

Chapter II

The existence of trans-border ethnic Mon nationalism at Sangkhabori and its impacts upon Thailand's Mon communities

The massive influx of Mon individuals displaced by the ongoing war in Myanmar into Thailand, via the mountainous area of Sangkhabori District, over the past three decades, has resulted in the emergence and development of a Mon refugee-warrior community on Thai soil. The massive exodus of Mon students and intellectuals in 1988 and scenarios of thousands of Mon intellectuals being tortured and massacred by the Government forces during their flight from the crack down and political persecution in Rangoon, attracted considerable public attention, exerted psychological shock, created anger and subsequently led to a rising tide of ethnic consciousness among some leading groups of Thailand's Mons who still enshrine certain Mon values and cultural traditions inherited from the past.

Thailand's Mons can be defined in a broad sense as a culturally-bound collectivity whose ancestors migrated into the area which constitutes Thailand's present political territory over a long period extending from the sixteenth century until the early part of this century.

The rising tide of ethnic Mon consciousness, especially in the 5 year period since the tragic exodus of 1988, is reflected in the growing numbers of Mon cultural and political activities, Mon Youth associations and Mon nationalist media for political propaganda. Their increased efforts towards revitalization of Mon cultural elements on the verge of sinking into oblivion amidst the ongoing process of globalization should not be regarded merely as psychological and social reactions to the trans-frontier, political and economic climate, but rather as both regional and global trends in which resurgent ethnic nationalist movements have arisen out of political disaffection with the political institutions and values inherited from the Modernity which have inevitably affected much of the mentality of thousands of Mon intellectuals within and outside their homeland.

The refugee-warrior community of Sangkhaburi which has developed out of the streams of Myanmar's Mon asylum-seekers, has acted as an agent, not only in arousing humanitarian compassion but also in stimulating a progression and elaboration of a sense of shared cultural roots, common history and sentimental ties with homeland into an emergent ethnic consciousness. This arousal of humanitarian interest and cultural awareness has been facilitated by an increasing communication network that connects all of Thailand's Mon communities with refugee

camps in Kanchanaburi and by printed media accessible to all major Mon communities on Thai soil.

Conscious of their status as nationalists, leaders from this Mon refugee-warrior community have persevered with tasks of promoting Mon literacy at refugee camps and of creating an atmosphere conducive to the development of ethnic consciousness among Thailand's Mons. These tasks have been carried out using the only two available sources of facts, namely, continued historicity and a state of being ethnic communities whose boundary has been made palpable and objectified by the availability of Mon cultural traditions, myths values and collective symbols. It is this distinct nature of the Mon cultural boundary and vivid memories of their glorious past that have served as a source of inspiration for the Mons through generation after generation, sans frontiere.

My survey findings have revealed that in the social context of Thailand's Mons, a sense of nation-ness can be defined or understood only in relation to the survival of some aspects of Mon culture, the boundaries that remain in southern Myanmar and central Thailand and also to the historicity the Mon nationalists have revived and maintained. This reflects the fact that such a definition of Mon nation-ness lacks a political, territorial category. Thailand's Mons can lay no claim to

political autonomy over the physical area where they have resided and will continue to reside on Thai soil. Even the ties of kinship between Thailand's Mons and their Myanmar counterparts that some Thai citizens of Mon blood could claim have long been broken through the passage of time. Thus, the task of writing their own history in its proper context, along with maintaining a political myth as well as efforts to achieve synthesis of cultural traits and collective memories that have developed in different political units, are considered as part and parcel of cultural invention in the formation of ideas of nationhood among most Thai and Burmese Mon nationalists. It could be argued that a vicariously felt sense of nation-ness, in fact, has been cultivated within their cultural boundaries, more specifically, within their family socialization. What should be noted is that among highly educated Mons, most of whom live inside and around Bangkok, a sense of Mon nation-ness has been intermingled with elements of cognitive liberality. Understanding of their past has been acquired partly through the reading of histories, inherited legends or other kinds of academic works some of which were carried out by Westerners after World War II.

In light of cognitive and social development among Thai people of Mon blood, it can be argued that over the past two decades, the line of Mon nation-ness has become distinct under the circumstances of ethnic revival. Thai people of Mon blood, having vicariously

experienced a feeling that the Mon land and her people living throughout southern Myanmar were being exploited and misused , began to react strongly to such worsening situations and changes by stepping forward to promote Mon cultural exchange and technical cooperation with the New Mon State Party (NMSP) in an attempt to expiate their cumulative frustration and militation caused by an inability to protect what they think they saw as their own homeland. Increasing economic hardship and pervasive political persecution in Myanmar, under the programme Burmanization, has compelled thousands of Mon people to enter Thailand as illegal economic migrants. For survival, some have formed networks and this situation has helped deepen the social interaction between the two groups , Thai Mons and Burmese Mons , reinforced by the presence of the New Mon State Party and its media. Political myths , as an instrument for creating and maintaining political loyalty within their targeted groups , were found to be widely nurtured among some of Thailand's Mon groups. Most of these myths predict that the existence of ethnic Mon cultural boundaries will pave a way towards eventual political autonomy and legitimacy.

My field research , carried out during October and December of 1994 , revealed that the continuity and infiltration of a politicized state of ethnic Mon consciousness , definable as ethnic Mon nationalism , into Thailand's other Mon enclaves was attributable to

continued efforts among Mon nationalists in manipulating media and in creating , or selectively employing , messages for shaping the imagination of their targeted public , Myanmar's Mon refugee-warriors and Thai citizens of Mon blood. These 2 groups, targeted so that their opinion could be mobilized in defense of their group interest against what Mon nationalists deem as their common enemy ,(real or imagined), the Rangoon military junta. As a result, many of Thailand's Mons were found to reactively assert their culture and their past as equal to or even superior to those of both Thailand and Myanmar. Some local academics, concerned with the survivability of Mon heritage , have tirelessly worked on a wide range of research projects on Mon social life as well as on the institutionalization of Mon social knowledge. Various degrees of ethnic nationalistic expression and maintenance found in individual ethnic enclaves were influenced both by the effects of the kind and number of efficient media to which the Mon nationalists found access and by the political and economic climate of a host society that either fosters or , ironically enough, at the same time postpones, if not prevents, any possibility their its progression into a more intense form.

A study of the media role which the Mon nationalists played on Thai soil, especially at Ban Pong in Ratchaburi province , at Sangkhaburi in Kanchanaburi province and at Kohkret in Pathumtani province, revealed the unifying impacts of ongoing socio-cultural

interaction between Myanmar's Mons and Thailand's Mons. These unifying impacts have regularly promoted a social cohesion between the two. English language news letters, Thai language leaflets and Mon articles, the three of printed media emanating from the two Mon groups are found to be freighted with political goal-oriented messages playing a vital role in deepening and enhancing a sense of common cultural roots and concomitantly creating an image of Myanmar's ruling military regime as a common enemy. In this way, the development and mobilization of ethnic consciousness among certain circles of Thai citizens of Mon blood, against all whom they perceive as a threat toward their existence, has been stimulated.

The survey findings further revealed that many of Thailand's Mon have responded to such appeals of awakened ethnic nationalism by setting up Mon cultural programmes, a Mon University in exile and by promoting activities conducive to ethnic revival. To a certain extent, it can be argued that without these efficient printed media, a sense of ethnic consciousness among those individuals at Ratchaburi, Kanchanaburi, Kohkret and elsewhere could not have developed. With financial support from several leading foreign religious organizations, as well as from other politically active groups of Thailand's Mons, these kinds of printed media spread far and wide under the control of Myanmar's Mon nationalists, some of whom are attached to the New Mon State

Party. Because of these facts , a relationship between the type of media, the extent to which printed media has been employed by Mon nationalists and the degree of ethnic nationalist expression varying, from one Thai-based Mon diaspora to another , becomes clear.

Varying degrees of definable trans-border ethnic Mon nationalism that did , and continue to prevail from the refugee camps at Sanghaburi to Mon diaspora at Kohkret , have been brought about by the unbroken line of constant trans-border social interaction , cultural diffusion , and even contact amongst individuals in various forms , ranging from mass migration to the exodus of refugees from Myanmar into Thailand.

The New Mon State Party functions to promote and disseminate what is to be theoretically termed , Mon nationalistic messages through modes of social communication among the Mons residing within and beyond the political territory of Thailand. The New Mon State Party was founded in the 1970s in Myanmar , but most of its members have been forced to leave their homeland due to political persecution under the Rangoon-based military regime. Over the past 3 decades and under the present leadership of Swe Gyin , the New Mon State Party has vigorously committed itself to the promotion of its political ideology and cultural heritage. Both its political ideology and

cultural heritage are understood to constitute what can be defined as the basis upon which modern Mon-ness and nationalistic messages are constructed. With the help of economic benefits reaped from within the area under its control, the New Mon State Party has developed its armed forces and its largest military base at Sangkhaburi in Thailand in defense of its nationhood after being forced out of the Mon State in Myanmar during the 70s. (Siam Post (Page 15) (March 13, 1994)

Given the significance of its functions in other areas, its major achievements in developing a political arena for articulating its political will and ideology through these printed media and in internationalizing its call for humanitarian concern and human rights with the help of various press media in Thailand, the New Mon State Party, in consultation with Thailand's local Mon organizations has successfully encouraged Thailand's Mons to maintain, promote and even revitalize their Mon-ness through the afore-mentioned media as well as through cultural exchange programmes.

At this point, it can be argued that the study of transborder ethnic Mon nationalism could not have been achieved without an understanding of the vital role of the Mon controlled media function, in both countries, in shaping and mobilizing public imagination in support of their nationalist cause.

An analysis of the structure of ethnic Mon nationalistic messages shows that at their core, these messages are constructed upon the combination between existing historical facts, myths and recently assimilated universal modern concepts. When observed in more depth, these myths whose centrality is the prediction of a positive Mon political future are found to play the most crucial psychological role in encouraging the Mon to survive with hope. These myths, created over time by the local elite, some of whom are renowned monks, draw their inspiration from ongoing social realities and serve the purpose of mobilizing and maintaining group loyalties, especially among Myanmar's Mon political exiles and bona-fide refugees, at time when they feel demoralized by set backs.

The establishment and development of this New Mon State Party and its armed force have so far been made possible under the particular political conditions, benign to their growth, in Thailand throughout the 70s, 80s and up to the year 1994. 1994 was a critical historical juncture, when the Thai Government began talk with the leaders of the NMSP on a repatriation programme whose objective was to signal to the NMSP that a ceasefire with Rangoon was the only viable option open to them after over three decades of fierce sanguinary fighting in protection of the Mon land. Thailand's initiative towards repatriation of NMSP members and all Mon refugees stranded on Thai soil has been

widely argued to be linked to , myriad areas of economic interest for Thailand , which expects to gain from the power center in Rangoon and several perceived major changes in the regional security environment.

At present, Thailand accords top priority to Myanmar on her foreign agenda. On the security front, Thailand's border with Myanmar is 2401 kilometers long , instances of political unrest and fighting between the Government forces and ethnic rebels have often led to unwelcome Burmese military incursions into Thai territory.

In retrospect , Thailand and Myanmar have never really been close since Myanmar took the socialist road in 1962. The Burmese Way to Socialism not only faced failure but also led to the ramifications of political unrest. Token reforms failed to stem opposition among both the Burman majority of Central Burma and minorities on the periphery. Thailand has so far associated itself with democratic western countries and come to serve as a model of capitalist achievement in mainland Southeast Asia whereas Myanmar has isolated itself from the regional community. During the 70s and 80s , Myanmar was regarded as a mystic country in the sense that few people knew what was going on there and this has so far caused suspicion and even fear among Thai military leaders with regard to Myanmar's military potential and political development. During this long period, the exiled Mon refugee-warrior communities along Thailand's western border area have emerged as a

result of Thailand's lax immigration control over its porous natural border and of its national security policy that was designed to show leniency towards Myanmar's ethnic asylum seekers. This national policy was implemented to serve national, political and military objectives, providing shelter and assistance to ethnic nationalists as a means of forming an alliance with them so that Thailand's border security could be ensured. In such a climate, some ethnic nationalists were even entrusted as Thailand's political spies, necessary due to a mutual suspicion of sincerity long fostered between Thailand's policy makers and those of Myanmar. (Committee for Publicity of People's Struggle in Monland Newsletter NO12 V.3 (October 1994))



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