

Malaysian nation-making and Thai-speaking Buddhists in Kedah

Keiko Kuroda (Kagoshima University)

Introduction

In this paper I set out to reconstruct something of the historical experience of Thai-speakers in the north Malaysian border state of Kedah during about a century. Although the large majority of the population in Kedah is Malay-speaking and Muslim, the proximity to Thailand means that many Thai-speakers were stranded when the borders were drawn.

Kedah had close political, economic, and cultural relations with the Kingdom of Siam (present-day Thailand). A history of the political diplomacy between Thai rulers and Kedah Sultans has been written [Kopkua 1989], however, grass-roots studies from a local perspective are still inadequate. Examination of local village history would show another side to the unique characteristics of this area and how the multicultural villagers interacted. Collecting and collating local oral history would contribute greatly to our understanding.

There has been a general awareness of the presence of Thai-speakers in the historical territory of Kedah but few have yet concentrated their attention on this minority. My own interest was stimulated by reports on the Sam Sam, a group predominantly consisting of Thai-speaking Muslims. They were covered by Archambault in 1957 [Archambault in 1957] and a later paper by David J.

Banks about the historical role of Thai-speaking Muslims of Kedah, who were called *the Sam Sam* [Banks 1980]. Bank's paper relied mainly on documentary research, including statistical data on Thailand and Malaysia and official British colonial documents in the 19th century. In 1990 and 1991, building on this base, I carried out fieldwork in Thai-speaking Muslim villages in north Kedah. This yielded a short paper concerning the history of these villagers and their present conditions [Kuroda 1992]. The situation of Thai-speaking Buddhists, another Thai-speaking minority in Kedah, however, was beyond the scope of that paper. In this paper, I will focus on the Thai-speaking Buddhists of Kedah.

Here in light of more recent data, including observations based on my own fieldwork, I will re-appraise old statistical data and historical records from either side of the Thai-Malay border. In addition, I have made use of some anthropological and historical studies concerning this frontier where Thai and Malay cultures mingle [Cheah 1988, Nishii 1989].

No account of Thai-speaking Buddhists in Kedah would be complete without comparing their situation with that of the Thai-speaking Muslims. After the border was agreed in 1909 the trials of both groups of people help to illuminate what was involved in the process of building both the nation states of Thailand and Malaysia.

Historical Background

My account begins with a discussion of the political relation between Siam and Kedah. Located on the southern periphery of Siam, until 1909, Kedah was a Malay tributary state of Siam. From at least the 16th century, after Kedah was Islamized, the Siamese kingdom Ayutthaya demanded tribute, sometimes

applying military force. On the Malay Peninsula, Siam maintained similar tributary relations with Kedah, Patani, Kelantan and Trennganu, and sometimes with Phatthalung.

Home to Indian and Islamic merchants, as ports of call for Far Eastern junks and Indian Ocean dhows, these peninsular polities played an indispensable role for the trade of Siam, in which Ayutthaya was the central of node.

The Anglo-Siam Treaty of 1909 instituted a fixed modern-style border between the Kingdom of Siam and British Malaya. This border was agreed through negotiation between the Government of Siam and the colonial officials of British Malaya. Little attention was paid to the cultural affiliations of the people who lived in these Malay states that formerly had tributary relations with Siam. In the final outcome, Satun, historically a part of Kedah, and Patani remained in Siam territory. Meanwhile Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Trennganu became part of the British Empire.

One feature of the new order was the reduction in the area of influence of post-agreement Kedah. Before the treaty the Sultan had exercised maritime control over the archipelago that fringes the western coast of the peninsula up to near Phuket Island. Under the Siamese tributary system, as the paramount local naval power, Kedah had maintained *de facto* control. Within this large area, many foreign traders and traders local to Kedah had prospered by using sea routes and trade routes across the isthmus through to Patani and other places on the Gulf of Thailand.

Perhaps this was a factor in the second peculiarity of Kedah: unlike other Siamese tributary states on the eastern coast, there were many people in Kedah

who could understand and speak Thai. The strong Thai influence is apparent in both place names, extending inland, and in the forms of traditional entertainment. Even today there are clear minorities who speak Thai as their first language. These Thai speakers include both the Malay Muslim *Sam Sam* and Thai-speaking Buddhists.

Thai speakers in Kedah

Muslims who speak the Kedah dialect of Malay comprise the major ethnic group in the population of Kedah. Even so, there are still people living here who use the Thai language. In the first half of the 20th century, however, almost half of the people in Kedah could understand and speak Thai language [informant in kg. Kota 1990]. The Population Census of Kedah and Perlis in 1911, includes the category of Thai-speakers, and includes *Sam Sam* as a subclassification of Malay [Cavendish 1911]*¹.

Here, the terms 'Thai-speaker' and '*Sam Sam*' are taken from the classifications of the 1911 census. For the purposes of comparison, it will be assumed that almost all *the Sam Sam* are Thai-speaking Muslims [Kuroda 1989]. If this were so, the census would provide statistical data that enables us to compare the situation of Thai-speaking Muslims with Thai-speaking Buddhists. Apart from the census, from the 19th century, cursory descriptions of Thai-speakers, especially the *Sam Sam*, occasionally turned up in fragmentary reports. Inconsistent and contradictory, these accounts do not allow for any kind of generalization. The inconsistency of these descriptions more likely provides evidence of diverse mixed-cultural characteristics. As such they flesh out the statistical data and give clues about what the area was like before modernization. Space precludes going into detail here.

With greater certainty, the census tells us that there were two general categories of Thai-speaker in Kedah. The Malay Muslim *Sam Sam* appeared as a Malay sub-classification. The term is also found in the journals of 19th century English explorers and later in the official annual reports issued by the colonial advisers of Kedah and Perlis. The census of 1911 provides the only reliable data for the *Sam Sam* population and distribution of residence. In 1911, 5% of the Malay population were *Sam Sam*. Most of them were paddy farmers and settlement was concentrated in villages in northern districts: Kubang Pasu, Padang Trap, and the central district of Kota Ster (including Pendang). Hardly any *Sam Sam* were living in the southern district, which was opened to cultivation comparatively later^{*2}.

Concentrated also in Pendang, Thai-speakers who were not included in the 'Malay' classification comprised another group of Thai speakers in Kedah. In all likelihood they were probably Theravada Buddhists. Using other sources, describing how they came to the area and their post-settlement history, I would like to discuss these Thai-speaking Buddhist migrants.

Lists of Siamese temples and monks in Kedah and Perlis in 1890 provide a source of information. The oldest official records I discovered for Thai-speaking Buddhists are lists of Siamese temples and registered monks of Kedah and Perlis in 1890, 1892 (National Archives of Kedah 1992). These lists are included in the collection of the letters and documents of Sultan Abdul Hamid of Kedah. The original lists are written in the Malay language with Jawi script.

The lists show that there were 13 Siamese temples mainly around Bukit Perak in Pendang. At Wat Lamdin, the largest temple, there were 22 registered monks. According to oral tradition and scant remaining documentary evidence, the

temple had been established several hundred years before and so was also the oldest. Because the documents concerning the origin of the temple were lost in a fire, however, there is no solid evidence for this temporal seniority.

It is reasonable to speculate that a settlement existed near the temple because temples are essential to the daily life of Thai Buddhists and temples generally require parishioners. The Siamese distribution in the census of 1911 does, in fact, show Thai-speaking settlement near the temple. It is likely that the largest Siamese communities were at Padang Peliang, Padang Kerbau in Pendang district and Tekai in Padang Trap district. In these areas *the Sam Sam* villages and the Thai-speaking Buddhist villages are very close.

The Thai-speaking Buddhist villages are almost exclusively in the inland area. This is likely due to the route of original migration. Settlements are largely found in the Muda River valley. Flowing from the watershed with the Patani River, the Muda meanders through the southern Kedah before discharging into the Strait of Malacca. Elsewhere, the list of 1890 shows a temple lower down the Muda valley in Baling district. In the early 19th century, Topping reported that numerous refugees from Patani fled from war and settled in the Muda River valley [Topping 1850]. In my personal observations of the residential environment of the Thai-speakers in Pendang district, I found a tendency for *Sam Sam* villages to be on lower-lying land and for Thai-speaking Buddhist villages to be higher up in tributary valleys. In these areas I also came across Malay-speaking Muslim villages in which the vernacular was the Patani dialect.

Some Thai-speaking *Sam Sam* informants (kg. Nawa and kg. Titi Akar) recall a lifetime of interaction at local markets and participating in local festivals and ceremonies, but they either have no opinions on their origin or insist that their

ancestors settled locally several hundred years ago. This account of origins is probably influenced by the oral traditions concerning the old Thai temples.

Compared with their Thai-speaking Buddhist neighbors in the northern villages of Kedah, Sam Sam villagers have very poor recollection of their Siamese connections. The Thai-speaking Muslim *Sam Sam* have maintained contact with Muslim relatives over the border in Thailand. Oral accounts of their origin largely concur that they came here, at around the beginning of the 19th century, from south of Songkhla or Patani to seek better land for wet-rice farming [Kuroda 1992].

The differences in these traditions offers food for thought about the origins of Thai-speakers in Kedah . It is possible that some settlements of Thai-speakers in Pendang originated from earlier migration than in the northern area.

Thai-speakers and the frontier 'Bandit Area' after fixing of the border

After the border was drawn in 1909 people continued to flow freely between the countries, often as part of their everyday work. For example, to bring in harvests from Patani to Kedah, seasonal laborers would cross the border. Others carried out cross-border trade between Kedah and Songkhla and visits were also made to relatives across the new border. Unfortunately, cattle rustlers and bandits could now also take advantage by fleeing across the border to escape pursuit. The Kedah Police and border patrols could not effectively control security in the border area. That is why Kedah gained a reputation as the 'Bandit Area' in the 1920s-1930s.

Cheah Boon Kheng has analyzed the famous Kedah robber tales [Cheah 1988].

One of these concerned Saleh Tui who, because *tui* is from the local dialect of Satun (Satul), was probably a *Sam Sam* from Satun. Even the most notorious outlaw, Nayan, although a Malay Muslim, was mainly active in Pendang, the area where Thai-speakers were concentrated. Saleh Tui and Nayan were known as 'Kedah men.' In comics and books Nayan has been transmuted into a 'Malayan Robin Hood, and his name lives on still today.'³

Another outlaw, Din Prum crossed into Malaya from Patani. He was either Siamese or *Sam Sam*, but had Thai nationality. Working his way up from cattle rustling, he soon went on to carry out robberies in Baling. On the run after committing crimes, he would cross the border into Thailand, outside of the jurisdiction of the Kedah police. He was more typical of the criminals that took advantage of the political division of the modern border. In the end he was shot dead by the police of Kedah. This incident became an international incident, however, because the Kedah police did not get permission to pursue Din Prum over the border into Siamese territory. Diplomatic negotiations were required to resolve the issue.

Tunku Abdul Raman even wrote an essay which features a story about a *Sam Sam* man who, in the 1930s, converted from Islam to the Buddhism to marry a Buddhist woman [Tunku Abdul Rahman 1978]. This conformed with the general image of *Sam Sams* as Muslims who lacked piety. In Kedah, the 'Bandit Area' impression of the vicinity where Thai-speakers are concentrated has remained until recent years.

Choice of national identity in nation building

After more generalized fear of plunder in the wake of the Japanese invasion, the

end of the war in 1945 paved the way to independence for the people in British Malaya. As elsewhere, on the way to, and after, independence, nationalist leaders emphasized national identity to establish the new country as one that could stand on its own internationally. In nascent Malaya, a country of ethnic diversity, some kind of unifying nation-state ideology that encompasses all citizens was needed express public identity in the nation as a whole.

During the war, an anti-Japanese movement gained strength in the Chinese community, leading the occupation forces of the Japanese army to suspect all Chinese people. Meanwhile, the Malaya Communist Party carried out guerrilla actions. In this border area there was cooperation between the communists and the many Chinese who were antipathetic to the Japanese. When the British returned, the colonial government kept a wary eye on both the activities of the Malaya Communist Party and the Chinese.

Looking beyond the solidarity of opposition, to build a new multi-ethnic nation, many ethnic groups came together to create what became Malaysia. During this period the groups created a sense of what it meant to be Malaysian. Individuals had to select and deal with pressure to conform with formal categories of Malaysian ethnicity. People could no longer simply follow local customary practices, they had to actively be Malaysian.

The *Sam Sam* found that 'Malay Muslim' most closely suited their aspirations, even though they spoke Thai and were not ashamed of their personal connections with Thai people. At the same time, they worked to repair the negative stereotype of the *Sam Sam* as lacking Muslim piety and former associations with the 'Bandit Area.' Until independence, shared language and familiarity with local cultural practices meant that the *Sam Sam* people married

