province with the purpose of choosing a suitable Islam village for a one-year survey. I consulted with government officials and knowledgeable residents for advice about my study. I finally selected one Islam village in Amphur Muang and contracted to take residence at a Kamnan's house near the village.

The village, a "Muban" in Thai, which I chose is called Donkilek and is located within the boundary of Tambol Pawong, Amphur Muang of the Province of Songkhla, about 19 kilometers southwest of the town of Songkhla. Songkhla's population totals approximately 31,000. Donkilek is a typical Thai Islam community, the whole population being Islam believers. The total number of the households is 296.

The Province of Songkhla is located just at the middle point of the east coast of the Malay peninsula and is adjacent on its southern border to the provinces where "Thai Malay" people predominate. The Province of Songkhla constitutes a border area separating the cultural sphere of Thai Buddhism from that of Malay Islam. The 1960 population of Songkhla Province was 500,285, of which roughly 18 percent were Islam believers. All of these Moslems are "Thai Islam". In Songkhla, there are about 170 Islam communities and, if I allow myself to make a bold assumption, those communities in Songkhla form a belt of the Thai Islam cultural zone, separating the above-mentioned two cultural spheres.

I chose Donkilek for several reasons. Donkilek, being a purely Islamic community, is surrounded by three Buddhist communities so that the villagers live in constant association with Thai Buddhists in their daily activities. Secondly, Donkilek is composed of five small hamlets each of which has distinct characteristics, some are rapidly developing, others stagnate, some are loosely structured, others are of tight structure. These contrasts enable me to make a comparative study of plural community samples within the single community of Donkilek. Thirdly, Donkilek is located near enough to Songkhla and another town, Haadyai, so that the villagers have ample opportunity for close contact with commercial centers. And lastly, with nearly three hundred households, the community itself is large enough to contain most of the social and cultural elements typifying a Thai Islam community. I also took into consideration the level of modernization and secularization of the village, which I previously tested by several formal and informal interviews with villagers.

3

My field work began in August, 1964, when I started participating continuously in the daily life

of Donkilek.

My approach to the villagers was quite informal at first. I joined a group of people who moved a house from one place to another. I sat near the corpse of a deceased with other attendants on the occasion of a funeral. After I gained rapport with the village people, I set about collecting data through rather formal interviews of the heads of all families. I continued my participant observation in daily activities as well as on any occasion of important rituals within the village.

To sum up the manner of my approach to the village, it was both formal and informal, for I have employed two different methods in order to analyze the social and cultural traits of the community. On the one hand, as participant in village activities, I have spent most of my time in conversing informally with men and women of the village.

The bulk of information comes from informal conversation with them. My second method, on the other hand, is formal inquiry by interviews of all the householders, through which I aim to learn of "social communication" within Donkilek. By "social communication", I mean the whole range of communication from intermarriage to travel experience, literacy, the ability to understand the standard language, the accessibility to mass media, the frequency of postal communication and so forth. The concept of "social communication" is useful as a means of study in a peripheral area since it helps to measure the degree of integration of a community into the nationhood. Formal interview seems most appropriate for collecting this kind of informations. In my Donkilek study, I thought it desirable to compare the social communication of a Thai Islam community with that of an ordinary Thai community dedicated to Buddhism. Therefore I have been conducting the same interview test in a Buddhist village close to Donkilek.

I will publish the result of my study in a monograph through Kyoto University. My publication will be in two parts corresponding to the two-fold method which I am applying to Donkilek. One part will deal with anthropological anatomy of the village, including economy, religion, government, and life cycle of people. The other portion will deal with social communication in the village, of which I hope to make a detailed account after analyzing the information collected through formal interviews.

In this way, I expect to draw a complete portrait of the sociocultural organization of a typical Thai Islam village community in the South and also to present a concept of "social communication" which will be verified by the observed behavior of people in Donkilek.

4

My study of Donkilek is not yet completed.

Therefore, I can make no conclusive remarks. I can only set forth a few unrefined remarks in accordance with the data I have collected in the course of my field work, which is still going on at this moment.

From the viewpoint of cultural fusion, I note that the religious customs in Donkilek have been influenced by Buddhism. One good example is that one of the villagers of Donkilek attends the *wan pra* day service in a nearby Buddhist community, and listens to the preaches delivered by a monk. Another example, the villagers believe in "pi" just as people in Thailand generally believe in its existence. In Donkilek, there is a "mo pi" or spirit consoling doctor, who takes care not only of Donkilek muslim people but of Buddhists as well. Finally, the wedding ceremony ritual is similar to that of the inhabitants in nearby Buddhist communities.

I have given the keenest attention to social relations between the villagers of Donkilek and those of the surrounding Buddhist communities.

I have confirmed the widely-shared belief that the relation between Thai Islam and Buddhist sectors is almost frictionless. It must be admitted that, on the part of the Moslems not only in Donkilek but elsewhere, there is a strong inclination to keep their community free from habitation by Buddhists, but, except in the case of intermarriage, social relations between the two sectors is quite peaceful. People of Donkilek and from the Buddhist villages gather together in the market and at boxing matches in Buddhist temples on Buddhist holidays. They recognize the difference in religion, but it does not follow that they force conversion on one another.

The people in the Thai Islam belt in Songkhla are fully welded into the Thai nation. Their respect of the King and Queen, their interests in the state of affairs in Bangkok, their self-identification as "Thai" Islam, all these testify to their integration as Moslems into the Thai nation.

On the other hand, my social communication test reveals that the villagers of Donkilek are far less qualified to be good citizens of Thailand

than villagers of Buddhist villages. My test questions concerning the ability to understand the standard language spoken in Bangkok reveal that Islam people can hardly translate the words used in the southern dialect into the standard Thai, while nearly 50 percent of the persons in the nearby Buddhist village could do it. Another test concerning knowledge about difficult words such as "Democracy" or "Communism" tells that Buddhists are again more aware of and familiarized with those type of words than Moslems. I found in Donkilek to my surprise that quite a number of people who possess radio sets don't follow the language spoken by the announcers. It must be stressed here that the Thai government should be more aware of the need to make Thai muslims familiar with the standard Thai language.

Further conclusions are unwarranted for this preliminary report on my study in the South. I would like to express my deepest feeling of gratitude for the kind consideration extended to me by the National Research Council.