

Legacy of Migration: the Muslim community in Bangkok

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Abstract

Although Thai Buddhism is the dominant religion in Bangkok, the capital is ethnically and religiously diverse. In particular, there is a large community of Muslims. This paper examines the Muslim community in Bangkok, focusing on the Minburi district. Most Thai Muslims in this district are of Pattani descent, having migrated to the area since 1786, bringing with them the common cultural practices of Thailand's southernmost provinces and Malaysia. The complex social, cultural, and political structures of Bangkok are rooted in the complexities of different religions, migration phenomena, and development discourses. The international migration of Muslims to the Minburi district resulted from state policies, economic and cultural factors, while existing networks cultivate a contemporary sense of mobility. To explore the causes of the migration and its legacy, this paper poses two research questions: 1) How have members of the Muslim community in the Minburi district settled through the migration and development process? 2) How do the Muslims in the Minburi district sustain and negotiate their identities through activities and changes within the community? To answer these questions, the paper used semi-structured interviews, observation and secondary data analysis techniques. The paper argues that through a history of migration and development, Muslims in Minburi have constructed identities and interpersonal networks within their community. Once unoccupied farming land, Minburi was transformed into an identifiable ethnic and religious community, which is currently undergoing the gradual process of becoming a multi-racial community. This reflects that historical entities and development programmes have shaped individual and community identities. Islamic identities and faiths remain salient in the district despite other dominant norms in Bangkok as a whole. The findings demonstrate the ways in which Muslims have negotiated their identities in the face of changing development paradigms and migration policies since the late 18th century. Transitions at different times underpin the Minburi community in its state of becoming or as an assemblage. Each period of change has challenged their identity and ability to consolidate their community. This paper contributes to our understanding of the migration phenomenon and the process by which identities flow and communities become dynamic.

Keywords: migration; Muslim; Bangkok; community; transformation; development

Introduction

Various stories of migration contribute to Thailand's capital-building discourse, with their legacies still continuing and evident today. Thailand consists of many different ethnic groups, including, among others, the Karen, Mon, Khmer, Chinese, and Malay peoples. These groups have settled throughout the country, further migrating and relocating within the country itself. Such is the case for many Muslims from the south migrating to the capital of Thailand. Migration is part of human history; people have always moved either by choice or by force (Barbacan, 2010, p. 8). The story of the Minburi district as a Muslim community began in the eighteenth century with the forced displacement from the south to Bangkok. Minburi is one of 50 districts of Bangkok, and is situated in the east of the capital. The Minburi district covers 63,645 square kilometres and comprises two sub-districts: Minburi sub-district and Saen Seap sub-district. The current population of the district is 117,183 as of 2015, based on the Minburi District Office (2017b), while the Minburi district is also home to 50,657 migrant workers from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Department of Employment,

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2016). The state strategies for area development here are to build security while developing a green city, learning society, and an opportunity centre for everyone and at the same time establishing Bangkok as a city of ASEAN. Development in the post-World War II period involves economic growth and modernity (Haslam et al., 2012, p. 17). Development is a discourse that legitimates the global expansion of capitalism (Rist, 1997; 2007 cited in Haslam et al., 2012, p. 17). Thai governments have set development goals since 1961 to alleviate poverty and later address economic growth, area-based development, income and social equality, industrialization and modernization. Hence, Minburi, situated in the eastern outskirts of Bangkok, has become a target for development, being a prime location for transit and town expansion. Minburi has undergone various changes under Thai development discourses influenced by nationalist politics through forced migration as well as assimilationist policies in the past. Up until the present, although the Thai state has become more liberal, Thailand's development goals have reinforced the transformation of the community physically as well as the negotiation of identities, extrinsically and intrinsically.

This paper examines the formation of Muslim assemblages in Minburi district located in a suburban area of Bangkok due to the progressive migration of Muslims from the peripheries to the area since 1786. Muslims are the largest religious minority in Thailand, accounting for approximately 6% of the population (Scupin, 1998, p. 229). Muslims in Thailand consist mainly of two categories: Malay Muslims and Thai Muslims or Thai Islam, with the former speaking Malay and normally settling in the border provinces between Buddhist Thailand and the mostly Muslim Malaysia. The latter refers generally to those residing in the central and northern regions of Thailand (Scupin, 1998, p. 229). Muslims in Minburi originate from Malay Muslims. However, this group has undoubtedly changed over the years in terms of identity from Malay Muslims to Thai Muslims following the long settlement of later generations. Muslims in Minburi are Thai Muslims with Malay Muslim backgrounds. Currently, there are 64 communities of various ethnic and religious backgrounds officially identified in Minburi (Minburi District Office, 2017a). Interestingly, 15 of them present their community's names in Arabic pronunciation derived from Arabic words and the Islamic tradition. Arabization has emerged widely, including in Bangkok. Arabization refers to the transfer of other languages into Arabic when there is no Arabic word or no translation into the foreign word (Al-Shbiel, 2017, pp. 469–470). Arabization also describes the process of the homogenization of Islam including through rituals, codes of conduct, and practices relevant to Islamic identity (Ghoshal, 2008, pp. 1–2). Arabization appears in Minburi when Arabic words form part of the process of the uniformization of Islamic identity in the area. The connection between Arabization and the negotiation of identity in Minburi grows in a supportive way through expressions of Islamic identity. Arabization strengthens Muslim residents to manifestly conform and express the values of Islam in their own societies, regardless of size or number of Muslim members. The spread of Arabization in Minburi is the result of attempts by Muslims to negotiate with the past assimilationist policy and their own desire toward the authentication of Islam, to maintain their identities where Arabization penetrates from school, migration, media, technology and so on to Muslims in Minburi. Islamic fashion in the area is reasonably similar to that of the Middle East. The language and culture results largely from the Arabic world. The Arabic influences have spread from schooling in Islamic countries, migration, grants and aid programmes. In the past, the dominant Buddhist religio-political landscape and developments in Thailand have kept these Muslim groups relatively isolated and as a closed community with minimal contact with other ethnic groups.

Toward this end, the current study will address two central questions: first, how a Muslim enclave was formed and eventually consolidated in Minburi, and second, how the Muslim identity of the residents of Minburi is sustained and negotiated through development activities and changes in space, environment, and way of life within the community. The paper uses the concept of assemblage to explicate the relationships in the area of Minburi and subsequently changes in the residents' identity. The concept of assemblage describes the social world as dynamic and in a constant state of becoming. For this reason, the Muslim enclave, network, identity, and practices in everyday life combine into arrangements as assemblages in each period. The paper is structured with a discussion section as follows: *Settlement of Muslims in Minburi*; *Development, Changes and Transformations towards the Muslim Community*; and *Minburi as Assemblage and Negotiation of Identities* (the latter part is broken down into two levels consisting of the institution and

community level, and the family and individual level). The paper provides a historical background of the area through its settlement, key elements of Minburi society, transitions from development and changes as well as analysis of the particular state of becoming to identify how the concept of assemblage applies and how such factors mutually influence each other in becoming Minburi as it is today. In these regards, the critical elements of analysis are the historical background and actors on different levels including international, national and individual levels. The elements have influenced the community process of becoming, from uninhabited land and then populated as a Muslim area, to an incipient multi-ethnic vicinity. The historical context, development, changes, and transformations in each phase are a catalyst of community and individual identity construction. These elements create a dynamic of community emergence exacerbated by migration and discourses of development in each time. The paper argues that the global and national discourses of development have precipitated rapid urbanization, causing Muslims in these communities to explore various means, from the global to the local scale, to maintain their Islamic identities over time and through the various development discourses of Thailand.

Theoretical framework and research methodology

Types of community are traditionally divided into two categories: rural and urban, small village and big city, or traditional and modern communities. These binary terms come with characteristics and configurations. Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) proposed the community typology by outlining two fundamental principles of social relationships. Tönnies considered the two types of community to be *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft* or community refers to the traditional and small community where everyone is familiar with each other. In *Gemeinschaft*, relationships are intimate and enduring such as in small towns and villages in which people help each other get connected via kinship and family ties. In contrast, *Gesellschaft*, or society association, represents the modern city characterized by individualism rather than common group interests. People are connected through formal ties based on business exchanges and laws. The two categories demonstrate the division of pre-industrial and industrial communities with the rural and urban sense in which the driving forces of profound changes appear from the emergence of industrialization and urbanization (Monti, Borer & Macgregor, 2015, p. 73). This grand theory highlights two main problems; first, it only captures a single moment (Appadurai, 1996, pp. 2-3) and second, the inapplicability of theories originating in the West to Southeast Asia (Bruner, 1961). The characteristics of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* can be applied in explaining the relations among Muslims in the area and between people and the community. However, the concept of traditional and modern society overlooks the ongoing process of social transformation influenced by multiple external and internal factors and lacks the specific timeframe of analysis. Changes in each community, particularly the Muslim community in Minburi, have intersected with the religious cosmopolitan, national polity, Islam-shaped ethnic identities with specific local adaption driven by international relations and Thailand's development discourse. The historical context is crucial to demonstrating transitions and connections as an ongoing process from the past until present, together with global, national and local forces. The social transformation of Minburi is a reflection of the consequences of the interplays among migration, development, cosmopolitan, local Muslim identities and urbanization. The social concomitants of urbanization lie with two sets of factors: the nature of the native culture and the conditions of urbanization (Bruner, 1961, p. 519). The process of urbanization relates to competition among groups and individuals and vested interests depending on the development paradigms of each cohort.

As the grand theory is not sufficient for explaining the changing community of Minburi due to its static framework and the specific locality in Thailand, one can simply use selected elements to make sense of the social concomitants of the transition from rural to more urban life. The paper then applies the concept of an assemblage – the social world is dynamic and in a constant state of becoming through various forces of interior and exterior relations (Delanda, 2006) – and operationalizes it to explicate Minburi so as to present how the physical area has been transformed and how the people's identities have been negotiated through development and migration over different periods. The paper draws upon some of the key concepts of Shigeharu Tanabe (2016)

as utilized in his framework of communities in relation to social assemblages in Thailand, as well as the concepts explored by Barbara Schmitter Heisler (2008) regarding the sociology of immigration. These two frameworks explain the transformation of the Minburi community, articulating migration and the global and national discourses of development. Forced migration has affected the way of life of Muslims in the past, but voluntary movements including those associated with business, family, education, or tourism occur nowadays due to social networks and digital media that help consolidate, link and reconstruct Islamic identities in the Minburi district. In regard to past development in Thailand, British colonialism provided the great push of the development agenda, whereas the current development goals of Thailand concern economic growth and advanced industries.

Tanabe (2016) argues that the classic theories of community and communality utilized in analysing integrity and tradition and constructing the fundamental identity of its members are insufficient for making sense of newly emerging communities and their movements. The essential characteristics of current and preceding eras are the persistent developments and transformation of movements in globalizing milieus (Tanabe, 2016, p. 2). Under transformation, fluidity and the combination of diverse motivations, Tanabe (2016) proposed the concept of assemblage to scrutinize the ways in which individuals learn to adapt to the fast-moving changes affecting their community. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) and other works, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize assemblage as a changeable structure resulting from a variety of global and local factors. The involvements that have shaped the identities of places and people depend on the global down through to the individual forces in terms of how one adapts and responds to various challenges towards minority Muslim identities in Bangkok. As interpreted by other works, assemblage refers to the dynamic process of external factors and different configurations as well as intrinsic relations, such as ethnic niches influencing various transformations and establishing intersections among driving forces. The concept of assemblage provides a sensible analysis of Minburi for two main reasons. First, a Minburi community embraces various historical backgrounds as a consequence of the state's decisions in each period, including involuntary migration, forced development, avoiding colonialism, assimilationist policies, and the modern development discourse. Second, a state of becoming in each phase of Thailand historical entities contour Muslim residents' and community identity, which are effect of a historical configuration, individual adaption, and external driving forces. This concept of assemblage suggests that analysis will bring out the various changes affecting the community, in this case the Minburi district, as a whole.

Migration, in light of the sociological framework, focuses on the causes of migration emphasizing the process of immigrant incorporation and the ethnic enclave economy (Brettell & Hollifield, 2008, p. 5). The interactions among Muslim immigrants in the community reflect transnational phenomena. Transnationalism covers macro and micro forces in the sense of capitalism, technological revolution, global political transformations, and the increase of social networks (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998). This paper looks at how Muslim identities have been strongly maintained since late 18th century. Social networks have resulted in multiple impacts upon immigrants that relate to transnational phenomena. Portes (1998) delineated social networks as being shaped through investment strategies penetrating the institutionalization of group relations and being considered as a trustworthy source of other advantages (p. 3). In the case of Muslim immigrants in the community, the social network of Muslims is larger and profoundly linked with the Islamic idea of brotherhood, enabling unity in the community. Similarly, through the concept of nationalism, religious communities are the product of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) because although members of the group or society have never seen or do not know each other, even their names, members can construct a shared sense of belonging via a type of brotherhood. Besides, once they are concentrated within the clustering of Muslim communities, this also facilitates the Muslim way of life because of the interdependence of common services and goods, and for common interests; for example, access to mosques and halal food. The potential changes, the unique Islamic characteristics, and the existing networks of the Minburi community relate to transformations in land use and the complexities of ethnic group interactions. The role that Islam plays is to lift "people out of such narrowly conceived collectives as the ethnic group, village or the nation, connecting them to a global human community, the ummah" (Taylor, 2007, p. 8). This

is one aspect of assemblage that on the religious side coincides with global Islamic influence and advanced technology, while development and migration are another side.

For the research methodology, the study uses the qualitative research approach primarily conducted via semi-structured interviews with Muslim participants in the Minburi district and a participant observation technique towards the Minburi community. The study also employs secondary data analysis through historical evidence, as well as current government reports on the situation, changes and development of the district. Questions for respondents cover topics such as social data, the rationale behind migration, settlement, and the sense of belonging among immigrants. In total, 30 participants took part, comprising 13 Muslim men and 17 Muslim women. The full population (Thai Muslims) speak Thai as their first language. The interviews were held in Thai between November 2017 and January 2018.

Settlement of Muslims in Minburi since 1786

Thailand, formerly known as Siam,¹ had a long history of war with neighbouring kingdoms in order to preserve its sovereignty and protect its interests. One of the kingdoms that Siam colonized was the Kingdom of Patani.² Patani during its golden era was a flourishing kingdom and the centre of sea commerce as well as Islamic education (Suwannathat-Pian, 1988). Since the 14th century, the relationship between Siam and Patani was one of a tributary system, whereby the weaker provinces and kingdoms would acknowledge the supremacy of the Thai king and periodically send tributes in the form of either silver or gold flowers (*bunga mas*) as a symbol of their subservience to the Thai king (Gin, 2004, p. 288). In return, Siam maintained its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the kingdom and provided assurance that there would be no wars against the tributary states. However, whenever Siam seemed to encounter hardships or suffered substantial casualties from wars in other parts of the country, Patani would seize such opportunities to abolish the tributary system which bound Patani to Siam (Yegar, 2002, p. 74). In 1786 and 1791, shortly after the First Reign of Rattanakosin, the Malay sultanates refrained from paying tribute to the King of Siam (Roy, 2017, p. 154). The first King of the Chakri dynasty, King Rama I, ordered his troops down to the Kingdom of Patani to quell the unrest. The rebels were defeated and Patani came once again under the influence of Siam. As a result, the prisoners of war and inhabitants from Patani were transported and settled along north-eastern Bangkok (Jory, 2013; Roy, 2017). The first wave of Muslims from the south settled around the outskirts of Bangkok.

A series of attacks on Siam occurred again in 1831, 1836, and 1838 by the states of Kedah, Pattani, Kelantan, and Terengganu (Salleh, 2012). These revolts arose during the reign of King Rama III. The uprisings were brought under control through excessive force and the Siamese conquest of Patani brought about the extensive transportation of captives from Kedah and Patani to Bangkok (Falarti, 2013; Roy, 2017). The rationale behind the transportation of the captives to the capital was to further quash rebellions and minimize the armed force of Patani, eventually subduing any form of retaliation against Siam. In 1837, the state ordered Chinese immigrants to build the Saen Seap Canal dredge, which was completed within three years. King Rama III commanded the war captives from Kedah and the Kingdom of Patani to continue the canal dredges, reforestation, and use and claim the land as their own along the Saen Seap Canal (a canal is commonly referred to as a Khlong in Thai).

The majority of the captives from Kedah came to reside around Khlong Sam Wa, Saphansoong, Khlong Saen Saep and nearby areas, while those from Patani settled mostly around Khlong Saen Saep, Hua Mark, Bangkapi, Nong Chok, Minburi and other connected suburban areas (Jitmoud, 1988). Since then, the captives from Patani and their descendants have settled in Minburi and the nearby area. There were approximately 4,000 to 5,000 captives around Bangkok during that

¹ Siam used to be the name of the country; however, Siam became Thailand in 1939. This was part of the cultural policies led by Prime Minister, Phibun Songkram in the late 1930s to strengthen the Thai race and culture.

² The former Kingdom of Patani comprised 5 provinces of Thailand, which are now Satun, Songkla, Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani. Pattani with a double 't' now only represents one province of Thailand situated in the south.

time (Scupin, 1998, p. 239). As illustrated above, the major cause of the clustering of the Muslim population in Bangkok was the forced displacement of people as a result of inter-state conflict and development. Despite the proximity of the Kingdom of Patani with Siam's dependencies, the stark difference between Patani and Siam must be appreciated. Unlike Siam, the majority of the population of Patani were Muslims who maintained some cultural practices that were similar to those in other neighbouring (Muslim) Malay states (i.e. Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu). The notion of the nation-state constructs a nationalism of an 'imagined community' of groups of humans who demonstrate cultural homogeneity connected to the ideology of the nation (Anderson, 1991). The lack of cultural homogeneity between migrants from Patani and the indigenous population in Bangkok in the past distanced these two groups from socially interacting.

Following the settlement along Khlong Saen Saep, the Muslim immigrants lived and associated predominantly within their closed communities while maintaining their Islamic identity despite residing within the Buddhist dominated society of Bangkok. The forced displacement had meant the people from Patani had to adjust to living and working in a new place. The majority of Muslims who settled down around Minburi and Nong Chok had agricultural skills; they farmed and grew rice in Patani before involuntarily leaving their homes (Theerawat, 1988, pp. 22–23). To earn their livelihoods, Patani immigrants applied their farming skills to work in the newly allocated land and to trade along the canal. The Minburi environment allowed immigrants to develop their rice farming skills through cooperatives within their strong ethnic group in order to further support their means of living. Minburi has long been connected to the Saen Saep Canal, which has been utilized since 1838 for the transport of goods, trading, daily traffic, domestic uses of water, and by the community of Muslim houses. Most importantly, the canal is utilized for farming purposes. The canal prevents water running off their fields, thereby providing suitable conditions for growing rice. Minburi's location and its irrigation helped Patani migrants plant agricultural crops successfully and farming has since become a major occupation for Muslims in Minburi to the present day.

The forced mass migration of Muslims from the south to Bangkok required the state to arrange accommodation and settlement. The assigned areas, particularly Minburi, which was previously empty and uninhabited, became a place for Muslims from the south. The initial transitions of the community resulted from the state decision that caused this area to belong to the ethnic group firmly attached to an Islamic identity. Later, various forces, under the guise of development, have affected and changed the nature of this community and formed specific contingent historical identities.

Development, changes and transformations towards a Muslim community

The concept of assemblage describes a changeable structure that is the result of multiple factors. To make the explanation more complete, the paper demonstrates a specific timeframe to scrutinize the essential changes. This section provides an analysis that reflects upon the multiple forces from global to local levels in the form of development and migration. The major consequences of development and impact of actors from different levels in each era have caused changes and transformations in the Muslim community. The key impacts arose over four periods: from the late 18th century to the early 19th century (1786–1840), the late 19th century to the early 20th century (1890s–1900s), the mid-20th century (1930s–1940s), and the 21st century (2000s–present).

During the first period (1786–1840), Minburi was an empty, unoccupied area of land on the periphery of Bangkok, disconnected and inaccessible by the waterways. The priority of the Thai state at that time was to suppress rebellions throughout the country. The forced migration from the south to Bangkok occurred as part of the national strategy to control uprisings and decrease forces with the potential to fight against Siam (Thailand). The resulting captives numbered around 4,000–5,000, which was a large number at that time. Housing and facilities around the palace and the inner city were not available in sufficient numbers. The Thai state, therefore, commanded the war captives to perform reforestation, claim their own land and continue dredging the Saen Saep

Canal for transportation, farming, and other consumption purposes. This was the early initiation of development in Minburi influenced by international and state forces. The conflicts between Siam and Malaya (now Malaysia) led to wars and the Siamese state employed these kinds of strategies to minimize numbers of ethnic Malay Muslims. Forced migration was one of the strategies that Siam used to defeat the Malay apart from military and diplomatic means. This change was the result of the involuntary migration of around 5,000 Malay Muslims to the area surrounded mostly by Buddhists. Although the image of the area was one of still being backward and isolated, Minburi transformed into a place occupied by the ethnic Malay Muslim communities, who brought with them their Malay ethnicity and Islamic practices. Development followed the immigrants in light of the improving public transport and more systematic land ownership. Muslim captives had to adjust their lifestyles and behaviours to suit the new environment, which differed markedly from the south in such ways as weather, food accessibility, recreation (from being close to the sea to being next to empty land), and religious-related facilities, mosques, congregation, and specific Halal food. The dramatic transformations involved the place of Minburi and its individuals as well as the national plans associated with Siamese-Malay relations.

The second wave (1890s–1900s) witnessed two major changes, which related to the British colonialism in Malaya and the ruling regime from the Thai central state to the southern border provinces with Malaya. Britain took over the peninsula of Malaya and effectively ruled the area by 1874. The Western powers legitimized their control over Southeast Asian countries through claims of improving uncivilized societies, including promoting liberal institutions and self-government, abolishing “savage” practices, and bringing modern development. Siam tried hard not to come under colonial rule from Western imperial power like its neighbouring countries. The state explored every means of retaining its autonomy, including the adoption of development programmes from Britain that ruled Malaya to present an image of the country as being developed and civilized. In the end, Thailand did not become a colony of any Western country but served as a buffer state, yet it continued to trade in the national interest. Western imperialism was a global force catalysing the Thai state in pushing forward what concrete development it could to avoid colonialization. In terms of development, as observed from the British colonial economic and political approaches to Malaysia, the Thai authorities followed the development routes of the British, namely, by building roads and post offices, and other infrastructure developments (Scupin, 1998, p. 233). Even though Siam followed a number of development programmes carried out in Malaysia, these were not for the ruling regime there. After 1902, the Thai state directed the political order regarding the indigenous leadership. Instead of maintaining the Malay elite authority, the state appointed Siamese Buddhist bureaucrats throughout the southern Malay regions. This caused resentment among the Muslims in the south towards the Siamese state with countless rebellions occurring between 1903 and 1922 (Scupin, 1998, p. 234). During the same period, the Bangkok authorities also expected citizens to abide by the central state law, which meant that the Muslim legal code structured by Malay customs and religious beliefs was under the control of Siamese Buddhist officials (Scupin, 1998, p. 233). Consequently, infrastructure and public facilities were concrete examples of development outcomes arising in response to colonialism.

The third transition (1930s–1940s) involved extreme assimilationist policies. In the late 1930s, democratic reforms spearheaded by the ultra-nationalist Prime Minister, Phibunsongkram sought for ‘Thailand’ to be the centre of the Thai race and culture. Subsequently, the country name, Siam became Thailand in 1939. The prime minister adopted radical assimilationist policies instilling the Buddhist faith within the education system. During the twentieth century, the Thai state enacted administrative practices and policies in favour of the dominant Buddhist-Brahmanic-animist political and religious culture (Scupin, 1998, p. 229). These policies impacted Muslims since such practices and policies established the notion of the nation with the main emphasis on ‘Thai’ ethnicity and on the national religion being Buddhism. These ethnic-religious policies left many Muslims in difficult positions leading to different strategies for negotiating in order to maintain the Muslim identity. However, when World War II came to an end, Thailand became more liberal and pluralistic. These transformations were a mix of global war motivations and domestic nationalist policies.

The fourth phase occurred in the 21st century (2000s–present) during which migration occurred more widely and development discourses diversified. The flow of migration, the development discourse, and diverse information became more intensive because of advances in digital technology and the internet. Considering development, the mainstream became concerned with the evolution of perspectives such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), scientific advancement, industrial progress, and technical knowledge. On the other hand, the definition of development also covers the freedom and ability to access resources. In this case, the freedoms vary by determinants; for example, social and economic arrangements: facilities for education, healthcare, political and civil rights (Sen, 1992). The discourse of development employed by the government emphasized economic growth, high technology, and modernization in order to move Thailand out of the middle-income trap and to become a high-income nation. Raising Thailand to become a high-income country is the essential goal of the twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017–2022). The government promotes advanced industries, innovation, infrastructure and regional linkages largely through the project of the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) with China and other ASEAN member states as the main partners. Minburi, situated on the eastern outskirts of Bangkok, is in a key location for development through transit. Its geography is attracting people to come and live and work there as the gateway to the east.

Based on extensive studies on social, environmental, economic and technological developments and the analysis of their results in previous years, the geography of the district has been transformed from one of an agrarian society to a more urbanized area (Minburi District Office, 2017a). Urban growth is that of town expansion – it is apparent that shifts from agricultural to non-agricultural land uses are occurring, including increased residences, housing estates, commercial buildings, common housing buildings, places of business, and industrial factories. These various land use changes have influenced the community's environment and people's way of life. The ongoing projects have facilitated the district in order to enrich the current Thai development discourse. The development projects aim to raise the quality of life of the residents, such as through the improvement of waterworks coverage, the establishment of the food centre on the eastside, and promote the construction of the Pink and Orange Line skytrain routes in order to accommodate the travel demands of northern and eastern Bangkok.

There are shifts in potential land uses. The unoccupied land and agriculture areas have gradually turned into housing estates, including the places for industry and business. Although situated in the capital of Thailand, many parts of the district are not yet fully developed, as exemplified by the inaccessibility of water and the low capacity of water drainage. The major changes from an agrarian society to urbanized communities with the increase in estate, road and rail link constructions certainly affect the lives of the people in the communities. The root of the community scenario changes resulted mainly from the state (forced migration) and global influence (colonization) together with a series of different development discourses serving political agendas. The pushes from internal and external relations have thus defined and designed the community and people's identity as assemblage.

Minburi as assemblage and the negotiation of identities

The specific historical context in each phase and the driving forces of actors at the global, national, local, and individual level constitute the process of assemblage that shapes the ontology of the community. An assemblage indicates the process of the transformation of a community where people live their lives in different circumstances (Nishii, 2016, p. 108). The emerging driving forces result in various parties and groups of people intersecting over different periods of time. This section elaborates further by pointing out how each phase represents the conditions of assemblage and how the Muslims have negotiated their identities.

Picture 1: Minburi as assemblage

Source: Sirima Thongsawang (2022)

Picture 1 illustrates how multiple forces interplay with the transformation of Minburi as a community and can be used to describe the relations within assemblage in different timeframes where development and migration have been essential catalysts. In Phase 1 (1786–1840), the hostile relationship between Siam and the Muslim border provinces, including Malaya, comprised the international forces. The conflicts between these two countries led to wars and captives were forced to involuntarily migrate from the south to Bangkok. The Siamese state started development programmes employing foreign immigrants and captives as actors of development for their own usages. From an unnamed, empty and disconnected area, Minburi became the site of the community of Malay Muslims in Bangkok, which was the initial wave of transformation. At the local level, Muslim captives stayed close together and consolidated their Islamic identities among their group while learning to adapt their farming skills to adjust to the challenging new environment where they had to start from nothing.

In Phase 2 (1890s–1900s), after settling for around 50 years, colonialism became the global force expediting further development in Thailand and Minburi. Siam needed to present itself as civilized so as to help avoid becoming a colony. Despite Malaya coming under British imperial rule, Muslim elites retained the right to govern themselves. This was dissimilar to how the Siamese state administered the Muslim border province, sending Buddhist bureaucrats to govern the south, antagonizing the local communities and raising southern Muslim sentiment against Siam (Scupin, 1998). While the era of colonialism catalysed Siam into initiating concrete developments, considered as part of the global push, the national drive had negative consequences for Muslims in Minburi. This change in the administration pressured the Muslims in Minburi to abide by state law. During this period, however, residents in Bangkok benefited from public service and infrastructure. Yet, the national vision to have all practices and identities like that of the Buddhist mainstream caused difficulties among Muslims as a whole in Siam, including those in Minburi who likely came under closer scrutiny from the authorities than those in the most southern parts. Locally, Muslims in the community remained close within their ethnic groups in going about their everyday practices and

economic activities, and isolating themselves from other parts of Bangkok.

In Phase 3 (1930s–1940s), the legacy of industrialization brought countries closer to mass media and technology in the 20th century. The global driving forces acting upon Thailand at the time of World War II brought about the implementation of ultra-nationalist policies intended to unify the Thai race and culture in as many aspects as possible. This was also the case for the education curriculum. Between 1903 and 1922, compulsory Thai education was applied to the Islamic curriculum with an emphasis on nation, religion, and king with the curriculum weighted towards Buddhist practices and the Thai language (Scupin, 1998, p. 234). This contrasted greatly with Muslim beliefs. To negotiate the challenge this period posed, the local religious leaders played an important role in supporting the communities in maintaining their ethnic identities, and Islamic religious and cultural symbols. Under the Patronage Act of 1945, official appointment was made via governmental machinery to administer the Malay leadership and religious matters: mosque councils, directed by al-Islam or Chularajmontri worked in line with the Thai bureaucracy through the Ministry of Interior (Scupin, 1998, p. 235). Later, the role of Chularajmontri was salient in terms of providing an understanding of Muslims for the Thai state, promoting an Islamic curriculum, supporting religious activities, and extending corporations among overseas Islamic countries through education, scholarships, and other related religious activities. Chularajmontri and these networks were not only in the secular sphere, but also involved in national politics through bureaucratic duties and democratic representatives. This means the power of negotiation was more consolidated and able to create opportunities for Muslims in Thailand. Another important factor to strengthen the status of Muslims in negotiating on behalf of their group was that Muslims increasingly had access to education at home and overseas.

Indeed, another level of local negotiation related to Chularajmontri and arising from the rigid Buddhist assimilationist policy was that some Malay Muslims sent their children abroad to Islamic countries (Scupin, 1998, p. 236). These students and graduates learnt Islamic values and those sent to the Middle East absorbed the soft power of the Arabic world. Apart from the pilgrimage, Arabic schooling disseminated Arabization – the process of Arab influence on non-Arab people – bringing about the gradual adoption of the Arabic language and culture in their own lifestyles as well as the transmission of Arab nationalist ideas to non-Arab minorities. The attempt to maintain an authentic Islamic identity despite the imposition of the Thai educational programme upon the Muslim curriculum in conformity with nationalist policies, increased the numbers of offspring sent to be educated in Islamic countries, especially in Arabic nations. Upon graduation and returning to the community, they absorbed Arabic culture and religious identity and transmitted it to the community. These are the circles of influence and the connection between Arabization and negotiation of identity. From the outset, due to grievances concerning religious practices and education, people migrated to fulfil their ambitions overseas, where they absorbed authentic Islamic and various Arabic values (fashion, food, lifestyle) before moving back to the community and reproducing those values and identities in the home community. To put it succinctly, Arabization is one element of a whole process in the assemblage of the Minburi community, where it serves as another driving force and outcome of the community's historical context and the strategies that local people explore to maintain their religious identities. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1984), school is the institution that can transmit cultural capital from generation to generation. The returning scholars helped set up Islamic learning centres, a proper curriculum, and other Islamic activities. Islamic practices in the curriculum of state schools and numerous Islamic learning centres are accessible in Minburi; this has helped shape and sustain Muslim identities in the changing era. Schooling not only cultivated Islamic values, but also enhanced supportive networks and connections among Muslim communities. The ability to access higher education overseas helped raise the social status of the ethnic minority in Thailand so they could enter national politics, which was how negotiation from the bottom up via school impacted the global and national levels.

Lastly, Phase 4 (2000s–present) indicates how the community has been transformed and how Muslims negotiate the maintenance of their identities in the contemporary world. The analysis is divided into two levels: 1) the institution and the community, and 2) the family and individual.

The catalysts for transforming Muslim identity have returned to those of phase one, mainly migration and development; however, they differ in terms of interpretation. At the institutional and community level, schooling in Islamic countries, particularly in Arabic countries, is a prime target for Thai Muslims. Every year there are scholarships offered from Islamic countries through Chularajmontri – as of 2019 the Egyptian government offered 85 scholarships to Thai Muslim children. Scholarships from the Arabic world have become part of the tradition of offering grants every year. To send children to study in Islamic countries is, directly and indirectly, to strengthen the Muslim identity, to transfer Arabization, especially culture, and to cultivate global Islamic issues. In terms of the political institution, there is also cooperation between government bodies and the Muslim community to maintain the Islamic identity. From the 2000s onwards, community transition in light of negotiation has tangibly appeared. Local people maintain their Islamic identity and promote religious practices at the level of the institution and the community, and the family and individual. The effort to homogenize Islam in the community in a Buddhist society like Thailand denotes the concept of assemblage. The process of striving to form and preserve an Islamic identity is a continuing process and in a state of cautiously becoming – embedded in the past involuntary migration, nationalist policies, and changing development discourses over time.

Nourishing Islamic identities at the institutional and community level

Activities and religious ceremonies benefit as a meeting point for officials and Muslims to interact so as to build a good understanding of one another. Senior officers are invited to participate in the Iftar (Ramadan breakfast ceremony). The ceremony is held every year for Muslims in the district to have the opportunity to interact as well as to pray to Allah together. Apart from serving Islamic practices, the ceremony organized in the Minburi district also functions as a cultural and relationship facilitator for promoting bonds and good understanding between governmental units and Islamic organizations including strengthening and emphasizing the sense of Muslim brotherhood among its members. The annual ceremony arrangement is more relevant to sustaining identity than it seems, since the ceremony arrangement leads to a unity within the Islamic group, enabling Muslims in the district to be able to highlight the importance of Islamic rules, to manifestly express their religious practices and be able to obtain cooperation from state authorities. The fundamental characteristics of the district and their Islamic affiliations are fully acknowledged by state authorities via the long history of migration and emphasized by daily lifestyle activities including this key ceremony organized every year. The distinguishing characteristics of the district with its numerous Muslim settlers has resulted in the claim that the educational curriculum be adjusted to serve the Muslim way of life. Indeed, for eight public schools in the district 80% of the school's intake is Muslim. Arabic language and Islamic religious content has been added to schools in the Minburi district. In addition, mosques in the district play an important role in strengthening the identities of Muslims in the district. The religious congregation and mosque-based social support carries multiple functions and roles for Muslim communities not only for worship, but also as centres for social and political gatherings as well as community involvement (Nguyen et al., 2013). Mosques in Minburi act as sites for community gatherings, which empower the identification of the Muslims upon a land more dominated by other religious groups.

In terms of the physical changes as a whole, the transformations appear in the environmental atmosphere, public infrastructure, image of the district, lifestyles, and identities. Minburi has long been known as the area of a large Muslim community and has attracted many Muslims to the district for various purposes, such as to stay close to their families or peer group networks, or to work or study in the area. This is because the area offers many conveniences for their Islamic practices, with Halal food, Muslim fashion, and many mosques. Lila, aged 33 from Pattani, told the interviewer that she chose to stay in Minburi while working as an accountant in Bangkok partly due to the high concentration of Muslims in this area. She said she felt warm and safe living there as she has a higher degree of social trust towards those that identify themselves as Muslims and share common cultural practices. Similarly, Karim, a 34-year-old lawyer from Songkla, said that Minburi was his second home because it is easier for him to engage in his Islamic practices,

particularly in terms of access to halal food. When asked about his feeling towards the district, he promptly answered that he was glad to be a part of the Minburi community and that he felt warm surrounded by his Muslim sisters and brothers.

The participants associate their sense of belonging to Minburi with their self-identification as Muslims. Probyn (1996, p. 19) notes that “[Belonging] captures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment...and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state”. Participants are like creators of religious belongingness depending on the geographical space of the district as well as expressing a symbolic inclusion in separating those who belong to the Muslim brotherhood from those who do not. This implies that the geographic space mutually shapes and is shaped by people’s religious belongingness. In this regard, the paper proposes that the legacy of Muslim migration from the south of Thailand to Bangkok since 1831 has transformed the space into an ethnic and religious community. Before the Muslim movement to Minburi, the space was simply farming land with little significance or meaning, but following the migration, the place became identified and labelled based on the ethnic and religious groups of its people, that of Islamic culture, and as a place with a configuration of ethnic and Islamic affiliation. Consolidating the identification of Islamic culture within the district since 1831, the legacy of migration also sheds light on the migration and mobility trends nowadays; that of outsiders moving into Minburi because of its well-known Muslim community. It is still common, when it comes to our contemporary sense of mobility, that people think of cultures as relying on and being rooted in places and in stable forms of interaction repeatedly occurring in the same place (Morley, 2000, p. 212). In the case of Minburi, the legacies of migration in the past and the present mobilities are clearly connected. The linkage of space, religious affiliation, historical entity, current identity, and community theoretically underpin assemblage.

The expansion of Bangkok to Minburi, now a suburban area, has accelerated the number of people moving into the district, including Buddhist Thais as well as foreign immigrants working for transnational companies, especially international schools. Indeed, a number of international schools in Minburi have attracted foreigners, students and their family members to live in and around the Minburi neighbourhood. As there are huge tracts of land available, the Minburi district has not only attracted schools into the district, but it has also become the target of developments and industrial and housing estates. The gradual urbanization of Minburi, though welcomed by the communities, poses a challenge in maintaining the innate characteristics of Minburi as a Muslim enclave. Slowly, this area is transforming into a multi-racial space owing to the spatial mobility of people and interaction between differing religions and multicultural groups. The town expansion in Minburi engages with estate and public transport constructions. The various mega projects rooted in the Thai development discourse largely require countless workers to perform unskilled work. The large influx of migrant workers has created multi-layered ethnic complexities within the area. It is inaccurate to simply classify the characteristics of the population in the area as Buddhist or Muslim anymore. The transformation of the community as a whole has increased its ethnic diversity. Newcomers into the district due to development programmes have brought with them challenges for the Muslim community in Minburi, and as an assemblage the Muslim community is being historically transformed. Numerous Muslims in this district have significant Islamic roles and retain their Muslim identities; however, the rapid changes urge them to negotiate their autonomy with the changing circumstances.

Family and individual level in sustaining Islamic identity

At the family and individual level, the small and intimate institution pays a vital role in forming and maintaining Islamic identity, countering the new national development programme, town expansion, and social media. Muslims who live in Minburi following the displacement of their ancestors located their homes close to their kin and friends. Muslims in the area have diverse specializations, which fulfil the different mechanics of society, such as farming, trading, operating food catering, manufacturing Muslim clothes, and so forth. Since Muslims have predominantly

managed economic and social activities, these have attracted other Muslims to the district based on the concept of Muslim brotherhood. Nowadays, Muslims stay together with their Muslim neighbours in their community. They handle social transformations by being strict with their groups, but not hostile to newcomers who live in new residential areas. Leena, a 22-year-old respondent, told of how she was born and raised in Minburi and observed people from various backgrounds start to move into the district. She said that her family stay close to the Muslim community, yet they talk to their Buddhist neighbours who are less in number in her residential area. However, they do not really associate with them. Similarly, Nureesawati, a 21-year-old respondent, admits that her family places great emphasis on her being a good Muslim, especially by always wearing a headscarf and covering her body as the Islamic principles command. From the findings, family socialization is the most salient variable in retaining the religious identities of young Muslims in the district. Also, the influences of neighbours and good relationships within the community facilitate residents maintaining strong ties and a shared sense of belonging. In this case, the well-knit communities can sustain more egalitarian social arrangements (Putnam, 2000, p. 359). People can join the religious rituals and form groups for religious purposes more effectively. Furthermore, a strong bond and a high level of belongingness accommodates and allows people to voluntarily express their Muslim identities within the group. The identity of the Minburi community is a bond with the Muslim group. It is common to see people overtly display their Muslim identities, for instance, through ways of greeting, praying five times a day in Muslim costume, labelling restaurants as Halal, or using the Arabic alphabet in representing the origin of Muslim culture. The place and community support the reproduction of the Muslim identity and help prevent it from disappearing.

Focusing more closely on the individual unit, family socialization transmits peoples' habits (Bourdieu, 1984). Muslims are connected with other Muslims based on the concept of the Muslim brotherhood. This notion allows Muslims in Minburi to have positive attitudes towards their other Muslim counterparts. Mohammed, aged 38, was formerly a scholarship grantee who studied in Egypt, and now runs an Islamic learning centre and works as an Arabic teacher at a public school. Mohammed commented that nowadays there are a lot of Muslim clothes shops and other businesses managed by non-Muslim traders coming into the area. He shared his opinion that he normally supported goods and services run by Muslims rather than owners from other religious backgrounds. He and his family send their children to an Islamic school, strictly uphold Islamic rituals, and dress and behave in an Islamic manner. He revealed that he as a Muslim has to help other Muslim brothers and sisters by supporting both cultural and economic activities as much as possible, otherwise Muslims, who are less in number compared to the whole population in Bangkok, cannot compete with other traders. This personal attitude rooted in the Islamic beliefs of individuals can be proposed as another way to make sense of why Muslim identity maintains its salience to the present day. However, female Muslim respondents said that they could not retain their Muslim identity all the time as they feel that they stand out when commuting to other parts of Bangkok. They reported that when they are outside of the Minburi district, they refrain from wearing the headscarf, long sleeve shirts and ankle-length skirts. However, in Minburi they confided that it is fine to dress and behave in the Muslim way. Again, this is because Minburi is a place closely attached to the Muslim identity, while most other areas in Bangkok are not. However, many in Minburi dress in the Islamic manner because they take it for granted that others are aware that they are Muslim – they also choose to do so personally – and so expect females to behave correctly according to good religious practices. It is therefore a form of symbolic interaction. Also, to wear female Islamic fashion depends not only on place, but also on gender relations, particularly with males.

My female cousin covers the parts of her body very strictly when she attends the big events Muslim men often join. (Faisol, 32 years old)

On top of the symbolic interaction, which frames Muslim behaviour attached to a place like Minburi, gender relations also dictate the behaviour of Muslim females in a defined way.

Minburi district functions as a place for Muslims to articulate their identity religiously and freely; the pattern of expressing identity is fluid and subject to change depending on the situation in the context of being a Muslim Thai. In the case of the interviewees, the expression of Muslim identity varies according to place and time denoting an assemblage in which history shapes community and individual identity and vice versa. With its legacy of migration, Minburi as a place has cemented its reputation for being a well-known Muslim centre in Bangkok. The idea of place-community refers to “local societies with particular strong attachments and associations – usually historical, cultural or ethnic – to spaces which play a key role in defining the identity of these groups” (Askew, 2002, p. 7). The transformations of Minburi have been driven by massive developments and migration leading to transnational connectivity among old and new Muslim settlers based on the place of settlement. Transnational connectivity, various forms of linkages between the place of origin and place of settlement, has occurred based on the Islamic idea of brotherhood, connecting strangers as Muslim brothers and sisters. The findings emphasize the linkage and connectivity of Muslims based not on blood or ancestors, but rather based on Islamic thoughts and beliefs. The concept of Ummah (community) refers to the bond between Muslims based on the Islamic faith and mutual respect (Halim, 2014, pp. 37–38). Muslim immigrants from other parts of Thailand or from overseas have internalized the same Islamic principles. These are the linkages between Islam and laypeople. Therefore, Muslim immigrants can be regarded as a model of a cultural position that is both autonomous of and connected with space. Muslims can reproduce and highlight the connectivity through religious rituals at event venues or mosques. Their Muslim etiquette, such as ways of greeting, eating, or speaking, are seen as transnational Islamic cultural capital, which indicate how the transnational and location-specific cultural capital is linked. Although there have been rapid changes in the district throughout different eras, Muslims have strategically sustained their Islamic identities and continue to negotiate their Muslim ways of life by consolidating and cooperating with all possible parties engaging at all possible levels.

Conclusion

The transformations of the Minburi community have mainly been based on developments and migration. The legacies of both factors in different periods have forced Muslims in the area to adjust yet maintain their Islamic identities in the face of global drivers and national programmes. The initial physical and social transformation of Minburi lay in its origins following the relocation of war captives and the development path undertaken similar to that of British colonial rule over Malaysia. These were the global forces affecting Minburi in the past. Later, the nationalist policies of Thailand as a national force during World War II placed Muslim identity in a difficult situation. Furthermore, migration and the modern development goals of Thailand today have culminated in Minburi manifesting itself as the place of a closely-knit Muslim community. This has resulted in a continually growing and increasingly dense network of Muslims residing in this area so as to become a centre of Muslims in Thailand. Migration and movement these days also take the form of development programmes. Donor countries are Middle Eastern countries supporting Muslims in the non-Arabic world that act as influential sources in spreading the process of Arabization through education, language, culture, fashion, and Islamic attitudes. This Arabization and Islamic identity construction becomes stronger when the internet and social media are more accessible.

The concept of an assemblage focuses mainly on the dynamic relationships at the structural level in line with the expressive and the functional parts under the structure, such as the regulations and governing principles together with social change and social networks (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Yu, 2013, p. 197). In the case of Minburi, the structure of assemblage comes from the global and national discourse of development affecting urbanization and people's identities. The community identity has been dynamic as the consequences of multiple levels of actors have together created historical contexts involving actions regarding security, development and identity nourishment. The major cause of the initial Muslim displacement to Bangkok was based on historical and political factors. The captives from Patani and their descendants since then settled in Minburi and its neighbouring areas. The legacy of migration in the past has resulted in Minburi district becoming a large Muslim community in Bangkok. The place has become a crucial pull factor

attracting Muslims to move into the area. Interpersonal ties, existing Muslim networks, and the idea of the place as a centre for Muslims in Bangkok are the motivations behind Muslims moving into this district. For other people of different religious backgrounds, the major rationale for moving into the district is expansion into the new suburban residential area of Bangkok and for employment purposes. Various developments have been directed at the district alongside the city's expansion. These increase urbanization and make the previously highly closed Muslim society interact more with other ethnic groups and adapt to a more modern lifestyle. The transformations have resulted in the anticipated outcomes of changes in the environmental space, way of life, and sense of ethnic community. The Minburi community has undergone multiple transformations. People adjust to the new lifestyle and negotiate in order to retain their faith and Muslim identity. In so doing, Muslims in the area have negotiated in terms of policy as shown by the community unit of analysis and of lifestyles via family socialization and the self-attitude formation towards the concept of the Muslim brotherhood. Ultimately, Minburi district has witnessed much change with the Muslim assemblage having experienced much transformation from its original founding until the present day.

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