The Muslims of Thailand

Michel Gilquin (tr. Michael Smithies)
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Thailand is about the last place one would associate with Muslims. One imagines Buddhist *wats*, saffron-robed monks, and fun-loving people. One does not imagine women in headscarves, minarets, and the call to prayer. Indeed, 90 percent of Thais are Buddhists. However, the majority of the remainder is Muslim (about 8 percent of the total population). In this slim volume, Gilquin provides a solid introduction to the Muslim communities of Thailand. It is a sweeping overview, and in that task it does its job very well. Personally, I would have preferred a more detailed analysis of the everyday lives of Thai Muslims.

Gilquin calls Thailand's Muslims a heterogeneous minority. Although one might imagine that Islam is limited to the provinces closest to Malaysia, the author demonstrates that this is far from true. However, 85 percent of the Muslim population lives in the south, and so their issues and concerns figure prominently in this account. Since the country's Muslims have different national origins, legal/ritual schools, and levels of commitment or interest in Sufism, the only characteristic that seems to define them is their more reserved approach to socializing. He notes that in a country noted for its fun (*sanuk*) and merry-making outings, Muslims are conspicuously absent in

public restaurants and bars because of dietary restrictions. Indeed, in other Muslim minority settings, such as among the Hui in China, dietary concerns also help to isolate the Muslim community.

The question of what to call these Muslims is a bit of a problem for scholars, the Thai, and the Muslims of Thailand as well. One Thai term meaning "guests" was originally used for Muslims of Malay, Indian, or Middle Eastern origin, even though some of them had been in Thailand longer than other groups (almost exclusively Buddhist) already considered Thai. Furthermore, a shift is taking place: "guests" is beginning to include Cham and Yunannese Muslims and thus is becoming a cover term for all Muslims. Linguistically, this demonstrates a fundamental difficulty: While the term *Thai Muslim* is commonly used, the logic described above suggests a necessary divide between being *Thai* and being *Muslim*. Despite this difficulty, Gilquin accepts this term for describing the general category of Muslims in Thailand.

In the south, the question of an appropriate label becomes more difficult. Historically, the majority of Muslims in the southern provinces were ethnic Malay. In the deep south, they remain so. To call them *Thai Malays* is problematic because of the close association of being Thai with being Buddhist and of being Malay with being Muslim. Gilquin attempts to solve the problem of what to call Muslims in the deep south by calling them *Yawi speakers*. He argues that Yawi is a language that sustains an identity and that it differs from other forms of Malay because it uses the Arabic script instead of the Latin script.

Here, Gilquin would have benefited from a wider knowledge of Southeast Asia and its languages. Yawi (or Jawi) is indeed a written form of Malay that uses an Arabic script. Before adopting the Latin alphabet under colonial rule, Malay was written in a modified Arabic script. The mostly religious books that still exist in this script are called Jawi books. In Indonesia and Malaysia, Jawi (Yawi) refers not to a spoken language but to the written form. Likewise in upper southern Thailand (e.g., Nakhon Si Thammarat), Yawi also refers to a style of writing. Malay speakers in southern Thailand often identify themselves as speaking either Malay Kelanten or Malay Kedah, reflecting the Malaysian provinces in which their families have historical roots. When transliterating from Arabic, the "y" sound is usually written with a "j," whereas when transliterating the same sound from Thai, it is written with a "y." This suggests that Gilquin's use of *Yawi speakers* reflects an exonym used by the Thai and not by the Malays of southern Thailand.

Throughout the Malay world (southern Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the southern Philippines), the central institutions are religious schools:

pesantren, *surau*, and *pondok* (as they are called in Thailand). Gilquin gives scant attention to these institutions, although they have been an important part of the Thai government's strategy to control the country's Muslim population. In the deep south, a distinction has been drawn between *pondok* and Islamic schools, for Islamic schools have adopted the Thai government curriculum and have deemphasized the traditional religious curriculum. In the upper south, however, the Muslim community has combined both the secular education recognized by the Thai government with the traditional *pondok* education. In this way, the *pondoks* of the upper south look more like many of their counterparts in Indonesia than they do their counterparts in southern Thailand.

My criticisms aside, I found this to be a well written, easy to read, and understandable overview of a very complicated social system. It is a very good introduction to Islam and Muslims in Thailand and is even a good treatment of Islam in a minority situation. For those who already know a fair amount about Thai Islam, it is a useful review. However, its real utility lies in being used in undergraduate courses.

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