

# FRONTIERS WITHIN FRONTIERS: THE PERSISTENCE OF THAI ETHNICITY IN KELANTAN, MALAYSIA\*

## Brokers of Morality: Thai Ethnic Adaptation in a Rural Malaysian Setting

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The conditions for a successful integration of ethnic minorities into 'new nations'—or rapidly developing but long-established nations like Thailand—have been one of the characteristic concerns of contemporary political science, and it will be part of my concern in this article to illustrate the relevance of political science in this respect. But the traditional preoccupation of political scientists with the 'state', and our seduction more recently by the easy opportunities of international relations, seem to have left us with little research on the critical rural sphere to our credit. Perhaps some political scientists have a sense of the futility of competing with the social anthropologists, whose institutionally inherited techniques and ever more sophisticated methodology constitute in themselves a most remarkable case of human adaptation. Both by training and, in many cases thanks to innate linguistic and cross-cultural aptitudes, social anthropologists seem to have a head start. They combine a traditional disciplinary orientation to rural societies with a thoroughly up-to-date interest in modernization, viewed typically as a process of culture contact and cultural change. Taken together with the relative inactivity of other disciplines, such factors have enabled social anthropologists to produce some of the most exciting and relevant research on ethnic contact and assimilation in modern southeast Asia.

For Thailand and the Thai-speaking peoples there are the essays in Kunstadter's collection (Kunstadter 1967), or Moerman's work on the Thai Lue (Moerman 1965; 1967a; 1967b). Conceptual convergence in south Thailand was the subject of a suggestive paper in this journal a few years ago (Burr 1972). And for the Thai-speaking valley people of upland Burma and their symbiotic relationship with the hill people, there is Edmund Leach's classic study (Leach 1954)—through which, as through his own (Leach 1960) and others' later work, runs the theme that processes of adaptation and integration as such, between indigenous minorities and majority groups, are of extremely ancient standing (cf. Kunstadter 1967:42). However, 'many of the minority peoples in southeast Asian countries were, and still are, internally organized on a level which necessarily brings them into structural opposition with the "central government"' (Kunstadter 1967:41) with its battery of new normative concepts, ranging from 'economic development' through 'the nation' to 'imperatives of national security'. Even

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where 'structural opposition' is not present—as I have argued for the Thais of northeast Malaya that it is not (Kershaw 1968; 1969: 28, 168-173)<sup>1</sup> — there is fertile theoretical territory to be explored, both from political science and social anthropological perspectives. But in relation to the 7,000-odd Kelantan Thais it is once again social anthropology which has made the running with Dr Louis Golomb's outstandingly professional monograph, based on a Stanford University thesis.<sup>2</sup>

It is a central tenet of Malay nationalism that the former colonial power drew its frontier with Thailand with such restraint and imperial modesty in order to divide the Malays, the more easily to subjugate them. Seen from Bangkok, however, the British forward movement encroached all too persistently on the old Siamese domain, by absorbing Kelantan and Kedah. And it needs only a passing awareness of the ethnic patchwork of indigenous southeast Asia for one to anticipate the presence of Thais south of the border—albeit a far smaller and more docile minority than Malaysia would have to handle if it had inherited, or should ever presume to annex, the 'four southern provinces'.

At first sight the Thais of Kelantan and Kedah might seem to fit rather imperfectly Leach's model of an ethnic group whose language 'has no necessary implications for the historical antecedents of the individuals concerned' (Leach 1960: 51), for their presence in present-day Malaysia must owe something—at least indirectly—to the southward expansion of the Thai state in the pre-colonial epoch. Yet notwithstanding the proximity and appeal of modern Thailand, the capacity of the Malaysian Thais to adapt to their social environment is still mainly determined (and ensured) by their ancestral ecological position as rice farmers in a Malay society (cf. Kershaw 1969: 81-94; Golomb: 20). Where Leach's discussion is especially helpful is in reminding us not so much of the well-advertised 'artificiality' of colonial boundaries in cutting off minorities like the Malaysian Thais from their 'homeland' (given ethnic intermingling, could there ever be a 'non-artificial' boundary in southeast Asia?), but rather, of the shifting and imprecise nature of **traditional** boundaries. The point, for our present context, is that Siamese power in the Malay culture area (including Pattani

1. Nor did I imply that there was in any really meaningful sense 'structural' opposition between the Kelantan Thai and Kelantan Malay spirit worlds, as Burr (1972: 192) believes. I wrote rather of two parallel or counterpart segments of one universe (Kershaw 1969: 165).

2. Among Golomb's particular advantages in approaching a study of the Kelantan Thais was his facility in standard Thai, acquired on US Peace Corps service. It is not clear whether during 15 months in Kelantan he actually switched to using the local Thai dialect but as a speaker of the standard language he was much better equipped than I during my research at Ban Semerak in 1966-67 and 1974 to spot convergences of the cognitive and syntactical structure of Kelantan Thai with Kelantan Malay. It is locally reported that his Kelantan Malay reached an impressive standard of credibility—perhaps as a consequence of not having lived or worked previously in Malaysia in the thrall of the standard language. That he did not take up residence in the Thai village which he studied is at first sight surprising but it may conceivably have facilitated his access to the neighbouring Malay village as a 'neutral observer'.



until quite recently in time) was exercised indirectly, as elsewhere on the Thai periphery, and alternated between periods of greater and lesser control. Thus the entry of Thai peasants was no doubt facilitated, if not promoted, at times of expansion and tightened control, but they were left to their own devices and had to make their own political and cultural adjustments to the host society most of the time.

My own interest as a political scientist has been partly in the effect of these historical realities on the Kelantan Thais' response to pressures and opportunities to identify politically with Malaysia. I have conceived historical experience as a process by which groups learn to interpret and evaluate their political environment. The ancient Kelantan Thai values of political passivity and willing clientship to Malay patrons are of great integrative significance so long as the contemporary environment accommodates and rewards such values (the tendency in the present decade has been for political party development to build on that kind of political culture and social structure; cf. Kershaw 1975). The experience of British rule generally reinforced the political culture in question but at the same time implanted a destabilizing, even slightly 'subversive', notion of a complex and correct hierarchy of the races. This hierarchy was headed by the benevolent British, who afforded a place of influence and honour to the urban Chinese as the most meritorious Asian category, but gave the law impartially to all. The 'subversive' effect of this simultaneously 'ideological' and 'home-made' model (Ward 1965) of the colonial political structure derives partly from the high status which it attributes (wrongly, of course, in a Malay Protectorate) to the Chinese; for many Kelantan Chinese are linked to the Thais by kinship, and their putatively favoured position in colonial society was vicariously enjoyed by the Thais themselves. A second and more important reason why the Thais' model of the colonial political structure may be characterised as 'subversive' is that Malays and Thais are recorded, in that model, as enjoying completely equal status, as the humble but honourable cultivators at the base of the structure.<sup>3</sup> The Malays' pretensions to replace the British as the superordinate ethnic category after independence were contrary to the Thais' new expectations of corporate equality in rural society. The British had provided a degree of security from banditry and Islamic encroachment which was beyond the capacity of Malay patrons in the past. With independence, in 1957, the old spectres of material dispossession (cf. Kershaw 1977) and the advance of Islam came together and were instantly identified in the rise of the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party as the dominant political force in Kelantan State. In the absence of an independent political structure the Thais' reaction was passive as in times past, but it was a passivity leaning towards alienation. It is mainly economic prosperity, the reviving possibilities of dependence on Malay patrons, and the continuing, relatively high status of the Chinese

3. They were not in fact equal as to access to land under British Malay Reservation Law but the absence of population pressure on land before World War II, and the flexible administration of the law by British District Officers, prevented the Thais from becoming aware of the new position. Golomb commits a minor error where he states (p 32; p 205, n 5) that Siamese land was excluded from Malay Reservation until sold to a Malay. In fact it was always under Malay Reservation but heritable by Thais until sold to a Malay. It is also worth pointing out that the law does not, technically, prohibit land purchase by non-Malays but makes it conditional on permission granted by the Ruler in Council. Although not nearly as generous and flexible as the British, Malay DOs have sometimes recommended the repurchase of land within Thai villages by Thais. At the same time, I must correct an error of my own (Kershaw 1968: 11; 1969: 123) where I have stated that Malaysian citizenship is a necessary condition of inheriting land. This is not so—although some elements in political parties and district administration believe or have pretended that it is.



in Thai perceptions (Kershaw 1973)<sup>4</sup> that have kept incipient political alienation within limits.

Nevertheless, it is also true—and necessary—to point out that the blusterings of the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party in the independence period did not lead in practice to any assault on the Thais' most precious institution, their Buddhist religion, nor on such symbols of Thai identity as pig-rearing. Security for the more conspicuous items of Thai culture provided a framework within which assimilation and political integration could proceed partly unawares (cf. Kershaw 1969: 166-167). I have even toyed with the idea that abrasive and menacing behavioural forms of the kind that is typified in Thai perceptions by Malay male circumcision may indirectly assist integration by helping to maintain ethnic solidarity and hence the underlying subjective security of the minority group (Kershaw 1979).

The foregoing conducted tour through my own modest contributions on the Kelantan Thais will only be justified if it has set the stage in general terms for a summary of Golomb's book and has provided a standard by which to appreciate the qualities of an alternative, modern social anthropological approach skilfully handled. Golomb's work is situated squarely in that current of studies for which a well-known collection of ten years ago (Barth 1969) is simultaneously a milestone of distance covered and signpost to subsequent development. This current of studies is concerned with the cultural 'boundaries' that demarcate and help to perpetuate ethnic units in poly-ethnic social systems.

The critical focus from this point of view becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries, though they may have territorial counterparts. If a group maintains its identity when members interact with others, this entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion. Ethnic groups are not merely or necessarily based on the occupation of exclusive territories; and the different ways in which they are maintained, not only by a once-and-for-all recruitment but by continual expression and validation, need to be analysed.

What is more, the ethnic boundary canalizes social life—it entails a frequently quite complex organization of behaviour and social relations. The identification of another person as a fellow member of an ethnic group implies a sharing of criteria for evaluation and judgement. It thus entails the assumption that the

4. Golomb (p 106) has cited this article in support of the proposition that as rather powerless minority groups in an overwhelmingly Malay State the Thais and Chinese have been drawn together in mutual antipathy to the dominant group. In fact, while admitting that Chinese power is illusory, I tried to make the point that the Thais' assumption that the Chinese had not suffered as much from Independence as they themselves had done was a factor reconciling the Thais to modern Malay government at first. (The article in question has also appeared in: 1976 Denys Lombard, ed., *Chinois d'Outre-Mer*; Paris, l'Asiatheque; 83-96. This printing is more accurate than the 1973 version, which lacked *inter alia* the fourth line in n 13, p 6.) In further connection with the Kelantan Chinese, Golomb (p 211, n 41) generously attributes to me the insight that Thai Buddhism has been able to fill a need for literacy among the local Chinese. My recollection of our conversation (in Kota Bharu, 1974) is that Golomb's thoughts were developing along the same lines as my own at the time, and it was certainly he who first referred to the Thais as the 'priestly caste' of the Chinese. At any rate the underlying implication in Kershaw 1973 of a diachronic exchange (the Chinese today repaying the Thais for their assistance towards integration in the past) needs to give way to the idea of a living transaction, constantly renewed on both sides.



two are fundamentally "playing the same game", and this means that there is between them a potential for diversification and expansion of their social relationship to cover eventually all different sectors and domains of activity. On the other hand, a dichotomization of others as strangers, as members of another ethnic group, implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings, differences in criteria for judgement of value and performance, and a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest. (Barth 1969: 15.)

Discussing the options open, specifically, to agents of change in minority groups which face pressures for assimilation or rapid modernization, Barth suggests a choice of three basic strategies:

(i) they may attempt to pass and become incorporated in the pre-established industrial society and cultural group; (ii) they may accept a "minority" status, accommodate to and seek to reduce their minority disabilities by encapsulating all cultural differentiae in sectors of non-articulation, while participating in the larger system of the industrialized group in the other sectors of activity; (iii) they may choose to emphasize ethnic identity, using it to develop new positions and patterns to organize activities in those sectors formerly not found in their society, or inadequately developed for the new purposes. (Barth 1969: 33.)

It is the third strategy which Golomb identifies, in effect, as the typical, almost the defining, response of one Kelantan Thai village community of 41 households, isolated from other Thai villages and forced by proximity and economic dependence into daily interaction with Malay neighbours.<sup>5</sup> To be precise in anthropological terms, it is not, of course, 'the community' which 'responds' to its situation by some collective, conscious decision to adjust in a particular way. Nor is Golomb concerned solely with the roles of conspicuous agents of change in the defensive modification of identity—not all the modifications observed at Ban Sadang can be traced to innovator types, whose interactions with Malay society would sometimes seem to fall into the more assimilative, second strategy in Barth's typology. Golomb is concerned, rather, with the less tangible subject matter of group cultural evolution over a period of generations, a product of 'mechanisms' of adjustment which social anthropology must assume to exist, not simply in order to be able to talk about them, but because their 'effects' in present cultural patterns are plain enough to see. Generalizing about Kelantan Thai villages as a whole, the author writes:

one finds individual villages evolving their own microethnic identities based on local cultural contrasts with their immediate Malay outgroup neighbours. Sometimes neighbouring Thai and Malay villages have dichotomized, so it seems, the production of certain goods and services along ethnic lines, thereby stimulating a healthy economic interdependence while revitalizing ethnic distinctiveness. In time, these complementarities have become ingrained local traditions. The overall picture becomes one of remarkable cultural diversification, linked to the preservation of ... the "ethnic category". Faced with menacing assimilative pressures, each Kelantanese Thai village is left to negotiate its own definition of "Thainess", which it presents as a united front to its Malay neighbours. In some cases the elaboration of this ethnic distinctiveness figures as an excellent strategy for exploiting otherwise implausible ecological niches. (Golomb: 12-13.)

5. In the interests of the villagers' privacy the author never identifies the village in which he worked. Nor does the book include a map showing the location of the various Thai settlements in Kelantan and the 20 *war*, or any reference to Thai village names (though three Thai-Chinese villages which have established or share Thai *wat* are frequently referred to by name). Yet Golomb's 'Siam Village' is known even beyond the borders of Kelantan by virtue of its late abbot's fame as a healer (his cremation was even reported in the Malaysian national media; Khoo 1978). As the village's exploitation of its abbot's fame was an important aspect of its 'articulation' with Kelantan society and as such a central theme in Golomb's book, no knowledgeable reader in Kelantan could be unaware of which village the study refers to. Moreover the Chinese son-in-law of the late Nai Ban and well-known contestant for the political leadership of the Kelantan Thais is clearly identifiable in a photograph of his wife's and daughter's ordination (to do merit for the late Nai Ban, if I recall correctly). I shall thus respect the village's 'anonymity' only to the extent of calling it by its Thai name, Ban Sadang.



It is as if these Thai villagers have unconsciously 'politicized' their ethnicity: that is, they do not organize themselves as a formal interest group but use cultural mechanisms to 'articulate' on favoured terms with the other Kelantan races, while reinforcing their identity not only in those sectors of their culture which are insulated from confrontation and modification, but most characteristically, even precisely, in domains of activity which presuppose interaction with out-groups. In short, specific cultural dichotomies are singled out and standardized as bases for structuring social and economic interactions. At all events, I think the point to be stressed is the extremely dynamic, out-going nature of this 'defensive' operation (here I eschew all pretence of anthropological terminology). Identity and the continuity of the group are secured by positive and constructive means, notwithstanding the unconscious element in the process. It must also be made clear—and it is at least implicit in Golomb's words about 'the symbolic reinforcement of Thai identity along a highly penetrable ethnic boundary' (p. 118)—that the better the 'defences' seem, the more accessible does the community become, in reality, to a long-term acceptance of identification with the modern Malaysian socio-political system, a process, ultimately if not simultaneously, of disincorporation as Thais.<sup>6</sup> My own research has focused on the continuity of familiar, responsive structures and the possibilities of defensive alliances as factors for the persistence of such integrative tendencies in the minority group's political culture. I have also (Kershaw 1979) suggested the paradox that the very obstacles to cultural crossing raised by Islamic culture may be a factor enhancing the subjective security of a minority group and thus its propensity for political integration. In its examination of the Thais' response to their Malay environment, *Brokers of Morality* offers a complementary but much more subtle perspective, in that it pin-points and analyses dynamic changes in the 'moving frontier' of Kelantan Thai culture itself.<sup>7</sup>

I propose to summarize Golomb's findings under three themes which run intermingled through his book. I shall classify the examples of cultural adaptation somewhat more method-

6. This may also be the ultimate significance of the observation that conservative practices in some spheres 'contribute to the continuity and stability of the Siam Villagers' ethnic identity. In so doing, they release the villagers from conservative commitments in at least some other realms of cultural activity. In particular, villagers become more receptive to behavioral modifications which do lead to increased cultural complementarity with local Malay communities' (p. 162); or even more to the point: 'diversionary boundary markers'... can be said to function as cognitive "defense mechanisms" which permit cultural minorities like the Siam Villagers to preserve their distinctive cultural identities while undergoing incorporation into a larger pluralistic socio-cultural system' (p. 182).

7. Perhaps the nearest I have come to this kind of insight is in the observation (Kershaw 1969: 160, 166) that in a polity where a Malay is defined pre-eminently by his religion, Thai identity redefines itself with similar emphasis on Buddhism. There is also the intriguing case of the partial nakedness of Thai women, ignored by Golomb (Kershaw 1969: 264-265). But such cultural differentiae are located in spheres of non-articulation and as such need little ingenuity to identify! A reference to economic interdependence and mutual regard (Kershaw 1969: 77) is not followed up, while my discussion of Thai medicine and *nora* (op. cit.: 286-288) in Malay society emphasizes Malay co-option of Thai cultural assets as opposed to their controlled, voluntary adaptation. I will recur later in this article to the question of differential assimilation between Thai villages and its implications for and relationship to 'political integration'.



ically and explicitly than Golomb has done himself, leaning perhaps towards oversimplification in the interests of brevity. In one case I shall take the liberty of questioning Golomb's own classification of a behavioural item.

For our first theme or category of adaptation let us consider what amounts to Golomb's major and most exciting category: the use of new cultural contrasts as the basis for the organization of complementary economic roles between groups. Almost by definition—since these roles relate to spheres of evolving articulation—these cultural contrasts constitute fairly conspicuous departures from 'traditional' Thai culture; but if they receive the predictable positive feedback from the environment, again almost by definition 'Thai' identity is reinforced. At the bottom of a quite profound series of cultural changes is found the land shortage, which afflicts many Kelantanese<sup>8</sup> but is felt more keenly by Thai communities like Ban Sadang because of the discriminatory land laws.<sup>9</sup> The Thais of Ban Sadang have fashioned for themselves a number of alternative economic niches which, in combination, compensate amply for the lack of a rice surplus, while removing points of potential competition with out-groups. As 'brokers of morality' the Thais provide sundry opportunities for deviant Malays to gamble and drink on non-Muslim territory out of Islamic sight and sound;<sup>10</sup> and a range of religious services to the Kelantan Chinese, with whom and for whom Buddhism is, of course, a permissible ground of interaction.<sup>11</sup> The provision of such religious services has involved a shift towards religious pragmatism, expressed not least in a declining fear of, and belief in, ghosts. Similarly there is a tangible scepticism about the efficacy of the charms dispensed so profitably to Malay clients. (I feel, though, that a reference to the far more profound rejection of animist belief and practice among Kelantan Malays younger than about 40 would have given a more realistic perspective to this aspect of change at Ban Sadang.) The most numerous type of 'medical' specialism at the village turns out to be that of the love-charm doctors (*mor saneh*): specialists who all in some degree have capitalized on the erotic element in the racial stereotype of the Thais in Kelantan society, derived in turn from the Siamese *nora*-man. The provision of love-medicine also supplies a need in a Malay society in which divorce is rife; but the Thais' ability to act in this capacity owes not a little to the convergence of Thai to Malay magical beliefs and moral categories.

Despite an adequate income from this kind of service, the Thais of Ban Sadang scorn the Malays' love of displaying wealth in the form of modern consumer goods, and recognise no special merit in the actions of rich Chinese who endow the *wat* with fine buildings and modern

8. An interesting possible parallel may be sought in Kessler 1978, where the thesis is put forward that land shortage and economic competition (an incipient class conflict situation) in Malay villages gave an indirect stimulus to Muslim identity, expressed through support for the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP). But it must be understood that Kessler, in emphasizing class conflict, is denying that Islamic sentiment is in any way a response to ethnic pluralism.

9. Cf. note 3 above.

10. It might have done more than just add a touch of local colour if Golomb had pointed out that the species of palm (the sugar palm) from which the Thais make fermented toddy is itself something of a physical 'boundary-marker' in Kelantan. The Malays make unfermented toddy from the coconut palm as a 'health drink'.

11. Cf. notes 4 and 5 above. The Thais have also enjoyed favoured access to urban employment through Chinese patrons, and Thai women have married into Chinese society on a remarkable scale for several generations (Kershaw 1973). Recently a further distinct phenomenon of Thai urbanization has begun—I am familiar with centres at Kota Bharu and Pasir Puteh—but Golomb (p 12) insists there is no such thing.



facilities.<sup>12</sup> In fact the Thais cultivate an image of distinct indigence—a behaviour trait which is not just another marker of ethnic identity, Golomb points out, but reinforces economic complementarity by persuading out-groups that the Thais deserve to be pitied for their poverty, not feared as an economic threat. The cultivation of a strong tobacco variety for village-based shredding and sale on the local self-rolled cigarette market is another non-competitive feature in the Thais' economy. Further, the development of outside sources of income has enabled the Thai to give up the breeding of water buffaloes, those indispensable providers of plough power in deep mud where even a tractor cannot venture. Whether ploughing with tractors or a buffalo the Thais turn to Malays for their hire. The notion that 'Thais don't keep water buffaloes' is now strongly entrenched as an ethnic boundary marker at Ban Sadang, though clearly contradicted as an objective proposition in other Kelantan Thai villages. The Thais of Sadang are not without some reciprocal recompense, however, for since the local Malays have moved over to double-cropping (thanks to the Kemubu Irrigation Scheme), the buffalo-owners must perforce graze their beasts on the Thais' fallow fields, which gain from the rich manure.<sup>13</sup>

Also in this review of adaptive cultural contrasts in the service of economic complementarity, mention must be made of the southern Thai dramatic art form, the *nora*, whose appeal to the Malays reputedly gave rise to the original invitation to the ancestors of the Ban Sadang Thais to go and settle there. The survival of *nora* in Kelantan in contrast to Tak Bai across the frontier in Thailand is attributable in Golomb's assessment to its successful absorption of elements of the Malay *makyong*, the use of Malay even for the traditional dialogues of the story, and the augmentation of the *nora* troupes with Malay actors and instrumentalists. So long as *nora* does survive it provides a basis not only of complementarity but also of valuable personal interactions with the Malay community.

At this point we may consider what I would regard as a separate category of adaptation or at least as a subcategory of cultural contrasts having relevance for economic complementarity. The contrasts examined thus far have all involved *change* in or from an original cultural feature. In my judgement Golomb makes too little distinction between his *nora*-men and the wild-boar hunters in this respect. True, they are both characterised by a love of roving and adventure; it seems to make good sense to identify them both as representatives of the *nak leng* culture-hero type and no doubt as innovators in the linguistic sphere at least. It also seems extraordinarily valuable on Golomb's part to have pointed out that they both consort with Malay friends drawn from distant places and of similar personality type, and that these friendships in consequence are not subject to the restraints on commensalism and curiosity about each other's religious practices which operate in the neighbourhood of Ban Sadang. But if this is a case of adaptation in any sense, is it not a case of breaking through the Thais' recent, adaptational boundaries,

12. But it seems a little risky to claim that the Kelantan Thais' emphasis on social action in preference to *wat* construction as a means of gaining merit is unique in Thai Buddhism, a product of the peculiar circumstances of Kelantan.

13. Although a perceptive reporter of agricultural practices in so many ways, Golomb might have done well, I feel, to inform us of the actual months in which the Malays transplant their two crops, and the Thais their single crop. Being unfamiliar with double-cropping schedules myself, I can only supply October–November as the traditional Thai period. An anomaly of Buddhist life in Kelantan which I have always found entertaining is that Lent ends just as the east monsoon brings in the rainy season.



back to a notional *status quo ante* in which Thais had nothing to fear from Malay assimilation, oppression or exploitation? Within this context the *nora*-men have 'Malayized' their art, but in what way have the boar-hunters Malayized their boar-hunting? On the contrary they hunt uninhibitedly as their ancestors did. Is it not rather their Malay collaborators who have made subtle cultural compromises? I feel that the same observation could be made about the removal of dead Malay domestic animals (i.e. unslaughtered, taboo meat) by the Thais. This particular, highly complementary function involved no adaptation on the Thais' part and is practised completely openly.

Let us now turn to a third category of adaptation in Golomb's study, one that is strictly non-articulating and thus non-functional except for the reinforcement of identity: the consolidation or revival of symbolic ethnic traits. A prominent feature here is the persistent keeping of domestic pigs at Ban Sadang, even though it has revealed itself (to the anthropologist at least) to be hopelessly uneconomic. My own observations at Ban Semerak confirm the appallingly bad investment that pigs can be in times of raging disease.<sup>14</sup> Correspondingly, beef with its powerfully Islamic connotations is effectively excluded from the Thai diet—a feature found at Semerak too. In the religious sphere the Kelantan Thai community evinces a very high rate of both male and female ordination compared to Thailand. Golomb records for Ban Sadang specifically the holding of Buddhist retreats, and I recall several instances of Kelantan Thais claiming that their community are better Thais than the Thais of Thailand, because more sober and devout. All these are examples of boundary consolidation with no relevance for complementarity, and related to spheres where assimilation is most feared—not because the danger there is objectively more real but perhaps because it is more easily conceptualized. Probably language is one such sphere where apprehension comes easily. In this connection Golomb's versatile analysis includes one especially telling point. The Thais exercise great ingenuity in transforming lexical borrowings phonologically so that the language remains unintelligible to Malays (and where Kelantan Malay and Kelantan Thai are phonemically compatible and the loan word may still be recognizable, the Ban Sadang Thais draw on their latent vocabulary of central or southern Thai words when Malays are present). But their own self-conscious ingenuity provides such reassurance that a profound revolution in the syntactical surface structure and underlying semantic categories of Kelantan Thai is enabled to pursue its inexorable course unnoticed.<sup>15</sup>

14. But I am surprised that Golomb should quote the high price of bran as a rational deterrent. I have had the impression that the price of bran is lower to the farmer who brings his own paddy to the mill.

15. Stimulated by Golomb's challenging example I hope to publish, before long, evidence of an even more radical development in the dialect of Semerak and Malai—this apart from its tone system, which, as Golomb correctly notes, is distinct from the main Kelantan/Tak Bai dialect. (It is necessary, though, to point out that Semerak/Malai is spoken in two other locations, not just one. Golomb—p 12—probably has in mind Ligi in the Padang Pa' Amat area of Pasir Puteh District. Besides this there is Pok Kiang in Trengganu, one of the two—not one, as in Golomb p 11—Thai settlements in that State. I also feel there may be some point in recognizing, within the main Kelantan/Tak Bai dialect, a distinct status for Bangsae'/Khaw Yohn.)



Golomb is careful to say—indeed it is crucial to his argument about micro-cultural differentiation—that the adaptations of Ban Sadang must not be assumed to be found duplicated in the other Thai villages of Kelantan. However, it may not be contrary to his intentions that the book conveys the impression that there are broadly two types of Kelantan Thai village: those isolated from other Thai settlements, and those near the international border which are far less isolated and thus less assimilated. Ban Sadang falls into the former class, of which it is implicitly representative in the general nature of its adaptation if not in the precise detail of its micro-cultural differentiae. I should like now to point out the possibility of another form of response to an encircling Malay environment, basing my remarks on some, though certainly not all, of my data from southeast Kelantan.

Ban Semerak in Pasir Puteh district is not only highly isolated from other Thai settlements—much more so than Ban Sadang—but also, until quite recently, from Malay habitation, by virtue of its location in a loop of the Semerak River with an infertile sandy heath to its immediate south. Historically, therefore, daily contact with the Malay community has been very limited, and the community has seemed to lack an intuitive sense of the need to avoid competition by developing new economic niches which simultaneously redefine, while reinforcing, identity (the only exception may be the practice of the adapted *nora* drama). Besides, pressure on land has been relatively slight. Thus as Thai males today seek regular employment for the first time in the modern Malaysian economy, they are competitors for jobs which, while lacking a cultural connotation as ‘typically Malay’, are already in fact something of a Malay preserve with heavy political backing. These Thais of the younger generation who work outside the village are peculiarly exposed to the dilemmas of a competitive market which offers no specialist niches and thus no refuges from assimilative pressures. Meanwhile the majority of villagers have received an abrupt awakening with the arrival of bilingualism among the young, for previously even the Semerak *nora*-master could not speak Malay with great facility or without a distinctive Thai accent. The encroachment of new Malay settlement close to the village boundary and the brazen curiosity of the modern Malay crowds which converge on the *wat* compound for temple fairs, are watched with timidity and foreboding. In order not to displease the large Malay element in the audience, the Kelantan *nora* is now performed with its full complement of Malay accretions, **even at the *wat***. This has prompted the opinion at Semerak that the Thais have ‘lost their *nora* to the Malays’.<sup>16</sup>

Comparing this kind of evidence with the situation at Sadang, one may wonder whether assimilatory pressures in isolated locations need always give rise to a side-stepping but ultimately positive and assimilating response. The point is that isolation can give rise to a sense of exposure which is too strong to be absorbed or abated by the cultural mechanism of a flexible ‘ethnic boundary’. Rather, identity may be reinforced in a spirit of resistance in the surviving spheres of non-articulation and in primary institutions. This is not to say that the concept of ‘political integration’ has no place in the analysis of the relations of a village like

16. The reader must not take this as a mere expression of exclusivism towards an inherited cultural asset, but try to imagine the feelings of village folk, especially women, who simply cannot understand the vulgar Malay of the new dialogues and are easily intimidated by the jostling, sometimes rowdy groups of Malays in the darkness around the *nora* stage. All this takes place, significantly, on holy ground, during religious festivals such as ordination, threatening the privacy even of the religious sphere.



Ban Semerak with its social environment. On the basis of a reinforced and unassailable identity in the religious sector, for instance, such a community may certainly become accessible to the more reassuring kinds of opportunity for political participation and political identification as 'Malaysians'. But this would be essentially on the basis of separateness in a system whose political dynamics and terms of reference are anyway defined by 'universal ethnic incorporation': the allocation of political statuses and national membership by prior reference to ethnic group.

This line of thinking stems of course from two sources. On the one hand there is my experience of an isolated Thai community which, while profoundly assimilated in many unconscious ways, is ill-equipped to handle the new, sudden pressures of economic and political modernization, and thus responds with relatively pronounced defensiveness and alienation. On the other hand, I am simply looking at the data as a political scientist. It is clear that the 'ethnic boundary' approach and Golomb's findings at Ban Sadang combine to produce a challenging standpoint from which to re-examine (as I have just done) the situation at Semerak, or any Kelantan Thai village for that matter; but at the same time, attention to the Semerak example, combined with a more political perspective than Golomb has employed, may help to pick out and illuminate unsuspected strands in the social web of Ban Sadang. Even in the midst of a high degree of economic complementarity, cultural security and underlying assimilatory trends, political integration is not guaranteed. On the other hand if directly political pressures become too menacing—if politics threatens culture—the fine cultural and economic symbiosis evolved over generations could founder.<sup>17</sup>

In this light the possible disadvantage of an exclusively social anthropological approach becomes apparent. I do not suggest that Golomb should have doubled the length of a book whose strength consists not least in its compactness and precision, just in order to write about Kelantan politics as well! But it is a really **remarkable** Kelantan book which contrives never once to mention the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP) and the Malaysian federal structure in which that party has flourished on a regional basis.<sup>18</sup>

17. Thus I question whether assimilation is necessarily a unilinear process. Golomb himself claims (p 115) that there were many more Thai marriages with Malays over 40 years ago than in the last 40 years. If that is true, the Thais would seem to be less convergent with the Malays now, in one sense, than in the past; though admittedly the essence of Golomb's thesis (with which I agree) is that good boundaries are not incompatible with underlying assimilation. It may not be a point worth pursuing because Golomb's only evidence for frequent intermarriage in the distant past is the occurrence of the patrilineal prefix '*che*' in the next-door Malay village. (I must confess to being unaware that this denotes descent from a convert, as Golomb states, and am not able either to contradict or confirm it.)

18. It is a pity, too, that in mentioning the portraits of the 'Malay King and Queen' hung side by side with the portraits of Thai royalty in Thai houses (p 28), Golomb should employ such an opaque usage and not say whether he means the Sultan of Kelantan or the King of Malaysia, or both, and if both, what proportion of the portraits fell to either monarch. This lack of alertness to political nuances comes out again, more seriously, where it is suggested (p 211, n 29) that the Thais may have failed to obtain gun licences because the 'Malaysian authorities may still doubt their loyalty to the Malaysian nation'. The difficulty about gun licences is general, I agree, throughout the community (though I do know of a licence held formerly at Yung Kaw), but does it not arise rather from the Thais' close alignment with the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and their consequent exclusion from the patronage of the PMIP-dominated administration? (In this connection I must take my distance from the statement—p 13—that only a handful of Thais align with UMNO! But I do concur with the well-substantiated judgement that modern Thailand has, at the moment, little political relevance at least to the more isolated Kelantan Thais.)



As it happens, the PMIP, latterly known as Partai Islam, has been 'tamed' in recent years by incorporation into the ruling National Front of Malaysia, but now it is in opposition again (though not in power in the Kelantan State government) and Malaysian politics remains unstable. The Malays of Malaysia are involved in their own profound crisis of culture and identity, as they weigh the rival options of Western-style secularization and 're-Islamization'. Social and economic modernization seem imperative as a basis of secure Malay political power against the Chinese, and to forestall a general crisis of poverty among the Malay masses. The Malays reject the strategy of the economic niche. But if it is not stoutly resisted, the revolution of values which modernization brings in its tow would undermine the Islamic commitment which provides the Malays with their most potent ethnic boundary-markers and instruments of social control and general solidarity-making. There is much scope here for a PMIP revival and an acceleration of political alienation among the Malaysian Chinese due to economic discrimination as well as cultural pressures. Some reverberations of national political developments will reach the Kelantan Thais through their Chinese co-religionists, patrons and kinsmen. Others will be felt directly at the village level in relations with the Kelantan Malay community. For a political scientist to sketch a broadly pessimistic scenario for the future might be an act of self-indulgence, yet as national communications and national conflicts impinge increasingly on rural society it is well to remember that Malaysia's politics, like its cultures, is in flux.

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