

In Search of Justice in Thailand's Deep South: Malay Muslim and Thai Buddhist Women's Narratives

JOHN CLIFFORD HOLT, ed.; SORAYA JAMJUREE, comp.; and HARA SHINTARO, trans.
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In May of 2008, Saimah Che'nae was nursing a newborn at her home in Kuching Lepah village, Pattani Province, in the deep south of Thailand. She had returned from hospital a few weeks earlier and since then had remained at home: breastfeeding, caring for the child, and moving carefully around a painful Cesarean scar. But she could hear the hubbub from the noodle store next door. And on this night, she noticed, the sounds were more animated than usual. Calling out to her neighbors, she learned that a local schoolteacher, known to her as Chuling, had been seized and taken to the nursery school grounds. Later, Saimah would learn that two Thai teachers had been abducted in a bungled attempt by insurgents to bargain for the release of two Malay-Thais who had been detained earlier on suspicion of causing the deaths of two navy personnel. Not knowing any of these circumstances, Saimah murmured with concern, "May Allah protect her."

Saimah's husband had returned from prison only two days earlier: he had been detained for 28 days under the 2004 Emergency Decree, which gave extraordinary powers to officers to detain, arrest, and interrogate people in the South suspected of terrorism, even on slim evidence. Saimah herself was summoned just days after her husband's release. She was detained at the police station for two days, and then at Narathiwat Prison for 14 days, on suspicion of being responsible for Chuling's abduction and assault. Saimah described the painfulness of her Cesarean scar in the cold of the prison, the pain of not being able to breastfeed her newborn, and the difficulties of sharing a prison cell only six tiles wide with six other women. Unlike many of those other women, Saimah was released on bail. She fought the case until 2011, when it was finally dismissed. But even then, her name appeared on blacklists, preventing her travel beyond Thailand's borders.

In Search of Justice in Thailand's Deep South is a collection of stories written by victims of violence in Thailand's deep south. Victims here are understood as those who have lost a loved one to violence (in a shooting, beheading, or disappearance, for instance) or to unjust incarceration. Soraya Jamjuree, founder of the Civic Women's Network, solicited the narratives and compiled them, and she also provides a preface. The Civic Women's Network is composed of volunteers who work to amplify the voices of women caught up in the violence. Many members were also themselves victims. These narratives were published first in Thai, under the editorship of Thitinob Komalnimini. *In Search of Justice in Thailand's Deep South* makes these accounts available to Anglophone readers for the first time, in translation by Hara Shintaro (who also provides an introductory note). Seventeen of the narratives are written by women, three by men, 15 by Malay Muslims, and five by Thai Buddhists. John Clifford Holt appears to have sponsored the translation by way of a grant from the University of Chicago, and he provides an illuminating introduction that

puts the conflict into historical context.

The conflict is very old, with outbreaks of violence between the Malay enclave in Patani and surrounding Buddhists spanning centuries, even if most of the history between these groups has been peaceful. Through the twentieth century, tensions have focused on calls from the moderate Islamic leader Haji Sulong (martyred in the 1950s) for limited independence for the four southern provinces within Thailand. His suggestions included a Muslim governor, instruction in Malay in schools up to grade 7, recognition of both Thai and Malay as languages of government, and an independent Muslim judicial system separate from the government's courts (p. xxvii). These were perceived by some as disloyal to the Thai nation and a threat to Thai sovereignty, leading to conflicts between insurgents and the Thai state. Violence has accelerated considerably since 2004. Holt describes how the populist Shinawatra Thaksin government, elected by a landslide in 2001, was ill prepared to take on the complexities of the long-running tensions in the South. For instance, it abolished the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre, which had long muted the violence through social measures such as poverty reduction, and instead handed management of the insurgency exclusively to the police. After the deaths of several police officers at the hands of insurgents, Thaksin declared martial law in 2004. Holt describes the overuse of force to quell the insurgency as "draconian" and "ham-fisted": insurgents with haphazard improvised explosive devices faced off against the extraordinary powers granted to the police and military under the special laws of the Thaksin government.

A common thread in this collection is that the violence seems to come out of nowhere. There is no voice in this collection that speaks from the perspective of a self-confessed insurgent or perpetrator. No one admits to a crime. There are no testimonies from military or police officers. The overwhelming voice presented here is one of bewilderment: violence intrudes on an otherwise happy and peaceful civilian life. Unexpected and uncalled for, violence leaves devastation in its wake. Many of the stories also express some kind of resolution, often concluding with hope for the future or words of praise for the Civic Women's Network, Allah, or even the Thai justice system. The structure of the stories is typically threefold: first the shock of violence, then the aftermath, then the resolution.

Another common theme is education. As Holt notes in his introduction, education is a much-valued end for many of the victims who speak in this volume. Men and women alike seemingly make incredible efforts to ensure the education of the children in their care. But another aspect emerged to me on reading this collection: the conflict in the South is itself a conflict about education. Education in Malay was one of Haji Sulong's demands. The narratives show that Islamic communities in Thailand's deep south go to extraordinary lengths to educate their children in *pondok* schools: often run by community groups and staffed by volunteers, these schools get by on a shoestring supported above all by the devotion of the community. But these are treated as hotbeds of extremism by law enforcement officers in some of the stories. In one story, we meet

an Islamic female school principal who was arrested on suspicion of harboring insurgents on her school grounds. In another, we meet the widow of a respected *pondok* teacher who was killed during the Kru Se Mosque incident.

These scenes contrast with those in another story: in Chuling's parents' home we see paintings and hand-drawn images of the king. Chuling evidently made these when she was herself a school student in Chiang Rai. The images give a hint of the triad of nation, Buddhism, and king that is typically taught at regular Thai schools. Chuling herself was, of course, a schoolteacher: the image of this northern daughter teaching with dedicated zeal in the deep south seems to have contributed to the outpouring of grief and anger at the events that led to her death. Furthermore, she was held captive in a school. The conflict as it appears in this collection is fundamentally about education: who has the right to educate, what they can teach to whom, and whose version of the truth they teach.

Even the Civic Women's Network is evidently involved in education, offering training to victims of the violence so that they can go on to moderate "seminars" focused on bringing peace to the deep south. Saimah Che'nae, for example, describes how the network reached out to her, overcoming the stigma and isolation Kuching Lepah village experienced after Chuling's assault and death. The network created a group of village women impacted by the incident, and together the group now produce "edible peace"—herbed fish crackers—as a signature product of the village. Saimah trained with the network to run seminars sharing views between victims and law enforcement officers, and in this way she was able to finally have her name removed from the blacklist: "It was as if I had entered a broader world, with new perceptions about surrounding society, and stood up again" (p. 50). She now volunteers to teach people how to recite the Qur'an four days and five evenings a week.

It must be noted that the narratives in this collection are not always highly readable. Hara acknowledges the difficulty presented in rendering these texts into English. It is hard to know how eloquent or compelling these stories were in their original Thai or Malay. It is safe to assume that these are amateur stories. The effort was, after all, to make ordinary people's stories heard. Not surprisingly, the results are mixed. In amongst the extraordinary, one finds the saccharine, the mundane, the confusing, and the clichéd. This led me to wonder about the role of authorship. If the aim is to let the voices of victims be heard, how is this best achieved? An admirable path is offered here: people in more privileged circumstances (Holt, Soraya Jamjuree, Thitinob, Hara) have dedicated their talents and resources to making the stories written by people in less privileged situations available to a wider audience. This is an ethical approach to a difficult situation. Furthermore, it can be read as a positive response to recent calls to decolonize scholarship, for those in already-privileged positions to act as megaphones for the less privileged, for research to engage with activism, and for research to proceed from collaboration and partnership. On all these counts, *In Search of Justice in Thailand's Deep South* is both a highly commendable and a

contemporary book.

The volume's approach also opens questions about authorship: are these stories really spoken in the victims' own voices? Or do they inevitably come to the reader already influenced, perhaps by the framing offered by the Civic Women's Network style? Hara puts these questions squarely on the table in the translator's note. Of course, thinking critically about authorship is not to discredit these stories, but instead to offer further nuance for a richer reading. At the same time, it reaffirms the importance of acknowledging and thus working with authorship: all stories are crafted, and the craft is an important one, because well-crafted stories are not only available to be read, but also highly readable.

Although (from a story-craft and readability point of view) these stories are far from perfect, the collection remains compelling because it stands as one of the very few available opportunities to hear from victims of the violence in Thailand's deep south. This book is recommended reading for anyone seeking to better understand religious violence and the Thailand "beyond the smiles" (as the original Thai collection was titled).

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Crip Colony: Mestizaje, US Imperialism, and the Queer Politics of Disability in the Philippines

SONY CORÁÑEZ BOLTON

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In this stunning theoretical and archival work, Sony Coráñez Bolton dives into the interstices of global colonial strategies and postcolonial projects by re-examining culturally significant Philippine images and narratives using the lenses of race, disability, and queerness. It is a monumental feat that begins with something small: a childhood memory of his mother using three languages—Spanish, English, and Tagalog—that lets him map out his own positionality as a mestizo Filipinx American professor of Spanish.

Throughout *Crip Colony*, Coráñez Bolton takes great pains to tease out the meanings and possibilities of the *mestizaje*, which is fundamental to his analysis of the ways that Philippine and Asian racial hierarchies were trafficked from the colonizers to the colonized, the primary difference between which, he argues consistently, is one of "imagined capacity" (p. 15). Referring to inter-racial mixing, *mestizaje* has been celebrated as an empowering space for the hybridity and plurality of Latin American cultures, but it has also been criticized for its erasure of indigeneity and its