NOTE

MENACE AND REASSURANCE IN MALAY CIRCUMCISION: A NOTE ON SOME ATTITUDES OF KELANTAN THAIS

by

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The 1970 census of Malaysia enumerated a total population of 686,266 in Kelantan, consisting of 637,012 Malays, 36,668 Chinese and 6,937 Thais.[1] This relatively minute and little-known community is almost entirely rural; urbanization (at any rate, urbanization independently of the marriage of Thai women to urban Chinese) has really only begun in the last ten years. The Thais are not quite lost from view in the countryside, however. Their 14 principal settlements—three to the southeast of Kota Bharu and 11 to the north and west (on the left bank of the River Kelantan)—are distinguished by the colourful pavilions and pagodas of their *wats*. Thai villagers may look Malay except to the experienced eye, but even if one does not spot the *wat* among the trees one may be startled and forewarned by the sight of a little black pig scampering across one's path. Also it is worthwhile to emphasize–for the point is often greeted with scepticism—that the Kelantan Thais speak Thai, the same basic dialect as prevails in the southern part of Narathiwat, though with some interesting variations between villages. But the great majority of Thai men can speak Malay. They would be at a very serious disadvantage economically and *vis-à-vis* the administration if they could not, for even if the Thais are not lost literally from view in the Malay countryside, each Thai village is physically isolated from the rest, sometimes by distances of many miles. Out of this situation has grown a quite strong sense of exposure and vulnerability.[2] The purpose of this paper is to explore one important ethnic boundary-marker between the Thai and Malay communities: the Malay rite of male circumcision, whose overtones are more menacing, in their way, than the open (though unfulfilled) threats of Islamic Party politicians in the 1959

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1. R. Chander, *Gulongan Masharakat* (1970 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia), Kuala Lumpur, Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 1972, pp. 60-61.

2. For an introduction to one of the factors which mitigate subjective vulnerability (and for some further basic ethnography of the Kelantan Thai community), see my "The Chinese in Kelantan, West Malaysia, as mediators of political integration to the Kelantan Thais", *Nanyang Quarterly* 3, part 3-4, December 1973: 1-10; or, in a more definitive printing, in Denys Lombard, ed., *Chinois d'Outre-Mer*, Paris, L'Asiathèque, 1976; pp.83-96.

elections to the Kelantan State Assembly, to close '*kafir*' temples and ban the keeping of pigs. But we suggest that so long as circumcision helps in a small way to repel individual Thais from cultural crossing, and ethnic integrity is upheld, the community will feel secure in its cultural identity and thus amenable to integration, on a political level, with the incipient Malaysian nation.

Economic and social modernization has brought Thais and Malays into ever-increasing contact and the days are past when Thais would be met with gestures of disgust, such as spitting on the ground, if they entered a Malay village. But Malay friendship has a disturbing aspect. On my visit to Semerak in Pasir Puteh District (southeastern Kelantan) in 1974 I noticed that the Thai youths and local Malay youths (unlike in 1967) were playing football against each other on an improvised pitch near the *wat*. Nearly all Thai boys of the current generation have been to Malay primary school, and have learned Malay earlier in life thau their fathers did.[3] They may not have learned to read and write Thai at all, because instead of becoming attached to the *wat* as temple boys (called โยม / *yoom* in Kelantan) they were going to Malay school. Now they are unequipped to บวช *(buad)* before entering full adulthood unless they spend several months making up for lost opportunities of Thai literacy. And in face of the many opportunities of employment outside the village, young men may be reluctant to devote time to such an enterprise. If they avoided the monkhood, who could say that some of them might not even gravitate towards the Malay community, be attracted to—or lured by—the sister of one of their Malay friends, and give up their Thai identity altogether? The shortage of Thai girls, which caused a very small number of Thais to seek Malay wives in the past,[4] persists to some extent because not a few Thai girls still prefer a Chinese husband (and urban life) if they can secure one. Meanwhile the chances of a Thai male finding a Malay wife have obviously increased, thanks to the more regular and friendly contacts between Thai and Malay adolescent males. These are the sort of reflections which lie behind the frequent expressions of parental concern about the decline in Thai literacy among their children.

There is, of course, a very big difference between having a daughter marry a Chinese and having a son marry a Malay girl. A Thai girl with a Chinese husband continues to make merit at the *wat*, and her husband may well accompany her on occasion. A Muslim girl, however, cannot marry a non-Muslim, and this has the significance, in the present context, not that Thai males are not at risk, but that they must convert to Islam in order to take a Malay wife. If a Thai converts to Islam he cannot make merit for his ancestors, or for his parents after their death. This is a terrible act of ingratitude and as such gives rise to a profound moral objection. But in philosophical terms it is still in the same category

3. The early to mid-1960s at Semerak saw concerted effort by the local Malay headmaster to attract Thai pupils to his school. This was very much in the spirit of national policy but the government had also provided an incentive (to headmasters) in the form of a capitation allowance. The Thai population of Semerak was 353 in 1967.

4. At Semerak there have been six cases in living memory. Although I distinguish in footnote 12 between 'conversion for marriage' and 'conversion for land', it is certainly the case that prospective Malay parents-in-law are sometimes in a position to offer the use of land as well as bride. Some Thai males unable to find a Thai wife will in fact be landless or nearly landless villagers. Wage labour plus thrift provide no solution of land hunger for a non-Malay for he cannot buy land from Malays under Malay Reservation Law.

as failure to *buad*, even if ten times worse. Just like failure to *buad*, it constitutes a breach of faith (in the contractual sense of the term): one has failed to repay one's parents' pains in bringing one into the world, and their efforts in raising and educating one to a decent life and a sense of one's responsibilities (and blessings) as a Thai.

Although a breach of faith of this magnitude is a very serious matter, it is not enough, by itself, to account for the peculiar horror and physical disgust with which Thais view conversion. This disgust arises from circumcision, which is not only physically disagreeable to them, but has sinister, irrational overtones which make conversion appear a more likely prospect than it really is: because the consideration that this disgusting practice will surely deter young Thais from conversion is potentially balanced or outweighed, for older Thais, by the thought that a community which circumcises, and takes this primitive rite so seriously, will be capable of many other breaches of the ethical mean in order to win converts.[5]

It is virtually impossible for a Thai ever to witness circumcision (except by undergoing it himself and ceasing to be a Thai). And yet in the village of Semerak there is an elderly man, *Naa* Nong, who was once on good terms with the Raja of Besut, for whom he used to perform the Manora drama (shortened by Kelantan Thais to โนห์รา / *noraa*). When the Raja's son, many years ago—probably in the early 1930s—reached the age of puberty, a *noraa* was arranged as the main part of the celebrations marking the boy's circumcision. *Naa* Nong, the *noraa*-master, was invited, by an exceptional gesture of respect and friendship, to witness the ceremony.

What dominates *Naa* Nong's recollection above all is the extraordinary and unnatural elongation of the foreskin as it was stretched by the special bamboo vice in preparation for the operation. *Naa* Nong had never imagined that a foreskin could be made as long as that. It grew longer and longer. *Naa* Nong suffered in empathy. At last the moment of severance arrived, and with a swift stroke the *mudin* performed the irrevocable act. There was a dramatic haemorrhage, and the floor was covered with blood by the time the bandages were applied. But worse was to come. The nauseous climax was the invitation to all the witnesses (including *Naa* Nong) to wash their faces in the water in which the severed skin was placed. At this point *Naa* Nong stumbled sickened and embarrassed from the room.

As *Naa* Nong recounted his experience in 1974 his wife Kh' Chan screwed up her face in disgust and uttered hissing sounds expressive of deep contempt. Thai women feel no less strongly about this than Thai men. As we have noted, the rite of circumcision is not only thoroughly distasteful in itself to local Thais, but by its profound irrationality in Thai perceptions suggests an underlying arbitrariness of the Malay moral order. This might lead to all kinds of threats to Thai interests apart from their religious identity. But circumcision has, above all, a quality of irrevocability which implies ruthlessness in the pursuit of conversion itself at every stage. Circumcision seems ruthless because Thais who had converted in an

5. It might be added here that the 'irrationality' of Islam and its lack of a mean are also often illustrated by Thais by referring to the high incidence of cattle theft during the fasting month of Ramadan. The Malays eat sumptuously during fasting month—itself something of a moral anomaly—so the price of meat rises, and this in turn drives up the number of stolen cattle. As the Thais see it, the Malays steal to make merit : surely an upside-down moral universe if ever there was!

incautious moment could then be mesmerized or shamed into permanent loyalty to Islam by their bodily transformation. Might not the attempts to secure a Thai's initial decision be characterized by the same unethical and ruthless guile?

Since a bodily transformation is involved—no less fundamental for the fact that it is not normally visible—it is not surprising that circumcision has become as much an ethnic boundary-marker for the Thais as it is for the Malays themselves, and considerably more important (though less frequently discussed) than the eating of pork. Fear of mutilation is inculcated in Thai male children as soon as they can talk. Mothers and fathers warn little boys that a Malay will come and cut off their smallest member if they don't behave. "แรงไม่พึงแอะ แขกเอาไปตัดกะดอแส่" (*"raeng mai fang, ae'! khaeg aw pai tad kador, sae"!)*[6] The significance of circumcision as a boundary between the communities is also emphasized by a story which *Caw* Daeng of Semerak believes to be authentic (it was told to him once by elderly Malays) that one of his great-grandfathers was a Malay who became a Thai (this would be about 90 years ago) after failing to go through with circumcision on successive occasions. Each time, he developed a severe fever. In the end he was ostracized by his peers, sought refuge at the Thai *wat* and in due course became a Thai. Today, Thais enquire of Europeans whether they eat pork and (after a certain level of familiarity is achieved) whether they practise circumcision. It is a matter of great relief to be told that they do not.[7] It places the Europeans, as it were, on the right side of the great divide between civil, humane culture and the forces of unreason; and this, apart from anything else, reinforces the conviction that Thai culture is civil and humane, because the Europeans have had high prestige in any case since the colonial period, which is remembered for its blessings of progress and just administration. Conversely, failure to circumcise gives Europeans the status of honorary Thai. This all adds in a marginal way to the after-glow of the imperial sunset, that diffuse nostalgia which delays acceptance of the post-independence political arrangements and Malay domination. At the same time, however, in so far as the ritual in practice works to inhibit total assimilation, it may be argued that the community as a whole is subtly reassured and becomes accessible to other, less abrasive influences for assimilation and political integration—for in a small minority community, even the loss of one member to 'the other side' can be highly demoralizing.

Let us consider the question of virility and sexual prowess. In the light of the threats of loss of male identity which little boys hear when they are naughty, one might anticipate that Thai males would carry into adulthood the germ of an idea that circumcision invoives a reduction of manhood. (The same words "*tad kador*", which children understand in the sense of "cutting off a penis", are used for circumcision.) This might pose a more insidious threat, one may think, than anything we have mentioned thus far. But here it is only necessary to recall that adult Thais of both sexes know quite a lot (mainly from market gossip) about what

6. "A really bad case of [literally: 'strongly'] not obeying [literally: 'listening'] if you please! A Malay (will) take (you) away (and) cut off (your) penis, d'you know!" (I render the two exclamatory enclitics as heard, without seeking, or locating, possible Thai dictionary equivalents. The word แรง is a loan translation from Malay *kuat*, and is used here with the meaning 'very'; มาก is never used in Kelantan Thai in this sense.)

7. Also a matter of satisfaction for the European and gentile social scientist to be able to say this without too much distortion of the present truth about present Western gentile practice.

goes on in nearby Malay villages. They know Malay males to be no less sexually energetic than Thais. Some Malays are less active than others, it is true, and then their wives may goad them into divorce and try to attract another man, but this is a matter of temperamental variation between individuals, a phenomenon which Thais understand well from their own experience. Judging by the frequency with which Malay males voluntarily change wives, or even indulge in polygyny, they might even appear **more** virile than Thais. Certainly this is the Malays' own evaluation of their sexual behaviour, and as for circumcision, its association with virility in Malay popular belief is unmistakable.[8]

For their part, the Kelantan Thais do not take the symbols of Malay sexual prowess (such as polygyny and circumcision) at full face value. They regard them as signs of unhealthy obsession and superstition, and a Malay tendency to vertigo and swagger. They also derive amusement—as well as financial gain—from the reliance of certain Malay women of Thai sexual charms. But they do assume (rightly) that the husbands of these women are sexually normal. The Thais have no concept of obsessions being inhibitory or self-defeating. The Malays are thought odd, but not impotent. And the few Thais who have been brazen enough **both** to cross to Islam **and** to show their faces occasionally in their old community do not complain of any disappointment in the area of manly preoccupation which was all (or a significant part) of the original motive for their conversion. One such Thai turned up at the ordination celebrations at Balai, Bachok District, in 1974.[9] He had moved to a Malay community a few years earlier. His presence was clearly embarrassing but his former friends made the best of it and asked him teasingly about his new life. 'Is it still sore?' they said. The renegade touched himself with mock caution in the strategic vicinity and dismissed the suggestion with a sly smile.[10]

If circumcision is not perceived as an assault on virility, it will not stand in the way of conversions among younger Thais who desire to have a wife, as traditional forms of social control in the service of ethnic solidarity decline. Literate and secular-minded young Malays these days have sometimes undergone the operation in hospital, and will be able to reassure their Thai friends that it is 'just one of those things' that Malays do, a harmless

8. Cf. William Wilder, "Socialization and social structure in a Malay village", in Philip Mayer, ed., *Socialization: the Approach from Social Anthropology*, London, Tavistock Publications (A.S.A. Monograph No. 8), 1970; p. 225. Syed Alwi bin Sheikh Alhadi, *Adat Resam Melayu dan 'Adat Isti' adat*, Kuala Lumpur, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Siri Pengetahuan 'Umum DBP, No. 1), 1960; p. 9.

9. This *wat* is illustrated in Stewart Wavell, *The Naga King's Daughter*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1965; opposite p.96. A major weakness of this book, in my view, is its reluctance or refusal to face up to the reality that the 'Kelantan Buddhists' are completely normal, *bona fide* Thais.

10. On the other side of the coin, although Malay males think of themselves as exceptionally virile (partly thanks to circumcision), I have never picked up any hint—from Malays or Thais—that Malays assume sexual inadequacy on the part of uncircumcised Thais. Malays tend to overestimate the potential of Thais in all spheres involving magic and the possession of special powers, and it is not inconceivable that 'special powers' would be assumed to be available to counteract any disadvantage arising from non-circumcision. In this general connection, a reference to Wavell (*ibid.*, p. 136) may be to the point. He describes a Malay belief (which he himself, romantically but ill-advisedly, accepts at face value) that Thai girls compete for the privilege of sleeping with ordination candidates on the night before their entry into monkhood. It is most interesting to notice such an ethnocentric interpretation of the Thais' adult rite of passage in sexual terms, for the Thais, as we explain below, have their own ethnocentric interpretation of circumcision in terms of abstention and worldly withdrawal.

formality like any other social custom. The 'stratagem' of conversion which Thai parents should beware of is rather the disarming relativism of intelligent, modern Malays, not the devious snares of a twisted fanaticism.

In fact, Thais of the middle-aged and older generations are themselves already partly disarmed because of the positive reassurance inherent in the rite of circumcision itself. This will seem paradoxical and contradictory after all that has been said, but there is scarcely any negative aspect of Thai-Malay relations which does not have its positive side, and an alternative, positive interpretation in the Thais' perceptions. The Thai custom of *buad* is a form of sacrifice which opens the door to responsible adulthood and marriage (besides being an act of gratitude due to one's parents). Frequently, Thais remark that all ethnic and religious groups practise some form of sacrifice and self-discipline which ensures responsibility and morality. I interpret this to mean, in the Kelantan context, that if each member of a plural society is a member, in good faith, of one of its cultural traditions and observes the disciplines which it prescribes, he will develop a sense of mutual interest and respect *vis-à-vis* other members of the plural society whose ostensible cultural allegiance is different but whose commitment to peace, order and underlying socio-religious values is the same. When the ecumenical mood takes a Thai he will say that "the Malays, too, *buad*": they all fast for one month in the year (as Thai monks do after midday all the year round) and young men are not considered ready for adulthood unless they have suffered circumcision. This is the rite which is seen as most nearly equivalent to the ordination of young Thais as monks; the latter also, of course, involves a physical change by means of a razor: the shaving of the head, as well as the initial pain of fasting. (It is also observable that Kelantan Thais often attend the hospitality accompanying a local circumcision, or *masok jawi*, and invite Malays to their sons' ordinations in return.)

The interpretation of circumcision as a purgative or fortifying ordeal is, I think, partly correct in terms of Malay belief. Where the Thais are less correct is in persuading themselves that Islam can be as eclectic and tolerant to other religions, on the grounds of such parallels, as Buddhism is. It is right to see popular Islam as a moral order with many basic points in common with the moral order of Buddhism (if it were not, Thais could not have lived harmoniously and to some extent interdependently in the midst of Malay society for so long). But it is wrong to suppose that a socialized and responsible Malay will, by these tokens, accept in **principle,** even for their adherents, the validity of other systems of belief than his own, as Thais are willing to do; for Islam is in principle at war with atheistic beliefs such as Buddhism, and proselytization has enjoyed much more government support since the Islamic Party joined the National Front (1973-1977) and Dato' Asri became Deputy President of the National Council of Islamic Affairs. Even the tolerance and seeming relativism of a secular-minded young Malay does not exempt a Thai from conversion and a change of identity if he wishes to 'become his brother', for in the Malay States *shariah* law has the full force of the state behind it. But the secular-minded Malay may add his subtle influence to the Thais' own ethnocentric complacency about the nature of Islam, to achieve gradual

inroads into Thai-Buddhist solidarity, where the characteristically menacing aspect of Malay religion has so far provided effective deterrence—and yet, by this very token, a certain security for the Thais as a whole.[11]

11. If the State Government were to use land-grants as an enticement, as in Sabah, it is probable that there would be some Thais willing to pay the religious price of a big increment in their material welfare. Whether or not it was the first step in a concerted effort, some Kelantan Chinese were deeply depressed when no less a personage than the Officer for Chinese Affairs in the State Secretariat, Choong Peng Por, converted in 1974 with his family, receiving, it was rumoured, 20 acres of rubber land in appreciation of his good example. (For the official details see *Majallah Kelantan* 6, No. 6, June 1974—Rumi and Jawi versions—p.7.) Although conversion to Islam does not bring recognition as a Malay under State laws or the Federal Constitution, land laws and discriminatory business licence quotas are easily waived for 'deserving cases'; and land in a Malay Reservation, one gained by a non-Malay, is heritable, as likewise a business licence. Circumcision is in fact 'commendable but not obligatory' in Islamic belief and a convert has only to declare his mental state for purposes of registration and recognition in Malaysia. It seems likely that in any concerted drive for converts in Kelantan, every effort would be made—as for example in Sabah—to moderate the impact of conversion on the life-style of first-generation converts and thus cause less cultural dislocation than occurs in the case of conversion for the sake of marriage. (In the latter case it would normally be the prospective father-in-law who would ensure that circumcision was carried out.)