

Ties of Brotherhood: Cultural Roots of Southern Thailand and Northern Malaysia

Suthiwong Phongphaibun
Institute of Southern Thai Studies

It can be said without exaggeration that over the last four decades Prof. Suthiwong Phongphaibun has become the leading figure in the study of the culture of the southern Thai region. He has published a voluminous output of original books, articles, and edited texts of manuscripts that have played a major role in defining the field. Among his best-known works are *Good Things from the South* (1962), *Principles of the Thai Language* (1962) – a textbook used throughout the country for over two decades, *Village Customs* (1964), *Buddhism in the Songkhla Lake Region* (1980), *A Dictionary of the Southern Thai Dialect* (1987), and the recently co-edited volumes, *Cleaning Off the Rust on the Kris: Examining the Way of Life of the People of the Lower South* (2000) and *The Southern Thai Chinese: Pathways and Power* (2001).

Prof. Suthiwong was general editor of the monumental *Encyclopaedia of Southern Thai Culture*, first published in 1986 in 10 volumes, to which over 220 scholars contributed articles. The work, which was the model for the compilation of three other similar multi-volume encyclopaedias on the culture of the Central, Northern, and Northeast regions, was later republished in 1999 in 18 volumes that ran to over 9000 pages – the largest of the four encyclopaedias.

In 1980 Prof. Suthiwong founded the Institute of Southern Studies which he directed until his recent retirement. In 1991, the Institute was relocated to its current picturesque location on Koh Yor island in the Songkhla Lake, Songkhla Province, southern Thailand, in buildings designed by Prof. Suthiwong himself. The Institute is devoted to the study and promotion of the history, literature, religion, language, performing arts, and culture of southern Thailand. Under the Institute's auspices Prof. Suthiwong has been a patron to hundreds of scholars in the region, ranging from the village level up to holders of PhD degrees.

For his whole life Prof. Suthiwong has been a tireless promoter of the value of research into southern Thai culture. Much of his work was produced during an era when the value of regional culture was not only unrecognized in Thai academic or government circles, but was also seen by conservatives as a potential security threat to the unity of the nation. He is currently advisor to the Institute of Southern Studies (<http://www.tsu.ac.th/ists/index.htm>) and Senior Adviser for research on southern Thailand for the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). (Patrick Jory)

The identity of a person / community tends to be a mixture of both physical and mental elements, including form, element, role, function and strength.

A community's true identity, therefore, is constituted by various elements deriving from **ethnicity** or **race**; this is one root. Another is that of "personality" expressed through behaviour and ways of thinking according to the ideals of a cultural or ethnic group, which has certain "intentions" (or *dhammaphayop*) that drive it. A person / community's identity, therefore, is continually changing and dynamic, rather than fixed.

Thai identity in the lower southern region and Malaysian identity in the upper part of the peninsula therefore must be viewed based on these two characteristics, with an awareness of the past, that which is currently being formed, and what we might predict for the future.

The View Based on Common Ancient Roots

The communities of lower southern Thailand and northern Malaysia share certain common structures and roots due to their location near the equator. Both regions enjoy a humid climate and monsoon winds blow throughout the year. These physical factors have created certain biological similarities, like people who are of the same bloodline, and similar to the animal and plant world. Biological diversity is a factor that lead to diversity in terms of local wisdom and local village culture due to similarities in natural resources and environment.

Let us look at the region's ethnic history going back in time 3500 years before the Buddhist era through to the beginning of the Buddhist era. The lower part of southern Thailand and the rest of the Malay peninsula, as well as the Indonesian islands including Borneo and Sumatra was inhabited by Mongoloids who mixed with indigenous local inhabitants, leading to the appearance of the Polynesians. 500 years before the Buddhist era they mixed with Aryans, who had migrated into south Asia.¹

Scholars often refer to the Polynesians who live in Southeast Asian and Madagascar in East Africa, including the Minangkabau and Bataks in Sumatra, the Dayaks in Kalimantan and the Javanese, as "Malay"². This term has a sense of crossing over to the other side of a river, which means the migration of a group of Javanese across the seas and other islands.³ The term "Malay" in this sense reflects a belief in a group that separated itself from Java. Thus these people and their culture are referred to as "Javanese-Malay."

¹ *Indonesia* (Department of International Republic of Indonesia, Indonesia 1997,) p.11.

² Nidhi Aeusrivongse, "Chawa-Melayu: People and Culture in the South," *Encyclopaedia of Thai Culture: Southern Thailand*, Vol. 3, (Thai Phanit Foundation, 1999), p.1963.

³ Explanation of Khun Silapakitphisan, former head of provincial education in Songkhla province and teacher of Malay at Chulalongkorn University.

Out of these common geographical and historical roots there developed a new ethnic group with a shared culture, with an identity consisting of more than simply racial or genetic similarities. There are especially close relations between the Thais of the lower south for whom **Patani** was the centre, and the people of upper Malaysia for whom **Kedah** and the neighbouring states were the centre in terms of administration, trade, and culture. These factors closely related the peoples of this region in both form and mentality. This may be seen in terms of local wisdom and customs related to village life, especially **eating culture**, eg. the production and eating of *budu*, and *jing jang* fish; **housing**, especially the building of houses on stone stilts, and building *phalai* (Balai); **dress**, including the wearing of sarongs, *batik*; and **health and medicine**, eg. treating fever by ritual dance performances of *materi* and *limon* or *toh khreum*, the role played by midwives called *toh bidan*, the custom of making a ritual payment known as *kha rat*. These things indicate a pre-existing common culture that has been handed down until today. This culture has deep roots and is very widespread.

Local culture is comprised of deeply-rooted, supporting culture, and sub-cultures. For example “rice culture” is a deeply-rooted culture – the method of ploughing, sowing, planting and harvesting rice plant separately using a *kae* knife (which still exists in southern Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia). Beliefs and customs related to rice-growing communities are a supporting culture, eg. the belief in the rice spirit (*khwan khao*), *khao khwan*, and *bai si khwan khao* which are expressed in various rituals, eg. *korn phom fai*, *kheun ple*, *tham khwan dek*, *tham khwan khao*. Some of these rituals have been integrated with orthodox religions, eg. *bai sri* has been integrated with the *sunat* ritual among Thai Muslims, and the practice of having a *bai sri* and *wian waen thian chai* ritual in marriage ceremonies is a mixture of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic beliefs.

These deeply rooted common cultural characteristics have gradually faded over time as a result of the demarcation of the border. What was once close now seems far apart. This sense of distance, and even sometimes doubt or suspicion, has led to an accumulation of conflict, which has meant what once fitted together now has no meaning. We might compare this to flowers that use to bloom on the same bunch; even though they are on a different stem or cluster, they still have the same petals, fragrance, colour. After they have become different nationalities speaking different languages the fragrance and colour has changed and the branches no longer touch each other. What was once the same breed, the same gender, is no longer. The “*tanyongmas*” in Narathiwat province may be related to the “*phikul thong*” of Phthalung, but is very different from the *phikul thong* of Ang Thong. The word *lut* (mud) in southern Thai dialect and *selut* in Malay shows this kinship; the only difference might be in the eyes of the linguist. But due to the fact that they now belong to different nationalities speaking different languages they might not understand each other even though they use the same word. This example I have referred to differs from the term “*khwan khao*” and “*nasi semangat*.” But without these links it is difficult to see the connection. For example in the marriage ceremonies of Thai Muslims today *khao khwan*

or *semangat* is still used. However in southern Thailand this ritual today is no longer practised. One needs to go back to the early Bangkok era to see it, as in the evidence from local literature in the south eg. the *Phra Rot Meri* in *kap* verse⁴ (Ruang Bannanai version, Nakhon Sri Thammarat). In the episode where Lady Sonsa is performing the *tham khwan* ritual and gives a new name to Meri, “Kangri,” there is reference to feeding *khao khwan*.

The Brahmans say open the <i>bai sri</i>	the banana leaf top is lifted off
The victory candle is lit	respect is paid to the guru
The Brahmans chant the Vedas	and bathe the hair of <i>Phra Yupan</i>
The astrologers	also read out their blessing
The lit candle is passed around <i>wian waen</i>	the people sit around in throngs
To receive the candle going around the circle	in honour of the lady
Circling to the right around the <i>binja</i>	the Brahmans stick it in the bowl
The guests are all seated together	for the day of the princess’s <i>tham khwan</i>
After nine rounds the candles are put out	and the smoke waved towards the Lady
Princess Sonsa takes the <i>khao khwan</i>	and feeds the rice to the Princess
Gives her a new name according to her lineage	the name – “Lady Kangri”
Her former name was Meri	given to her by her father and mother

It can be seen that the rituals in the city of *yakshas* integrates different elements of the *tham khwan* rituals deriving from Hindu, Thai, Javanese and Malay culture, because these are *yaksha* from southern Thailand, not India.

Therefore that which was once similar may now appear different, as one region still maintains certain practices that have ceased in another region. Like the custom of “counting relatives” (*sao yat nap yot*)⁵ we must go back to the past to discover the “truth” about the present. Southern Thais call tracing the source of something in the past “*lae hem*” (appearance) in order to “*sao yan nap yot*,” or discover who one is related to.

The View Based on the Spreading of Roots in the Era of Navigation

⁴ *Phra Rot Meri Kham Kap: Wannakam Thorngthin Pha Tai Praphet But Khao (Phra Rot Meri in Kap Verse: Southern Thai Local Literature in But Manuscripts)* (Khongkan Phumpanyathaksin Jak Wannakam Lae Preutikam, Thailand Research Fund, 2001-2004).

⁵ The phrases “*sao yat nap yot*” or “*sao yan nap yot*” used in southern Thai culture refer to the counting of relatives of the same bloodline or lineage according to race. The word *yot* has two senses: 1. roots, origins; 2 deriving from the term *yojana* meaning “far apart” / “utility.”

The Thai-Malay peninsula lies across an ocean trade route. Since the early age of the technology of seafaring it was a port of call for Moors, Southeast Asians, and Chinese boats where they carried out repairs to their boats and loaded goods. The work of the Greek geographer Ptolemy describes the golden peninsula, ie. the Thai-Malay peninsula, especially Java. He portrays Java as a very developed country in terms of political administration, agriculture, navigation, and astrology. He refers to the skill of the local people in the production of *batik*, metallurgy, as well as their use of currency and production of coins. Especially the Indians from Gujarat who migrated to the region inhabited by the Javanese, Malays and southern Thais from the 5th century of the Buddhist era to 620 BE (in the reign of Aji Caka). In Java or Indonesia there is evidence of the widespread use of Sanskrit and the Pallava and Devanagari scripts. Later this language and these scripts became mixed with the local language of the Javanese, leading to the birth of the “Kawi” language. With the expansion of trade this region became known as *Suvannadvipa* or *Java dvipa*, and the region later became a Hindu-Buddhist cultural zone.⁶

Khlonchai Hattha states that it is the Tamil literary work, *Pattinappalai*, written between the 7th-8th century BE, that first refers to Kedah as a competitor with an ancient city called Puhar of the Cholas. Since ancient times Pattani and Kedah were related in terms of kinship, trade and religion. He refers to an Indian document written between 13th-14th century BE which mentions that Kedah was well-known among traders. Later it became famous as a spice trading centre. Europeans referred to the goods purchased from this region as “**straits products**.”⁷

The ocean trading routes from the tip of the Indian sub-continent should lead straight to the Straits of Malacca which was the shortest route. However there was a danger because the region in the zone between the equator to 5 degrees north often suffered from a lack of wind (which was referred to as the “doldrums”). When the wind was too light the trading boats could not move. This was called “falling off the world” (*tok lok*). Prasert Withayarat explains that ship navigators therefore had to navigate their boats further to the north. Apart from avoiding this problem they would also stop for repairs to their boats, stock up with food and water, as well as trade.⁸ The peninsula region (both for the Malays and southern Thailand), eg. Kedah and Takola, situated across on the trade routes became important trading ports and linked the eastern and western coasts. Kedah was linked with Ligor (Nakhon Sri Thammarat); Saiburi was linked with Pattani (Langasuka and Yarang)⁹. For many centuries it was a centre for the trade of straits products,

⁶ *Indonesia* 1997, p.12.

⁷ Khlongchai Hattha, *Pattani: Kan Kha Lae Kan Muang Kan Pokkhrong nai Adit* (Pattani: Trade and Politics in the Past) (Songkhlanakharin University, 1998), p.65.

⁸ Prasert Withayarat, “Saphap Phumisat Khorng Khap Samut Sathing Phra” (The Geography of the Sathing Phra Peninsula), in *Prawatisat Lae Boranakhadi Khap Samut Sathing Phra* (History and Archaeology of Sathing Phra) (Southern Thai Studies Institute, 1993), pp. 14-15.

⁹ Khlongchai Hattha, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

whether during the Sri Vijaya empire, Majapahit or Siam. When Majapahit was at its height this region was under the strong influence of Majapahit Hindu-Javanese culture, more so than that of Ayuthaya.

This was followed by the decline of Majapahit's power and the rise of Islam and Malacca as the centre of trade in the region. During the Ming dynasty in China (1368-1644 BE), and especially during the reign of Emperor Yung-lo, there was development in the construction of large-sized boats. Cheng Ho led a fleet of ships to explore trade opportunities across the oceans seven times between 1405-1433 BE¹⁰ (it is thought he passed through the Doldrums). The era of Western colonialism began in 1511 BE when Portugal seized Malacca shortly after the Muslim world had spread its influence into this region. The region thus became an extremely diverse mixture of peoples and cultures including Hindus, Arabs, Persians, Indo-Javanese, the Islamic world, China and the West. In 1585 BE the Portuguese received permission to conduct trade with Pattani, with the effect that differences between peoples gradually began to take the place of the earlier similarities. Cultures that were once mutually compatible now gradually began to become ill-fitting.

Metallurgic culture, which can be seen in the *kris* dagger, is an example of Hindu-Javanese culture, both in terms of its form, use, and the beliefs attached to it. Symbols of Shiva and Uma were inscribed on the handle and the "eye" of the *kris*. Images of Ganesh, son of Shiva and Uma, are also found in the designs on the blade of the *kris*. Patterns based on the beliefs of the local people as well as the worship of Hindu gods are mixed up in the *kris* from the skill of metallurgy of the local people. The emergence of rituals eg. *talak bala* is a ritual for warding off evil from the community and is importantly related to playing *kalo* (music played in cremation ceremonies among the Thai Buddhists). Eg. The art of Javanese and Malay shadow puppetry displays interesting similarities and differences. The marriage ceremonies of Pattani people in which *justar* cloth is worn on the head shows the influence of Javanese culture. The use of the Mount Meru symbol in cremation ceremonies among the Thais of the lower south, called "*samsang*" (*samsan* Sanskrit; *susan* Pali), is similar to Mount Sumeru symbolism used in cremation procession ceremonies among the Balinese. The playing of *kalo* music in front of the corpse in cremation ceremonies among the Buddhist Thais of the south is again similar to the Balinese. The use of betel or banana *bai sri* in auspicious ceremonies among the Thai Buddhists in the south is similar to the *bai sri* of the Thai Muslims.¹¹ These are all examples of an integrated culture.

¹⁰ Suthiwong Phongphaibun et al. *Jin Thaksin: Withi Lae Phalang* (The Southern Thai Chinese: Way of Life and Power) (Thailand Research Fund, 1997), pp. 33-35.

¹¹ Suthiwong Phongphaibun et al. *op.cit.*, p. 37.

Kalo musical instruments are Javanese-Malay, but the Muslims do not play them at funeral ceremonies in the evening as the Thai Buddhists do, due to the religious ruling that the dead body should not be kept over night unless necessary. In the *lak phra* festival Thai Buddhists in southern Thailand have adapted the Mount Sumeru of the Hindus and constructed an imitation called *yot phanom*, where the Buddha image is placed. It has been adapted to look like a *monthop* [square structure with a spire] called a *benja* or *binja* in the ritual of washing the head of important or senior people, or as a gesture of respect for people generally. The adaptations vary according to the dynamics of each community.

In the 35 years between 2149 and 2184 BE the Dutch attempted to corner the lucrative trade in the region by taking over the position of trade middleman at Malacca from the Portuguese, which it eventually achieved in 2184 BE. Thus the Dutch brought an end Portugal's relations with the Malay region.¹² The centre of trade subsequently moved gradually from Malacca to Pattani. By the early Ayuthaya period Pattani had become the centre of trade between Europeans, Chinese, Japanese, Javanese, Sumatrans, Indians, Arabs, and the Persians, and was a more important trading port than Ayuthaya. At the same time the influence of this cosmopolitan culture of Pattani spread to the lower part of southern Thailand and upper Malaysia.

Viewing the Ties of Brotherhood in the Age of Commerce

Since ancient times to the era of navigation it can be seen that the peoples and cultures of the lower south of which Pattani was the centre were very diverse. Some cultures overlapped, and some showed similarities with the culture of the middle south and the upper south. The factors that caused the similar and different dynamics were Hindu-Javanese culture, Javanese-Malay, Islam, and Mahayana and Sri Lankan Buddhism, and the use of different languages and scripts. Therefore, the differences and similarities that exist in the cultures are based on 4 important foundations: (1) religious principles; (2) local culture and practices which do not contradict religious principles; (3) customs, traditions and laws; and (4) universal practices. The factor that has led to a distancing or estrangement between these cultures has generally tended to be administrative power. In other words, the aim is peace, but different people have sought different paths of achieving it.

In this era of globalization and commerce when cultures compete among themselves these ties of brotherhood have becoming looser and more brittle, easy to break. This is the case with the growing problem regarding the border of southern Thailand at this moment. Academics, politicians, and businessmen are looking for a word to rebuild and strengthen the former ties of

¹² Suthiwong Phongphaibun et al., *Katho Sanim Krit Lae Withi Chiwit Chao Tai Torn Lang* (Knocking off the Rust on the Kris: Examining the Way of Life of the People of the Lower South) (Thailand Research Fund, 2000), pp. 75-158.

“brotherhood,” that is, “culture,” but their definitions of culture are not the same, with the result that their use of the nature and power of culture goes in diverging directions.

Most people regard the nature and power of culture like a moon orbiting far away, sending out soft moonbeams. They believe this might be the very best way to end the violence and bring about peace. But viewing culture on this very broad canvas in the end is usually fruitless. For example, the policy of the National Security Council¹³ is aware that the cultural similarities between the Thai Buddhists and Muslims can be used to end the conflict. But after the announcement of this policy there was nothing. No matter how hard one tries, nothing seems to come of it because culture is viewed as a far away dream, not as something that can fruitfully be put into practice. It is not possible to separate the issues so that those involved at each level and in each aspect can see where and how to start the process. The main idea should be translated into something more tangible than this; for example, looking at the culture of work of people in the locality, the culture of creating and utilizing resources, the culture of creating standards and options, the culture of learning, recognizing the strong and weak points of tradition and habits which inform the structure and personality of the people in the region, etc. A society or community that lacks the ability to create and enhance these things at the micro level will find it difficult to achieve the goals it desires at the macro level.

Social scientists and anthropologists ought to help create a new species of humanity for this region, that is a **“culturally integrated ethnic group.”** For example, the counting of relatives through the common culture of harvesting rice using a *kae* knife, as their ancestors used to do. Join together in the search for the spirit of common kinship that exists in the shared rituals of *porn khao khwan*. Search deeply into those aspects of a common sub-culture which still exist in the present, eg. the *yok rap* festival (for food) and the custom of the Thai Muslims in the south of preparing plates of food to welcome guests. All the various customs which have spread from beliefs related to death and Mount Sumeru, be they “*gunung*,” *bai sri*, *benja*, *phanom phra*, *yot khom khropr long sop*, etc. Perhaps the spirit of our descendants which is immanent in all these things might help restore our brotherhood and make it even stronger than before.

¹³ An important section of the policy of the National Security Council in relation to the southern border provinces (2542-2546 BE) is as follows: “everyone in the area of the southern border provinces can live peacefully and happily based on the uniqueness in religion and culture, especially Thai Muslims who are the majority in the area can live as Muslims in Thai society...”