

The Importance of Culture in *Emic* Interpretations of the History of Thailand's Southern Separatist Movement: The "Gentlemen's Agreement" of 1943 and the Malaysian Relationship with the Separatists

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Abstract: *This paper explores the role of culture in two important events in the history of the separatist struggle in the Muslim South of Thailand. The first event was the "gentlemen's agreement" of 1943, promising Britain's support for independence or annexation to British Malaya in exchange of military and intelligence support against the Japanese, between the traditional Melayu leadership and the British Colonial Office represented by the commander of the British forces in Malaya during World War II. Emic and etic explanations are provided from the point of view of the Melayu leadership and of the British. The second event that is discussed is more complex and involves Malaysia's support for the separatist movement and subsequent negotiations during the 1980s between Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur leading to an agreement stipulating that Malaysia would cease aiding the separatist movement in exchange of Thailand's support against the Communist Party of Malaya along the porous Thai-Malay border. Finally, a brief conclusion summarizes the importance of culture in the history of the separatist movement of Southern Thailand.*

Keywords: *Thailand, Malaysia, Separatist Movements, Ethnonationalism*

1. Introduction

The three border provinces of the Thai South, Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani, are predominantly inhabited by Muslim Malays, also known as Melayu Patani due to their Malay dialect. Historically, they were part of the independent Kingdom of Patani and during the 16th century represented the height of Muslim Civilization in Southeast Asia (Yegar 2002; Roux 1998). The rise of the unified Kingdom of Ayutthaya and later on of Siam to the North was followed by

military incursions to the Southern Muslim Malay Sultanates (Wyatt 2003). A loose relationship of vassalage was established by King Rama I and maintained with few changes until the ascent to the throne of Siam by King Chulalongkorn, Rama V in the late 19th century (McCargo 2009). Chulalongkorn's drastic modernization program included the centralization of the administration of the kingdom and led to the first attempts at the direct administration of the Malay Sultanates of Patani, Terengganu, and Perlis (Yegar 2002).¹ The centralization of administration was resisted by the Malay Muslims in the South and their traditional leaders were tolerated by the Central Government until the early 20th century when direct administration by Thai bureaucrats was imposed by Bangkok and traditional leaders were left with only a ceremonial position (Roux 1998; Yegar 2002).²

World War II provided an opportunity for the Melayu Patani to seek outside help in order to reestablish their autonomy and possibly their independence from the Thai Central Government. Since Thailand had joined the axis powers and supported the Japanese, the Melayu of the South decided to support the British forces of British Malaya. The British made good use of them as fighters and in providing intelligence about the Japanese. Traditional leaders, lead by Tunku Mayhiddin, brokered an agreement with the British Commander which stipulated that in exchange of military and intelligence support by the Malay Muslims of the South of Thailand, the British would support their independence from Thailand or at least their annexation to British Malaya after the end of the War (Yegar 2002).

After the end of the War, the British decided not to annex Patani and Satun in order to avoid destabilizing Thailand. Needless to say, the traditional leadership of the South of Thailand felt betrayed and after the independence

¹ Perlis and Terengganu were annexed by British Malaya after the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909. Patani was recognized as part of Siam.

² The last ruling Sultan of Patani, Tunku Abdul Kader, escaped to Malaya in 1932 after the Coup ending the absolute Monarchy in Siam.

of Malaysia it was supported by relatives in Malaysia such as the royal family of Kelantan, *inter alia* (Millard 2004). The conflict between the Malaysian Federal government and the Communist Party of Malaya, during the 1960s and 1970s, complicated the relationship between Malaysia and the Thai South (Neher 2002). Communist forces operated along the porous Thai-Malaysian border and were tolerated by the Thai authorities (Smith 2005). The Thai Government used the communist threat as negotiating leverage to convince the Malaysian Government to stop supporting the separatist movement in the South. Kelantan continued to support the rebels while the Federal Government ceased to do so. Pressure mounted and even Kelantan was restricted from aiding the separatists (Smith 2005; Jory 2007; Liow 2006).

Both of the previously described events were pivotal in the history of the separatist movement in the South of Thailand. The following sections provide *etic* and *emic* interpretations of the events so as to bring to the fore the role of culture in the wider context of the unrest in the Deep South of Thailand. Nevertheless, the issues are complex and the parties are not monolithic entities and therefore the explanations provided are exploratory in nature rather than conclusive.

2. The "Gentlemen's Agreement" of World War II

During the early stages of the Japanese occupation of Thailand and later Malaya the situation for the allied forces was dire (Neher 2002). Manpower was limited and logistical and intelligence support was badly needed by the British forces operating in Malaya (2002). The traditional leaders of the Melayu Malay community of the South of Thailand decided to side with the British in exchange for support for independence or annexation to British Malaya at the end of the War. Malay Muslims in the South of Thailand cooperated with British forces by providing food, shelter, logistical support, fighting men, and intelligence (Yegar 2002). Several sources mention an important oral agreement between the traditional leader of the Melayu Patani, Tunku Mayhiddin, the son of the last Sultan, and the Commander of the British

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forces in Malaya, representing the Colonial Office. While there is no documentary evidence of the agreement, several witnesses have come forward to attest that the encounter between the two leaders took place and that British support for independence or at least secession from Thailand was promised in exchange for the aforementioned support (Yegar 2002; Ungpakorn 2007; Gunaratna and Acharya 2006). As was mentioned in the introduction, British support for the independence of greater Patani was not forthcoming and the region was recognized to be sovereign territory of the Kingdom of Thailand (Ishii 1994).

How to interpret the event? First a standard *etic* explanation will be provided which will then be complemented with two *emic* interpretations. During the early stage of the War, the British forces needed the help of the Malays in order to defend the dwindling territory under their control. Furthermore, the Pacific theater of the war was not a priority at the time and most decisions were taken by local commanders based on the particular circumstances of the situation. Therefore the British commander took the opportunity to cement an alliance for pragmatic reasons. After the war, the main priority of the British and the allies was to have a stable Thailand at the center of Southeast Asia and geopolitical considerations trumped any other considerations. The lack of a written agreement provided an expedient excuse for breaching the previous understanding between the parties.

While the previous *etic* standard explanation seems plausible it is far from exhaustive and leaves important ideational and cultural aspects out. An *emic* interpretation from the perspective of the Malay leadership is that the British entered a formal agreement based on honor between the representative of Great Britain, the British Commander, and the leader of the Melayu Patani nation, Tunku Mayhiddin. According to them the agreement was later breached by the British due to selfish considerations and this is considered a dishonorable betrayal. On the other hand a British interpretation of the event greatly differs from the previous one. According to the British the agreement was provisional in nature due to its oral nature. Moreover, the

British Commander did not have the authority to make such an agreement in any case nor did the Colonial Office. Since the agreement was merely a provisional "gentlemen's agreement" then it was not legally binding on the British Government. The need to have a stable Thailand trumped the need for self determination.

Several cultural factors are important in the *emic* explanations previously presented. It is clear that the two parties viewed the value of an oral agreement differently (Nisbett 2003). In addition to that, the perceived powers of the British Commander also differed. Finally, the underlying assumption of pragmatism in diplomacy was an issue (Murdock 1955). At the risk of oversimplification, it can be asserted that traditional Malay aristocrats, such as the leaders who negotiated the agreement with the British, held in equal respect written and oral agreements (Nisbett 2003; Mulder 1996). Moreover, they assumed that a Commander had the same power as a traditional Malay leader to enter into binding agreements. Both assumptions proved to be incorrect. Thus while culture cannot be considered the sole explanatory factor in the breach of the "gentlemen's agreement", it complements *etic* neo-realist explanations based on blanket assumptions of actor self-interest and perfect rationality.

3. Malaysia's Relationship to the Separatist Movement

The second "event" that will be discussed is not a discreet one-time event but rather a trend in a long term relationship punctuated by several major agreements. There is a very close socio-cultural relationship between the three border provinces of the South of Thailand and the northern Malay Sultanates of the Federation of Malaysia (Jory 2007; Liow 2006, 2006; Roux 1998). Furthermore, the three border provinces share a common language and religion with them. Even the royal families of the Sultanate of Kelantan and of Patani are closely blood related. Nevertheless the initially high support provided by Malaysia to the separatist movement in the South of Thailand, of the early post-

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independence period gradually gave way to a policy of non-interference in the 1970s and 1980s.

Why did Malaysia's support for the rebels decline over the years? A realist explanation to the previous question based on realism would assert that Malaysia stopped supporting them when their cost-benefit analysis made support for them too costly. More specifically, the rise of the threat of communism in Southeast Asia in the late 60s and 70s made military cooperation with Thailand more important than the promotion of self determination (Askew 2007; Liow 2006). Thus the pragmatic support of the rebels during the early post-independence years was an attempt to balance power by weakening Thailand while the change in policy was due to the need to fight the threat posed by the Communist Party of Malaya (Askew 2007; Neher 2002). From a security perspective, Thailand was ignoring the troops of the CPM in its side of the border as long as they did not attack Thai targets and due to sovereignty Malaysian forces were not allowed to pursue them into Thai territory (Yegar 2002; Askew 2007). Thailand used the threat of the CPM as leverage so as to convince the Malaysian government to stop supporting the separatists.

The previous explanation assumes that the parties are unitary actors, operating under perfect rationality, and motivated by self interest (Cozette 2008; Tang 2008; Hazen 2008). Avruch criticizes this "sealed black box" assumption and recommends including a nuanced cultural analysis into the picture (1998). Firstly, Malaysia was not a unitary actor in the relationship in discussion. As a Federation, the individual Sultanates have considerable autonomy and their own political leaders. It is also important to mention that Kelantan and Trengganu, both under the control of an Islamic political party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, continued to support the separatists even after the Federal Government decided to stop doing so (Askew 2007; Yegar 2002). Moreover, there are considerable cultural differences between the Northern Malay Sultanates and the rest of the Federation (Millard 2004). For example, the dialect spoken in the Northern Malay States is closer to the one spoken in Southern Thailand (Roux 1998). In addition to that, the

Northern Sultanates are more religiously conservative than the rest of the country (Millard 2004).

An *emic* explanation of the change in the relationship from the point of view of the separatists would take those cultural factors into consideration. For example, the close relationship between the Sultan of Kelantan and the traditional leadership of Patani would be emphasized. It could even be asserted that Kelantan has more in common with Patani than with other Malaysian Sultanates (Millard 2004). Thus, from the point of view of the separatists Kelantan supported them due to their close ties in term of kinship, cultural affinity, and common history of oppression under the Siamese (Yegar 2002). The change would be interpreted as pressure from the secular leadership in Kuala Lumpur and the weaker socio-cultural links between the people of Patani and those of the rest of Malaysia. An *emic* explanation from the point of view of the leadership of Kelantan would be very similar to the one of the Melayu Patani.

A proper *etic* explanation of the change in the relationship between Malaysia and the separatist movement should take into consideration realist factors such as security in addition to cultural factors. Internal political factors are also important, such as the difference between the political culture of the northern Sultanates and the rest of the Federation (Millard 2004). Therefore a more nuanced explanation of the change in the relationship would attempt to open the "black box" assumed by realist scholars and look at internal cultural variation as well as commonalities (Avruch 1998; Shani 2008; Kessler 2009).

4. Conclusions

The two "events" discussed in this paper were used to explore the role of culture in conflict. Culture was used as a complementary explanatory variable in order to emphasize the *emic* interpretations of events. *Etic* explanations in the realist tradition tend to omit culture as a valid concern and give primacy to control over resources and hard power (Guilhot 2008; Kolodziej 2005). The situation in traditional

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security studies is no different from that found in international relations. Traditional Security paradigms tend to give primacy to the security of the state at the expense of other actors and take a narrow view of the factors that can be considered important (David Carment 2009; Khong 2006; Abulof 2009).

The unrest in the Deep South of Thailand is a good example of an ethno-national conflict that has been mostly analyzed through the traditional lenses of international relations and security studies (Ungpakorn 2007; McCargo 2004). Geopolitical factors such as the balance of power in Southeast Asia and the rise of communism have been emphasized and local cultural grievances and basic human needs from the point of view of the Muslim Malay population of the region, have been ignored (Jitpiromrisi and McCargo 2008). The recent surge in violence shows that the root causes of the conflict have not been addressed by Bangkok and that a new more holistic approach is needed. Cultural insecurity on the part of the population of the Deep South is at the root of the violence and thus a proper inquiry as to the root of that cultural insecurity should be undertaken and the findings must be properly integrated in to any possible policy interventions (Jitpiromrisi and McCargo 2008; Ungpakorn 2007; Liow 2006).

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