

**Dual Ethnic Minorities and the Local Reworking of  
Citizenship at the Thailand-Malaysian Border**

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**CIBR Working Papers in Border Studies  
CIBR/WP02-3**

## Abstract

For Thai-speaking Muslims in Satun on the west coast of southern Thailand and Thai Buddhist monks in Kelantan on the east coast of northern Malaysia, the local reworking of citizenship constitutes an important strategy to deal with the constraints that have been designed by the state to control the populations at the border. Holders of dual citizenship on the Thailand-Malaysian border use the documents of the state to their personal advantage, producing their identity cards to facilitate their border crossings. This essay examines border-crossing practices as a way of life for trapped ethnic minorities. Border communities resent their inferior position in the space of the nation-state. By joining Buddhist/Muslim networks across the border, border people counter the work which citizenship as an instrument of control has done to them. This essay explores the terrain and the tension between personal and national identity and emphasises the deep ambiguity of identity and identity shifts in the space between the Thai and Malay worlds. The new spaces in-between Thailand and Malaysia are not only limiting, but also liberating and empowering the lives of the respective border communities.

*'The impasse is the inevitable exclusiveness of citizenship which distinguishes those who have it from those who don't' (Patton and Caserio 2000: 1).*

The networks of border people are changing the meaning of citizenship<sup>1</sup>. In many discourses of the state, holders of dual citizenship are seen and treated as trouble makers whose practices of participating in more than one national polity are violating the concept of sovereignty. Migration and religious movements and the resulting border-crossing networks have left durable traces in the borderland, which in the end help to establish firm routes, effectively criss-crossing political boundaries.

One of my most puzzling findings when conducting ethnographic research on the increase in border crossings on the Thai-Malaysian border was the practice of dual citizenship among trapped ethnic minorities. Being Thai or Malaysian

citizens, Thai-speaking Muslims from the west coast of southern Thailand and Buddhist Thais from northern Malaysia acquire multiple citizenship rights through various means: by registering the birth of their children just across the border, by marriage, by making use of kinship relations or by inventing them and by applying for naturalisation. In the course of my fieldwork, I became conscious that the adoption of dual citizenship not only reflects a pluri-local social life, it is also embedded in durable social relations which encompass social worlds in Thailand and Malaysia, in which the distinction of national identity is rendered increasingly meaningless, and it constitutes an important strategy to deal with the constraints which have been designed by the state. Members of ethnic minorities use the documents of the state to their personal advantage, producing their identity cards to facilitate their border crossings.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnic minorities on the Thai-Malaysian border have been discursively constructed as peripheral ethnicities and inferior races. The Patani Malays, the Thai-speaking Muslims in Satun in Thailand and the Kelantan Thais in Malaysia can be conceptualised as trapped minorities, who are trapped on the national border between a host but hostile state which reluctantly offers them citizenship, and an absent, scattered mother nation with little political and economic weight (Rabinowitz 1998: 156). To be sure, daily raids on the border, which are aimed at 'illegal' migrants and reports of beatings in prisons to prevent illegal re-entry, are reminders of the presence of the nation-state. But while the state remains the single most powerful form of political organization in the region, its inability to purge the practice of dual citizenship shows that post-national forms of belonging have become a reality. In fact, the flexible use of citizenship (Ong 1999) seems to be a characteristic strategy of diasporic cultures in the borderland of Thailand and Malaysia. Moreover, I observed that ethnic minorities do not renounce their citizenship rights after acquiring new ones- on the contrary, they carefully keep their identity cards. While people ignore as far as possible the bureaucratic implications of moving

across a modern international frontier, they are keenly aware of the differences between Thai and Malay society and of their position in each.

The Patani Malays on the east coast of southern Thailand, the Sam Sam on the west coast and the Kelantan Thais on the east coast of northeast Malaysia are located in a similar diasporic trap as the Palestinian citizens of Israel.<sup>3</sup> Cut off from their parent ethnies by national borders, ethnic minorities are trapped between a hostile state that gives them citizenship (but withholds state resources and certain rights from them) and an ambiguous position within their parent ethnies. In the consolidation of the Thai-Malaysian border (in 1911 and 1949), Siam had to compromise her territorial ambitions with British colonial interests. Ceding the tributary provinces of Kedah, Kelantan, and Trengganu, Siam kept control of Pattani, Naratiwat and Songkla on the east coast and Satun on the west coast. The early loosely organised hierarchical arrangement of overlapping tiers of tributary states, small umbrellas under the protection of larger and higher umbrellas, which in turn were under those still higher and larger, has given place to the more recent western arrangement of sovereign states with defined and mutually exclusive national boundaries. With the transformation of Patani from being a Malay principality to an ordinary Thai province, local Malays remember the old times, when the Patani sultanate was known as a cradle of Islam, attracting Muslims from the Malay peninsula to its famous Islamic schools. The nostalgia for a lost state characterises the psychological situation of the Malays, cut off from the Islamic heartland, and bound up with the religious cosmology of the Buddhist nation-state of Thailand.

### **Reflections on citizenship**

Citizenship has become a popular, newly public topic in Thailand and in the world at large. As Patton and Caserio (2000: 1-14) argue, multiple disciplines with multiple motives have converged on this term. Recent work in political

philosophy and social history by Fraser (1997) and Tilly (1995) addresses not only the notion of citizenship, its genesis and its reworking in historical, social, political and legal practice, but also the possibilities of recovering it in order to get out of the impasse in which our traditional ideas of citizenship have landed us. Instead of seeing citizenship from a state perspective, I shall treat citizenship as a practice that is situated in social and cultural relations and negotiated in relations of power, domination and resistance. Instead of taking for granted citizenship as a concept of universal rights, we should enquire about the work citizenship does, the problems which citizenship creates and the impasses or damage that its rehabilitation might continue to effect. Post-colonialism, which re-examines the use and meaning of citizenship in the wake of the nationalist projects that imperialism left behind, helps us to liberate the concept of citizenship from its static almost mythical character, by overcoming the straightjacket of the nation-state to which the notion of citizenship has been inevitably attached. The impasse of citizenship calls for a subversive approach to citizenship which looks into the ways in which different categories of citizen and non-citizen are produced and where the boundaries of membership are historically contested.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I join the efforts of other authors who have looked at ethnic minorities in the borderlands (see, for example, Tapp 1989; Walker 1997; Evans, Hutton and Eng 2000). In this work, citizenship is liberated from its mystical character and its significance in everyday life is applied to a wider discussion about the transformation of livelihood in the borderlands, the increasing control of the state over people's lives, the location of ethnic minorities in the nation-state space and the strategies followed by border people.

I argue that dual citizenship is embedded in border-crossing networks, which reflect the inability of the state to purge dual citizenship, indicating that forms

of post-national belonging have become a social reality. The analysis of border-crossing structures and their dynamic of change, in which practices of dual citizenship are embedded, and the transformation of state-centred concepts in that framework, leads me to conclude that state sovereignty may never have been fully achieved and that the people themselves play an important role in shaping the negotiation and practical use of citizenship.

The essay seeks to contribute to the anthropology of the state at the local level of the border from a fresh angle. The double identity card holders are making use of the border and are contesting their assimilation in the host state. Their local reworking of citizenship fits to the practical needs of the border people, who develop multiple contacts and relations across the border. The intensification of labour migration and the revival of religious movements results in the transnationalisation of the everyday life of migrants and travellers. People move across the border almost despite the regulations of the state. Borders are also discursively constructed in narratives of the self and the other, with very material consequences. In the Malaysian discourse, Thailand is associated with criminality, disorder and sex tourism. This discourse justifies the construction of a wall, separating the Malay from the Thai world. The Thai government complains that Malaysia is a haven for Islamic fundamentalist movements. The escalation of the cultural competition results in various stereotypes and pejorative constructions of the other (Horstmann, forthcoming). Border people make use of the border and use their ethnic networks as a resource. Doing so, they benefit from the compliance of the state, whose agents cooperate in border trade and in the barter of identity cards and working permits. Most important, the states may see their diasporas as a sort of extension of their cultural territory and hence turn a blind eye to the practice of dual citizenship. The Malaysian government has a more ambiguous relationship to the Muslim diaspora in Thailand. While it tolerates

transnationalism from Patani to a certain extent, the extension of citizenship has become much tighter in recent years.

### **The ‘Sam Sam’ on the Thai-Malaysian border**

While the Sam Sam are a historical category (meaning mixed, half-race), the Malays in present-day Langkawi distinguish themselves from the ‘Orang Siam’. Thai-speaking Muslims are alleged not to attend the five prayers, not to eat anything like Buddhists, and to be filthy. During the golden age of banditry between 1900-1920, the Sam Sam are said to have provided the most notorious gang leaders (Cheah Boon Keng 1988). The Sam Sam represented the lowest social stratum in Kedah, Perlis, and Satun, mostly involved in the agrarian sector of the economy, as paid-planters: ‘They constituted a social class which had to bear almost unlimited demands on its services during the pre-colonial period, and later as main targets of the various taxes, land tax, land rent, unpaid services, etc., imposed by British and Thai administrations. When faced with the problems of poor land, occasional disasters such as drought, poor harvests, or other natural disasters, these peasants were left with only one recourse for their survival, namely theft’ (Cheah Boon Keng 1988: 44). Nishii examines the process of emergence and transformation of their peripheral ethnicity (2000: 180ff). They were regarded as wild, uncivilised criminals by the Siamese rulers (as *chao pa*), and alienated by the Malays who wanted to defend the Malay world from invasion by Thai elements. While the younger generation of the Sam Sam in Malaysia, being ashamed of the practices of their ancestors, have abandoned the Thai language, Thai-speaking Muslims in Thailand find themselves as Thai nationals who have to adjust to the presence of the Thai state. The identity of the Sam Sam integrates elements from the Thai and Malay worlds, playing on the ambiguities between cultural boundaries. Refusing an essentialised identity has advantages for Thai-speaking Muslim migrants who establish social relations in Thailand and in Malaysia that sometimes include government officials.

## **The gendering of citizenship in border-crossing marriage**

### ***The borderland: Scene 1***

Habibah lives with Hazemi in a small, one-storey house in Kampung Temoyong, near Hazemi's mother's house. Habibah comes from Ban Ko Sarai, a small island in front of Amphor Muang Satun in southern Thailand. She began to work in Malaysia at the age of fourteen, refusing an offer from her well-to-do brother in Saudi Arabia to continue her education in Thailand. Habibah recalls that she was often beaten in school by her Thai-Buddhist headmaster and felt discriminated against. Changing offers of jobs from kin, who recruited labour in Sarai, brought her to Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Langkawi. Habibah's experiences included experiences of poor living conditions, poor salaries and sexual harassment. She had to endure difficult working conditions in her life. She regularly returned home to Sarai and maintained intimate relationships with kin and friends. During her last job, she continued to work in a souvenir shop at the international airport of Langkawi where she met Hazemi, her present husband. Habibah is among 2,400 Thai women from Muslim communities in southern Thailand who are married to Malaysian men and registered with the Islamic office in Kuah, Langkawi. A male fantasy is projected on the daughters of Thai-speaking Muslims of the west coast of southern Thailand who are imagined (and desired) to be submissive housewives. Men from the lower social stratum are inclined to seek Thai wives, because they have problems finding Malay partners, who are more self-confident, freer in their relationships and who have much better opportunities than their Thai counterparts. A pattern is emerging on the Thai-Malaysian border in which Malay men, especially from Langkawi, by virtue of their citizenship, have the power to ask for Sam Sam daughters. The pattern of marriage reflects the gendering of cross-border relations in Thailand and

Malaysia and maps of power in which Malaysian men marry Thai women and in which unequal gender relationships are reproduced.

Habibah uses a border pass as an inhabitant of one of the five border provinces in southern Thailand (Satun). She has been applying for a Malaysian passport in vain so far.<sup>5</sup> She is therefore forced to return to Thailand to renew her border pass. Without the papers, Habibah has to live a migrant's life with irregular employment and lower wages. Her movement in Langkawi and in Malaysia is very prudent, restricted and vulnerable. She is even subject to occasional control or harassment by border police. Habibah has established close ties with other women from Thailand in Kampung Temoyong and in Langkawi, with whom she can exchange information about work opportunities and news in Thailand. On the other hand, Malaysian women tend to avoid and ignore her, contributing to her humiliation and marginal position in the village.

Habibah suffers from loneliness and the fact that she is not integrated into the daily life of the village. She is clear, however, that she never wants to return to Sarai or southern Thailand which, from her perspective, is underdeveloped (*mai pattana*), neglected and dirty. Hazemi, on the other hand, enjoys travelling to Thailand. Habibah concentrates on her marriage with Hazemi and their daughter who is learning Arabic and Malay crafts. In addition, she prepares lunches for a hotel, to help the family budget. Having children has stabilised her relationship, and being a mother has helped improve her status in the village.

Her insistence on a formal Islamic marriage in the town of Kuah was motivated by her aspiration for more security in her relationship with Hazemi. She felt especially depressed about Hazemi's unfaithfulness and his relationship with another Malay woman. Worse still was having to do the washing and cleaning for a household of five persons, while being ill-treated

and humiliated by her mother-in-law. Many women from Thailand become the victim of discriminating practices, sexual violence, or confinement to the house. Habibah told me about minor wives who have been divorced by Malay men, and who are confined to the house with no means to support themselves. Some women were developing depression as a result of their hardships. Habibah decided to endure the hardships, being afraid to return to Thailand empty handed. Habibah's story illustrates how women from southern Thailand are vulnerable to exploitation and unequal gender relations. It is common for members of such bi-national families to live on both sides of the border, like Jamila's daughter from her first marriage who is visiting the Thai school in Ban Sarai and who is educated in the Thai way. Being a foreigner without certain rights and without claim to state resources, Habibah felt that her precarious status was used against her. Overall, the transformation of citizenship among Thai-speaking Muslim communities on the west coast has an important gender dimension. The women from Thailand are not easily integrated into village society, but face hostility from the husband's family as well as from other Malay women who feel that the subordination of the Thai women undermines the new female spaces of Malay women. While Carsten (1997, 1998) describes the incorporation of migrants from southern Thailand and the perception of Langkawi villagers that southern Thailand is very much part of their cultural map, I emphasise the unequal gender relations which make women from Thailand second-class citizens and the subtle differences between Malay and Thai women, the latter kept apart from Malay women circles.

The pattern of border-crossing marriage reflects a power regime which is further transforming citizenship. Women assimilate to the Malay world, which includes the Islamization of lifestyle, and subordinate themselves to unequal gender relationships. Their children grow up in Malaysia and become Malay. Resistance to marginalisation includes close social ties with other Thai women

at home as well as in Langkawi. While the women suppress the Thai language in Malaysia, they use their southern Thai dialect in conversation with fellow Thai women. Thus, married women are at home in both languages, moving back and forth between the home in Thailand and the home in Malaysia. Through their Malaysian partner, they have access to Malaysian citizenship, to the Langkawi labour market and certain state resources, in short, to a better life. But they do not leave their homes in Thailand behind. Instead, they keep the old identity card for convenience and maintain close contact to family networks in Thailand and in the Islamic world at large.

### **Fishing illegally in Malaysian waters**

#### ***The borderland: Scene 2***

After five days at sea they are tired, thirsty and hungry. The fishermen secure the fish, wash the boat and repair the net. The shrimps are washed, sorted and weighed. The fishermen are paid immediately. After washing carefully, the men sit at the table to drink sweet tea and to smoke. All the men sitting at the cafe are illegal. Their gossip focuses on increasing police controls, strategies and related experiences with Malaysian police. Depending on the weather, the three sons fish in Langkawi for a tour of fourteen days. They use the money to pay for the renovation of the house, the maintenance of the boat and for paying the fees of Islamic education in Pattani province for themselves and for their three sisters. Nearly every young man from Ban Sarai in southern Thailand has experience of being arrested, imprisoned, and fined. Stories of being humiliated in prison by the Malaysian authorities circulate. When they are not able to pay the fine, their small boats, their means of existence, are burnt.

In Sarai, the rapid depletion of natural resources is threatening the subsistence of small fishermen who have not enough cash to pay for the maintenance of

their boats. Big trawlers use thick nets and spotlights which not only catch fish, crab and shrimp, but all kinds of sea life. The small fishermen in Sarai are afraid of talking about the local mafia who own the trawlers and are involved in border-crossing illegal trade. Opponents are easily killed by powerful gangsters who combine legal and illegal forms of accumulation and cooperate with local politicians and bureaucrats. The diminishing prospects, especially for young people, create a depressing atmosphere in the village. As a result, drug addiction among youth is rampant, with young people dying of overdoses or drug-related health hazards at an early age. There are parents who lose their sons at their most productive age and children who lose their parents due to AIDS. In the process of the emergence of a transnational space, life worlds in Sarai and Langkawi are fundamentally changing. The division of migrants and households who are bound to home is creating social differentiation, competition in poverty and the bitterest divisions in the village. Diminishing prospects are creating survival tactics among which border crossings to Langkawi is by far the most significant. Most households in Ban Sarai have family members in Langkawi, either daughters married to Malaysian men or sons fishing illegally in Malaysian waters or taking up casual jobs.

Although fishermen from Thailand are fully aware of the risks involved, they develop strategies in order to get a hold in Langkawi and to survive in a basically hostile environment. One of the key strategies is to build social ties with people in Langkawi, with villagers, kin, and even the lower-ranked police. For the fisher-folk from Thailand, the patron-client relationship to the middleman is crucial to the sustainability of future border-crossings. In parallel, Muslim fishermen from Thailand claim solidarities with distant kin in Langkawi on the basis of Muslim identity and kinship relations.

According to Malaysian regulations, working permits for fishing in Langkawi can be acquired on condition that the owner of the boat is a Malaysian citizen.

However, it is known that papers which document Malaysian ownership, for boats on which Thai fishermen may be temporarily employed, can be bought on the black market. The illegal fishermen benefit from the fact that it is impossible to distinguish them physically from the Malay villagers. Yet, as already noted in the case of Habibah, the newcomers are not fully integrated into Malay society, and do not join the Malaysians in their Friday prayers, local mosque associations, festivals and ceremonies. Being most vulnerable to arrest and deportation, fishermen try to keep a minimal presence in Langkawi.

The relationship of fishermen from Thailand to the Malaysian middleman underlines the extremely vulnerable status of Thai citizens fishing in Malaysian water. In order to achieve a reciprocal relationship, fishermen from Thailand demonstrate their loyalty to their chosen patron by giving all their catch to him. Obviously, this is very beneficial to the middleman who can then rely on hardworking, faithful clients. In exchange for loyalty, the illegal fishermen expect some form of protection. But just as kinship ties and common faith are factors which are invoked to garner solidarity and help, so the superficially harmonious relationship to the middleman masks exploitation. Only fishermen from Thailand are satisfied with lower wages, higher interest rates and insecure, temporary employment. Nevertheless, Malay middlemen provide at least some sort of security for the fishermen who can land and sell their catch on Malay shores. However, this space is a vulnerable one which can change from one day to the next.

### **Longing for Malaysian citizenship in Langkawi**

#### ***The borderland: Scene 3***

The pioneer settlers in Sarai remember when they fled the Japanese occupation in Langkawi to Sarai where only a handful of families made a livelihood from fishing, finding plenty of fish and crab in the sea, planting

coconut trees, with tigers and snakes being the only danger. The grandmother migrated from Perlis and did not speak a word of Thai, while the grandfather settled in Setul and used to be a *nakleng*, a local strongman. They have nine children who shuttle between Sarai and Langkawi. The grandfather recalls that fishermen had to depend on the forces of nature. But now, the cultural crisis in Ban Sarai has hit the family as two of the sons died in their twenties from heroin. More than four-hundred families try to make a living in Ban Sarai, and most of the families live a hand to mouth existence and do not know how to pay the costs for the motorized small boats. Being members and citizens of the Thai state, their children are registered in Thailand, attend Thai primary school and are eligible for military service. Their daughters and sons move back and forth between Ban Sarai and Langkawi, benefiting from the uncertain, ambiguous space in the sea and the geographical proximity of Langkawi, lying just south of the Thai border.

One of the striking features of Muslims from Thailand is their effort to become as Malay as possible by emphasising kinship ties, emotional bonds, language and religion. But in a move for a better life, Muslims from Thailand aim to become Malaysian citizens in order to settle down in Langkawi and to make a livelihood from fishing. In the last decade or so, Muslims from Thailand have begun to settle down on the periphery of Langkawi. In Kampung Serat on the island of Pulau Dayang Bunting at the back of Langkawi the new settlers are easily detectable, living in wooden shacks which have been hastily constructed either on the coast or in the water, helpless against the intensive heat of the sun. The established Malaysian households which tap rubber live in ancient stone houses on the hill with beautiful fenced gardens on carefully prepared roads with street names, all signs of state-led local development.

On a closer look, many established families in Serat trace their origin to southern Thailand. In between the established and the newcomers of the village, settlers try to assimilate themselves by building stone houses (or solid wood houses) to look ancient. The most recent wave of outsiders is confronted by a strict immigration regime. A broker who, having obtained Malaysian citizenship rights much earlier, and established an intimate relationship with the local district officer, abuses the precarious status of new settlers. This broker uses his privileged position to apply for forty invented relatives and their households from Ko Bulon in Amphor Muang Satun to settle down in Kampung Serat. The Thai-Malaysian broker buys a dozen used Thai motorized fishing boats from Krabi, registers them in Malaysia and lends them to the new labour recruits who, working without wages, are in debt to him. In the process of application for the new documents, the newcomers depend heavily on the good will of their broker, who uses his position in the borderland to recruit cheap labour, thereby accumulating wealth on their back. Communication between the newcomers and the established families in the Kampung is minimal, with some newcomers not able to converse freely in the Malay language. Due to their precarious position, the parents neither register their children nor send them to primary school. That way, the children grow up as illiterates in Malaysian society. Non-obedient clients are easily deported back to Thailand. The newcomers take on odd jobs in the village, including cleaning the school, gardening in the established houses, doing all the rubber tapping, minding children, etc. The broker invests his profits in a resort hotel in Bulon Island back in southern Thailand. For the construction, the maintenance and the management of the resort, he again makes use of his relatives' cheap labour. In fact, the role of the broker provides a striking example of the changing role of kinship relations in the borderlands in a context of rural poverty and socio-economic inequality. Kinship relations in that context are used for exploitative purposes. However, the example shows

that state regulations can be moulded to their own interest by those who live in the borderlands.

In places such as Ko Sarai or Ko Bulon, it is not difficult to trace kinship relations. While Malaysian regulations require a kin connection to obtain a local identity card, there is ample room to invent kinship relations and to make up relatives by the (bilingual) broker who prepares the papers. The newcomers are hardly at ease with Malay culture, Malay language, Malay bureaucrats or Malay teachers. The only characteristics which they share with Malaysian villagers are fishing skills and Muslim prayers. Nonetheless, the prospect of rich fishing grounds and a sustainable income is sufficient motivation for impoverished households to bear the role of 'aliens'. The meaning of Malaysian citizenship cannot be more arbitrary for Thai villagers who are regularly travelling home and who are so much more comfortable in their home setting. However, settlement in Langkawi, even in an inferior position, is a rare and precious opportunity for social mobility not to be missed by marginal fishermen. Once settled, the Thai households can benefit from shuttling between Thailand and Malaysia, trading Thai nets and fishing equipment or smuggling Thai merchandise. They may even act as brokers for other fishermen who want to fish illegally in Malaysian territory. The game goes on.

### **The Ethnic Thais in Northwest and Northeast Malaysia**

The Thai minority in Kelantan has long interested cultural anthropologists (Golomb 1978; Kershaw 1969, 1980, 1982, 1984; Yusoff 1993). Ismail Yusoff's study of the social organization and cultural reproduction of a Buddhist temple in Kelantan illustrates the strong attachment and deep involvement of Thai-Malaysian villagers in Theravaddha Buddhism (Yusoff 1993). Yusoff, who prefers the English term Siamese (from the Malay word Orang Siam), shows that Theravada Buddhism is essential to guarantee the

persistence of Thai ethnicity in an Islamic stronghold, and that the continuing regulation and management of Theravada Buddhism serves as an ethnic boundary marker to other ethnic groups. He argues that the Buddhist temple in Kelantan acquires special meanings and orders, which distinguish it from temples in Thailand. Golomb's dissertation, published in 1978, concludes that the ethnic Thais in Kelantan occupy a niche and have become brokers of morality in relation to the rural Malays. He argues that the Kelantan Thais are accentuating cultural and ethnic boundary markers such as Theravada Buddhism, their role as healers, their practice of magic, gambling and raising pigs. The study of Kershaw on local politics complements this perspective on the ethnic niche of the Kelantan Thais, who balance their alliances between the rural and urban Chinese and the rural Malays to cope with fears of economic dispossession and growing Islamization. The growing racial tensions on the east coast of northern Malaysia have not resulted in an assault on Theravada Buddhism.

Border-crossing trips to Thailand are associated with much joy and excitement. Young women and men use the border pass to cross the Thai-Malaysian border without much bureaucratic effort. Although owners of the border pass are allowed to stay in Thailand for six months, young people hardly stay longer than a few days and sometimes return in the same evening. Young people cross the border to Thailand to participate in entertainment, to eat Thai food or to buy bottles of Thai beer. They return with cheap Thai merchandise, pop music and magazines.

The Thai have long been regarded as an inferior race, just like the Sam Sam discussed earlier. In contemporary Malaysia, Thais have the reputation for being alcoholic, criminal, poor, illiterate and stubborn. In addition, in the context of rapid Islamization of Kelantan, the Thai environment is seen as ritually dirty and religiously polluted. Thus, dogs which come from a Thai

Buddhist village into Malay spaces are chased away. This has not always been the case. The Thais consider themselves indigenous settlers, sons of the soil. The first prime minister of Malaysia, Tonku Abdulrahman, was a product of Siamese marriage politics in Kedah. His mother, a daughter of King Rama IV, was a Thai, and the first wife of Chayo Praya of Saiburee, Sultan Abdulhammed of Kedah. She donated land for a Buddhist temple which bears her name and symbolizes Malay-Siamese relations in the old days.

Thai citizenship can be acquired in a number of ways when birth is registered in Thailand. Not least because so many Thai prostitutes are married to local Thai-Malaysian men, Thai citizenship can be arranged in neighbouring Narathiwat province. As large numbers of Kelantanese Thai have kinship ties with Takbai Thais, Thai citizenship can be acquired by registering birth in Thailand or by inventing kinship ties. In addition, Kelantanese Thai who worked on Nikhom state schemes in Naratiwat have obtained citizenship rights. While for the Sam Sam, the acquisition of citizenship in Malaysia is increasingly difficult, the Kelantanese Thais use the legal situation of the Thai state to their advantage.

### **Teaching Thai cultural identity in Malaysia**

#### ***The borderland: Scene 4***

We meet at a checkpoint on the Thai-Malaysian border in Sungai Golok with a Thai teacher, a Thai official and a Thai-Malaysian student from Kampung Bang Sae in Kelantan who is studying Thai in the programme of the Songkla Foundation. We are heading for Wat Utamara in Bang Sae, housing the chief abbot of Kelantan. In Bang Sae, we begin to talk with Thai youth about Thai identity in Kelantan. The Foundation supports the reproduction of Theravada Buddhism and Thai traditions in Malaysia, tackling Thai youth in particular. The Thai teacher (from Isan), a volunteer of the foundation, is on good terms

with the village youth and engages the boys in Thai boxing. In the evening, the girls perform a Manohra dance for which they had several weeks of training. The visitors are welcomed with a Thai Wai (traditional Thai greeting) and some enthusiasm. The girls ask the visitors for their opinion of the Manohra dance, especially its authenticity. They tell us that they are collecting money for the Kelantanese Thai-Malaysian association from wealthy temples to buy Manohra costumes instead of borrowing them from southern Thailand.

Buddhist monks play a special role in northern Malaysia. In addition to taking care of the religious matters of the community, they teach the Thai language. As teachers, materials and books are lacking, the Thai community depends on the temple not only for religious purposes, but for the reproduction of Thai cultural identity at large. In addition to religion and language, monks teach Thai customs and Thai manners. The reliance on the monks is due to the fact that few people are prepared to become a Thai teacher. Little money from the Thai consulate is forthcoming. In Bang Sae, the Thai school is linked to the training centre for Thai Malaysian youth. As attendance at Thai lessons is low and limited to children and youth, the level of Thai literacy does not extend beyond the elementary level. Not only does the Thai community lack Thai teachers but it also increasingly lacks its most important cultural capital, monks. The solution to the dilemma is to bring monks from Thailand, resulting in further intensification of border-crossing networks.

It is not uncommon in contemporary Kelantan to find temples deserted, because there are simply not enough monks to staff the vacant temple positions. On the other hand, there are some extremely wealthy, well staffed temples, contrasting markedly from the one-hundred year old temples. Bang Sae is a big village near the Golok checkpoint. In the centre of Bang Sae lies the spectacular temple of Wat Utamara. The large Wat is a postmodern bricolage which integrates architectural styles and symbols from Thai, Chinese

and Indian worlds and beliefs. Wat Utamara houses the chief abbot of Kelantan. The temple has visitors from Thailand, from Kota Bharu, but also from Johore and Singapore and the dormitory can easily welcome fifty guests at a time.

### **Rupture and disjuncture in Thai everyday life**

The factors which are responsible for the fragmentation of everyday life are the isolation of Thai villagers in the Malay world, especially of the youth, and lengthy periods spent outside the village. Young people are increasingly dissatisfied with life in the village, the monotonous and hard labour in the fields, the low earnings, and, most of all, the boredom of village life. Migration of Thai villagers to Singapore is increasingly attractive to Thai youngsters.

Border-crossings to Singapore are highly regulated and immigrants are subject to massive government disciplining which includes health-checks and skill examinations. The labourers who are employed by Chinese enterprises must undergo regular health checks. In Kelantan villages, young men who are engaged in physical, stressful labour are often addicted to drugs, which are now readily available in Thai villages. Although they try to participate in the *Sonkran* or *Loykratong* festivals where possible, in order to share the excitement or to find a Thai spouse, young men spend much of their life outside the village. Lately, Thai youth have become the subject of discourse on the moral values of the Thai in Malaysia. Parents complain about the refusal of young men to robe as monks even for the shortest Lenten period which is seen as the status passage to adulthood. The refusal to submit to the regime of the temple is seen as a threat to the reproduction of Thai ethnicity. Thus, the young men who focus their lifestyles on desire and consumption are seen to jeopardise Thai traditions. Their habits of drinking, prostitution and drug addiction add to the stigmatization of Thai youth.

Inspired by these anxieties, a new generation of Buddhist monks in Kelantan has started a campaign which focuses on the spiritual state of Thai youth. Phra Buntam and Phra Plian present themselves as modern, knowledgeable monks who want to develop the spiritual knowledge of the lay people, by targeting the Thai youth. They believe that they have a special responsibility to educate stubborn villagers, especially the youth, who are said to be losing touch with Buddhism. These monks emphasise new ways of teaching Buddhism as a self-technology, and mobilise transnational cultural capital to incorporate the Thai-Malaysian youth in their circuits. In Bang Sae, a Thai-Malaysian youth centre integrates traditional Thai drums (which are unused) and modern Hi-Fi-Karaoke equipment which is extremely popular with Thai youth. In addition, women organize *Manorah* classes and the monks teach computer and Internet-classes. Phra Buntam and Phra Plian distinguish themselves from the traditional monks who only stay in the temple and rely on folk knowledge. Instead, they stress the importance of the text, the teaching of the Buddha (*Dhamma*), meditation practice, ascetic values and bodily discipline, and the rules of the Buddhist canon. In short, they understand teaching of the *Dhamma* as cultural work on the self.

This campaign to develop Thai-Malaysian youth is integrated into networks with Buddhist foundations in Bangkok and Songkla. Young men are selected to participate in a programme to study Thai language at Thaksin University in Songkla. It is hoped that these youth in turn promote Buddhist values and Thai ethnic identity. In parallel to religious practices and cultural work in rural Kelantan, Buntam and Plian are integrated into the cosmological order of the Thai Buddhist Sangha. Ajarn Buntam has been nominated as Phra Choi Petsuwan and has received his insignia from the Thai king. He is a potential successor of the chief monk in Kelantan.

In a context in which the institutions of cultural life are fragmented, and in which the ethnic Thais are increasingly marginalised, a new generation of intellectuals is targeting the Thai-Malaysian youth as a symbol of Thai ethnic identity in Malaysia. The fact that indigenous monks are disappearing does not weaken the central role of the religious sphere in the revitalization of Thai ethnic identity. Especially since the rise of Islamic utopia and its regimes of power and truth, which dominate the everyday communication of the Kelantanese Thais, the revitalization of Buddhism has a particular relevance. As Johnson (personal communication) remarks, Thai villagers are sceptical about the help and representation from the Thai consul, other diplomats, the senator and politicians who appear at festivals, but who have no dealings with the everyday realities of the villagers.

### **Buddhist networks**

The Buddhist grassroots movement extends from Bangkok to Singapore via Kuala Lumpur, and encompasses a handful of Kelantan villages on the way which are considered sacred. Exemplary temples in northwest and northeastern Malaysia, such as Wat Utamara, have extensive links with the Thai Sangha as well as wealthy Chinese patrons in Thailand, in Malaysia and in Singapore who are ready to sponsor the spectacular renovation or entire construction of a temple in the hope of acquiring merit (*tambun*). The Thai religious elite in Kelantan nurtures networks of communication and support with Buddhist foundations in Singapore. In this way, Malaysian Chinese patrons from Johor Baru or Singapore are bound to particular Buddhist temples in Kelantan where the bones of their ancestors are interred. On the occasion of prayers for their ancestors, wealthy Chinese patrons drive their families in Mercedes-Benz cars from Johor to the sleepy rural villages of Kelantan. The village provides only junior monks and a small *sala* for the funeral ritual, underlining the minor importance of the ritual which is performed solely for the Chinese visitors. The chief abbot of Kelantan is

known to spend lengthy periods in Singapore. As shown above, young men from Tumpat and Pasir Puteh are migrating to Singapore. This pattern of movement involves all young men.

Some wealthy temples in Kedah have established formal agreements with the Buddhist University, Mahachula Mahavitayalai. As a result, young graduates can be recruited to Mahachula to occupy vacant positions in some Malaysian temples after graduation. In a context of diminishing staff, educated Thai monks are gradually replacing indigenous monks. Buddhist pilgrimage routes between southern Thailand and Singapore encompass Kelantanese villages whose temples are considered sacred and which become tourist spots as a result. The revitalised exchange is greatly supported by the diplomatic representations of the Thai kingdom in Malaysia, such as the Thai consulate in Kota Bharu. The Thai consul has an interesting function in the Thai borderland. He not only shows up on important ceremonial occasions, but also mediates between the Thai state and the Thai-Malaysian Sangha. If necessary, a large Buddha image will cross the border in a diplomatic car avoiding any spot checks from the border custom officials.

Using terms of kinship and racial assumptions of common blood, government officials from the Thai consulate claim a common destiny across the border with Thailand. As Yusoff and Johnson have observed, the presence and overseeing of Thai officials at a funeral ceremony in Kelantan changed the character of the ritual, transforming it from a local ritual into a performance of Thai statecraft (Yusoff and Johnson, personal communication). The Buddhist foundation in Songkla plays a conspicuous role in training selected Kelantanese Thais to lead in political seminars, meditation courses and Thai studies programmes.

### **Border-crossing networks and the Thai state**

The politics of Thai ethnic identity in northeast Malaysia involves many players who claim to represent Thai-Malaysian peasants. Anthropologists have seldom commented on the political perspective of the ethnic Thais and their relationship with neighbouring Thailand (but see Kershaw 1984). The Thais are too small in number and too domesticated to present any threat to the Malaysian state. The manifold cultural interactions with the rural Malays and the symbolic patronage of the Sultan prevent any violent assault on Thai communities. The impoverished Thai villages in Kelantan and Kedah have seen a revival of Buddhist culture, in which the Thai state plays a supportive role. In this revival of Thai identity, Buddhist monks play a leading role. As a religious elite, Buddhist monks are the gatekeepers of Thai language and Thai traditions, which are now accentuated anew. The Thai cultural association is mobilised to buy Manohra costumes, which had hitherto to be borrowed from southern Thailand, dusty music ensembles are unpacked, many Buddhist stupas and all kinds of Buddhist goods are imported. Many Buddhist temples are built on the model of Bangkok wats, thriving on the money which is flooding in from wealthy Chinese patrons from Johore, Singapore and Thailand eager to make merit, and on the growing integration of the Malaysian monks into the Thai sangha. Kelantan villages acquire a new role as sacred sites in a re-imagined pilgrimage route, which from Nakhorn Sri Thammarat's Wat Mahathat to Singapore criss-crosses political boundaries for Chinese patrons and Thai pilgrimage tourists. Thai monks, who come from the Buddhist University (Mahachulalongkorn) in Bangkok or the Buddhist foundation in Songkla with the mission to revive Thai traditions and modelling it according to Thai rules, subvert the national idea of citizenship and transform Buddhist monks in Malaysia into agents with double citizenship. Through the Wat, as the central pillar of Thai culture, this reorganization of local religious concepts of meditation along national models also captures the villagers, especially young people and women.

### **Diasporic cultures and citizenship on the Thai-Malaysian border**

The revivalism of Thai culture and Buddhism on the Thai-Malaysian border, although minuscule, parallels the resurgence of Islam. The resurgence of Islam on the Thai-Malaysian border parallels Islamic networks across the Malaysian, Indonesian and Philippine border. The revivalism of Buddhism in turn parallels the re-awakening of Buddhist networks in Thailand, Burma, Yunnan and Laos (Cohen 2000). The networks are not limited to the border, but are part of a larger process of globalization and the intensification of border crossings. The most important transnational social spaces, constructed through border crossing migration, marriage, trade and conflict, are visible in the borderlands. The diaspora populations trapped on the Thai-Malaysian border become transnational communities for whom border crossing is a way of life.

There is a shift of emphasis in the concrete interaction of minorities and the state on the ground and on the local re-workings and filters of national and global scripts in the local context in the work of borderland scholars (Horstmann 2002). This interaction of ethnic minorities who find themselves subject to national citizenship regimes in which they are defined as the other to the state is crucial to the social transformation of the Thai-Malaysian border. It is important to start with citizenship as a focal point. This essay has given some findings on the practical, silent reworking of citizenship rules by border people for their own purpose. The practical reworking of citizenship shows the real needs of border people in everyday life. In the marginal space where one nation-state ends and another begins, local communities are playing on the ambiguity of identity in the borderland and make use of their networks across the border as a resource.

Crossing an international border, border people now become foreigners. Carsten (1998) argues that the local perception of the borderland differs substantially from the centre and that border people avoid as much as possible

the legal hurdles, which crossing an international border implies. Carsten compares the local perception of the border with kinship relations. However, the relations across the border are far from unproblematic, as regimes of citizenship produce social differentiation along nationality lines. Thai- and Malay-speaking Muslims in southern Thailand resent their inferior position in Thai and in Malay society. By joining Buddhist/Muslim networks across the border and by seeking niches in the host society (Miyazaki 2000), border people counter the work which citizenship has done.

Double citizenship is a hidden transcript. Doing fieldwork on Buddhist-Muslim relations in southern Thailand (Horstmann, forthcoming), I naturally came across the everyday life of Patani Muslims on both sides of the border. People were crossing the border to send their children to an Islamic boarding school, because they resented the Thai influence on their children. Families split up between Thailand and Malaysia and are reconnected. These connections further limit the national meaning of citizenship. Thai-speaking Muslims seem to have more problems obtaining Malaysian citizenship. Fishermen who attempt to escape poverty in Thailand and to settle in Langkawi carefully operate between Thai and Malay local bureaucrats. Other people would like to imitate them. Malay-Muslims in the Malay world have always discriminated against the Thai-speaking Sam Sam. Thai Buddhists in Malaysia are registering the birth of their children in neighbouring Takbai for the convenience of double citizenship. Double citizenship seems to be a pattern of the political ecology of the borderland in which border people are reworking the government rules according to their own interests. Doing so, they rely on the implicit or explicit compliance of one of the states on the other side of the border. Indeed, these assumed blood ties seem to be the essentialism of citizenship ideology on the Thai-Malaysian border. This essay has explored the terrain and the tension between personal and national identity. Instead of assuming a definite landscape of the borderland, the

ambiguity and shifts between the Thai and Malay worlds are emphasised. The new spaces of migrants and monks are not only limiting, but are also empowering the lives of the respective border communities.

## Notes

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2. The study of border-crossing also necessitates a multi-sited fieldwork approach which adapts to the lifestyle of border-crossing subjects.
3. The Palestinian citizens of Israel are marginalised twice over. Citizens of Israel, they are members of a racialised minority perceived by many Israelis as potentially disloyal and subversive. Implicated by their residence and citizenship in Israel, and by their growing acculturation into Israeli life, they tend to be suspected and marginalised by Palestinians elsewhere and by Arabs generally (Rabinowitz 1998).
4. Anderson ([1983]1991) and Thongchai (1994), whose works on the formation of the modern nation-state give insights into the genesis and formation of citizenship in Southeast Asia, suggest such an approach. State borders play a crucial role in that analysis. That the borders of the pre-colonial Southeast Asian state (*negeri*) were qualitatively different from those of the modern nation-state was a crucial aspect of Anderson's theory. Thongchai argues that the border implies a hierarchical organization of the territorial state from the very beginning, not only in terms of class and status, but also in

terms of an ethno-geography which puts its subjects in an inferior relation to Bangkok space.

5. As a married wife of a Malaysian citizen, Habibah can aspire to Malaysian citizenship after five years of residence and employment.

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