Some Reflections of Ethnic Identity of Refugee Migrants from Burma to Thailand

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The main aim of this paper is to raise the question of the nature of the ethnic identities that we so often seem to take for granted when talking about the refugee migrants coming from Burma to Thailand. To do this, an introductory reference is made to the historical 'ridge and furrow' cultural structure of the region, and some implications this has for contemporary national integration projects within Southeast Asia. The theoretical core of the paper then revisits some concepts of ethnicity, with particular reference to the perspectives of 'primordialism' and 'situationalism'. Literature relating these concepts is then outlined, noting their bearing upon the 'ethnic' political conflict in Burma. Finally the paper seeks to relate the fore-noted, apparently fixed nature of the ethnic identities of these migrants to the prospects for solutions to the twin crises of democratization and ethnic conflict in Burma.

Keywords: *Southeast Asia, ethnicity, conflict, refugees, Burma*

*"The hegemonic national cultures of the post-colonial state in Southeast Asia have been a nightmare for ethnic minorities who have been marginalized or folklorized in the space of the nation state as inferior races". (*Horstmann, 2004*)*

Introduction

Quite rightly, the predominant focus of presentations to this meeting on migrants, minorities and refugees in Southeast Asia is upon the practical and policy measures that may be applied to alleviate the hardships suffered by marginal migrants across the region. However, the aim of this contribution is just to take a little time out from such an applied focus to draw together some more general notions

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pertaining to the region's cultural and political history and theories of ethnicity.[2] In particular, this paper is concerned with placing the plight of the millions of migrants and refugees who have fled into Thailand from Burma[3] within a broader perspective. The underlying contention is that these, perhaps, more academic perspectives really do have something to say about the present severe situation, and may even point to some possible solutions.

'Ridge and Furrow' Topography and Politico-Cultural History

In looking at Southeast Asia with the broadest regional and historical scale, authorities have often highlighted the connection between what has been described as the region's 'ridge and furrow' topography and its cultural and political evolution (for instance Fisher, 1966; Fryer, 1970; Keyes, 1979). *Ridge* refers to the rugged, though not particularly high, mountain ranges, and *furrow* to the broad expanses of fertile lowland plains, dominated by great watercourses such as the Irrawaddy, Mekong and Chao Phraya.

In terms of cultural history, the key theme has been the growing distinction between the core lowland cultures and the peripheral marginal peoples. However, rather than being separated by clearly defined boundaries, the upland peoples were generally loosely incorporated into the political and economic systems usually dominated by the more advanced lowland peoples. The core lowland populations went on to form the bases of the emerging kingdoms and contemporary nation states. This theme has been particularly strongly developed in terms of the political analyses of the great pre-modern kingdoms of Southeast Asia. Wheatley's classic (1971) work articulated the notion of these kingdoms as 'mandala states'. Tambiah (1976) introduced the notion of 'galactic polity', refined by Lieberman (2003) as a 'solar polity' to highlight a single core rather than a proliferation of centers. The key theme in all of these conceptualizations of the political nature of the pre-modern kingdoms was the idea

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[2] Something that may have stimulated my thinking about these themes was the way Chinese ethnic identity has been transformed here in Thailand. So many people living in Bangkok, for instance, have Chinese forebears. Thais *do* have a sense of who has more Thai or Chinese ethnic origins, and maybe some have a sense of a link with a Chinese heritage. In other parts of Southeast Asia, for instance, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Indonesia, no matter how long their families have been living in the country they are still strongly identified as Chinese. However, in Thailand these descendents of Chinese migrants have become 100% ethnically Thai, in speech, manner, values, loyalty and so on.

[3] The name Burma is used in this paper, as Aung San Suu Kyi has argued that the label Myanmar is merely a gloss over a continuing Burmese authoritarian domination of the state.

of a concentration of political power emanating from a ritualized, spiritual centre, and—crucially for this discussion—increasingly fading with distance from the core.

The loose incorporation of the ethnically diverse peoples inhabiting the upland areas generally took the form of tributary relationships to the more powerful lowland kingdoms. Such tributary relationships would shift with fluctuations in the fortunes of such kingdoms, and on occasion indeed included multiple tributes being paid to different kingdoms.

These are not mere arcane reflections on aspects of the spectacular *mandala states* of pre-modern Southeast Asia. The contemporary relevance can be clearly observed today in terms of the political significance of the classical capitals, their spirituality and arts, such as Angkor, Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin in the historiography of the contemporary nation states unfolding in recent decades, in what may be thought of as national integration projects (Aung Thwin, 1995). For instance, today venerated Rattanakosin stands as the clearly defined centre of the Thai state, symbolically uniting Buddhism, monarchy and nation. The articulation and the protection of the associated historiographical narratives have been central to the attempts to forge unified national identities within sometimes rather fragile and ethnically diverse emerging states.

Winichakul's (1994) magisterial work sheds further light on the contemporary relevance of these historical politico-cultural relationships between core and marginal peoples in Siam. It is in the modern era, and initially during the encounter with Western colonialism, that more explicit efforts were made to actually map the state of Siam, and in that process to attempt to replace the hazily identified upland areas of traditionally mobile minorities with precisely defined borders with neighboring countries. Winichakul (1995) skillfully unpacks the historiographical notion of the history of Thailand as that of the history of a unified Thai sovereign nation gradually migrating south through mainland Southeast Asia, replacing it with a sense of the combined *histories* of the *peoples* of Siam.

Contemporary problems pertaining to these border demarcations include, for instance, the Phra Viharn dispute with Cambodia, the Muslim terrorist conflict in the 'deep south', and the de-territorialization of a Thai 'diaspora' created by a Thai-Burma border demarcation in 1866. As presented so eloquently at this meeting by Phongsiri (2012), the 'fixing' of the border in the upland areas between Thailand and Burma has had some problematic implications for these populations, who have become marginalized minorities within the respective states.

Ethnic Identity

The second part of this discussion examines the implications of considering the nature of ethnicity in relation to the vast number of refugees and migrants fleeing Burma to Thailand. This section addresses this theme in terms of some lines of theory about the nature of ethnic identity and some general perspectives on ethnic separatism and state conflict. These are related in turn to some stages in the ethnic conflict in Burma and its bearing upon these ethnic identities.

Group identities of any form, and especially ethnic identities, are defined in terms of what they are not, through some form of contact with an 'apparent other'. When rigorous attempts are made to define ethnic boundaries and the differences between such groups, it is found that it is very difficult to do so with any precision. There will always be a wide range of shared and overlapping qualities. The key point is that ethnic (and other social) identities are fundamentally characterized by metaphoric or fictive membership (Yelvington, 1991). Such identity is socio-culturally learned and shaped.

Within the extensive literature on the origins of ethnicity, there are two polars and diverging explanations or emphases, namely 'primordialism' and 'situationalism'. *Primordialism* refers to the sense of intrinsic satisfaction of a culturally-embedded group loyalty (Furnivall, 1958). It alludes to the instinctual quality of our sense of ethnic identity, and gives rise to a rather fixed and taken-for-granted conception. By contrast, *situationalism* refers to the instrumental utility (or practical use) of ethnic attachment arising from situational benefits, but more commonly threats from 'dominating others' (Taylor, 1987; Keyes, 1979). Situationalism is thus a constructivist perspective, more in line with much social and cultural analysis. It is not surprising that much lay discourse takes a primordialist, un-analyzed perspective on ethnic identities. But we should also note that many academic studies also take for granted a single categorization of an individual's ethnic identity (see for example the presentations by Xenos (2012) and Tran Quang Lam (2012) at this meeting). While such studies are making a valuable contribution to the overall patterns of ethnicity in Southeast Asia, they could possibly make some reference to the multiple layers and situational qualities of some ethnicities. Furthermore, as Tapp (2000) has noted with specific reference to research on the highlanders of the Golden Triangle, "scholars of ethnic minorities tend to essentialize the identities of 'their' ethnic minorities…" (Horstmann, 2004:3).

In contrast to any fixed and unitary form of ethnic identity, there is much evidence to show that it must be continuously reinforced and reproduced, can indeed change, and often takes a pluralist form, with various levels and personal commitments to different identities (Eller & Coughlan, 1993).

The Ethnic Conflict in Burma

In his classic (1996) work , *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, David Brown has argued that there are six general perspectives on ethnic separatism and state conflict:

- First, multi-ethnic, newly independent cultural states are inherently politically fragile.

- Second, ethnic nationalism is rooted in uneven regional development and 'internal colonialism'.

- Third, such conflict occurs where a group's primordial cultural integrity is threatened by alien ethnic groups.

- Fourth, such conflict arises due to the manipulative activities of (alienated or dispossessed) ethnic minority elites.

- Fifth, it is due to any combination of the above.

- Sixth, ethnic separatism is particularly complex because it is not a distinct phenomenon, but rather a label for certain sets of circumstances.

It is not difficult to identify all of the first four explanations as relevant to the ethnic conflict in Burma. As Brown notes, culturally there was the establishment of an 'ethnocratic state', in its recruiting to elite positions and depiction of the nation's history, to reinforce the Burmese monopolization of power, the related emergence of new Burman (educated) elites associated with the Nationalist movement, and corresponding marginalization and dispossession of the ethnic minority elites. The combination of the 'capture' of the state by the Burman majority and the unfair exploitation of the resources in the areas inhabited by ethnic minorities resulted in the deepening and seemingly intractable ethnic conflict that has wracked the country for so many years. Furthermore, the deeply divisive nature of the relationship

between the Burmese state and the minorities has been exacerbated by the extreme brutality of the Burmese army towards the inhabitants of the territories in conflict.

The dire situation of the country was further deepened by an adherence, for many years, to an idiosyncratic and bankrupting Burmese socialist model of development, along with a repressive military authoritarian state (Silverstein, 1977; Aung Thwin & Myint, 1992). Even as the Burmese state has moved towards a more open model of development, the catalogue of abuse has been compounded by the corruption associated with the politico-military elite within the very process of limited economic liberalization.

Returning to the key focus upon ethnic identity, part of the tragedy of the Burma situation is that the fore-noted factors, and in particular the viciousness of the conflict and the appalling treatment of non-combatant, minority populations, has resulted in ethnic identities becoming increasingly fixed.

Conclusion

Obviously the humanitarian plight of the refugees who have fled to Thailand is related to the political and developmental crisis in neighboring Burma. Recently there have been signs of some political liberalization, giving rise to a cautious optimism that the country may be able to emerge from the decades of conflict. There has been an assumption that the country's ethnic conflict is inherently bound up with its government's crisis of political legitimacy and the population's quest for democracy (Clements, 1994). For a nation to function politically, people have to willingly form a community irrespective of racial, religious or linguistic backgrounds (Brown, 1996). This is especially the case for a land as ethnically diverse as Burma. Furthermore, the complexity of the distributions and co-residence of the ethnic population make secessions extremely problematic. In light of the hardening of ethnic identities attendant to the years of conflict, it is quite possible that, of the twin ethnic and democratization crises, the former could well turn out to be the more intractable. Thus, an important component of the solution to Burma's crisis may well be a more pluralist and softer sense of ethnic identities.

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