

The Portrayal of Muslim Militants “Southern Bandits” in Thai Newspapers

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Abstract—This paper examines the depiction of Muslim militants in Thai newspapers in 2004. Stuart Hall’s “representation” and “public idioms” are used as theoretical frameworks. Critical Discourse Analysis is employed as a methodology to examine 240 news articles from two leading Thai language newspapers. The results show that the militants are usually labeled as “southern bandits.” This suggests that they are just a culprit of the violence in the deep south of Thailand. They are usually described as people who cause turbulence. Consequently, the military have to get rid of them. However, other aspects of the groups such as their political agenda or the failures of the Thai state in dealing with the Malay Muslims were not mentioned in the news stories. In the time of violence, the researcher argues that this kind of newspaper coverage may help perpetuate the discourse of Malay Muslim, instead of providing a fuller picture of the ongoing conflicts.

Keywords—News Discourse, Newspapers, Thailand, Thai Muslims.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE year 2004 is considered “the new height” of violence in the Deep South of Thailand. In January 5th, 2004, an unidentified Muslim militia group broke into a military base in Narathiwat, Thailand’s southern province, and stole weapons, followed by a clash between the military and Muslim civilians at a historical Kru-Ze Mosque in Pattani in April. In October, 78 Muslim protesters were found dead after the military cracked down at a police station. Besides these major incidents, daily killings of both Buddhists and Muslims allegedly committed by “southern bandits” or commonly known in Thai as “Jone Tai”, were prevalent. Amnesty International said that in 2004 alone, 500 people were killed in the southern provinces [1]. Conflicts and violence in the area of a Muslim majority in a “Buddhist country” is not new, but chronic and deep-rooted.

This paper took some part of the researcher’s master thesis project, which examined the portrayals of Muslims in the south of Thailand in Thai newspapers. Consequently, this paper focuses especially on how the newspapers depict militant groups in particular. In Thai language, the word “Jone Tai,” which can be literally translated to “southern bandits,” was used to call militant groups. This name constantly appeared in headlines of Thai language newspapers. These insurgents appeared to be the major actors in these cruel incidents. It is a simple word used to describe a group of insurgents who are trying to create violence against the Thai government. However, interestingly, this word has become a “public idiom” used in the Thai language mass media.

The research question this paper poses is: How were “southern bandits” or “Jone Tai” in the deep south of Thailand

portrayed in Thai newspapers in the year 2004? News stories where the word “southern bandits” appeared on the front page were analyzed.

This study used discourse analysis to analyze front page coverage in two leading Thai-language newspapers *Thai Rath* and *Matichon*. *Thai Rath* is characterized as ‘sensationalized’ while *Matichon* is a serious, elite newspaper. These two different media outlets reflect the broader discourse of Thai-language newspapers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Thai Nation-State and Muslim Insurgents: Historical Background

My basis for considering the creation of Thailand is inspired by Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities.” [2] notes “the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the new fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the state for the modern nation” (p. 46). As a result, the creation of modern nations is not “natural” but has been shaped by socio-political, economic and cultural contexts. In the case of Thailand, Malay Muslim minorities in the deep south came into existence by the formation of a new kind of community – the Thai nation-state which is commonly known as a Buddhist country. This section examines a history of Thai nation-building, the transition from pre-modern to a modern state and its consequences.

The name *Thailand* was created in 1939. It was previously called Siam. However, Siam had been defined by boundaries demarcated in the 1890s and 1900s – more than a hundred years ago [3]. Drawing boundaries between different kingdoms at that time was a new concept of territory introduced by the British and French colonialists. [4] examines a history of the “geo-body” of the Thai nation and asserts that among South East Asian pre-modern (before the colonialism era) polities, the relationship between political powers was hierarchical [4]. Clear-cut borders were not considered important by the overlord of each kingdom. However, the indigenous hierarchical relationships were overtaken by the new Western territorial paradigm – a nation-state. The results were control over revenue, taxes, budgets, education, and the legal system [4].

As a result of the Thai government’s exercising such a rigid policy toward minorities in ex-tributaries, there has always been the resistance. Muslims in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand were no exceptions. Malay Muslims in the south are the largest minority group in the Thai state. After losing its autonomy, this old tributary has opposed the state with an array of political movements.

[5] Posits that the forcing the Muslims to use Siamese law instead of Islamic law and required attendance at state schools brought strong resistance from the Muslim population. Consequently, many Muslim resistance groups came into

existence. In the 1970s, rural resistance groups emerged: PULO (Patani United Liberation Organization) and PNLF (Patani National Liberation Front). In the 1980s, peace-making efforts were established and a more acquiescent official attitude toward Islam was adopted. Separatism then lost support under the local population. However, since 2001, new violence has erupted [5]. The year 2004 marks a new height for violence and the revival of an authoritarian strategy in suppressing dissent in the Thai state.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In critical/cultural perspective, news is not just a fact reported by journalists with their objectivity. Socio-cultural and economics contexts have shaped the production, distribution and consumption of this genre of mass media. In this paper, Stuart Hall's media representation is employed as a framework to look at the way Muslim minorities are portrayed in mass media. Hall, a British cultural theorist, argues that language plays a crucial role in creating and sharing meanings for people in the same culture.

A. Media Representation

Against the backdrop of news as a means of transmitting 'facts' or 'reality' to an audience, [6] applies the work of representation to media studies and argues that news should be perceived as "a cultural product" constructed by journalistic practices: "a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories" (p.335). Millions of events occurred each day, but some are regarded as newsworthy and get covered by the press. Besides the journalistic norms, [6] asserts that when trying to understand an event, inevitably, journalists and editors have to apply his/her understandings about the social world – constructed cultural maps - to make sense of the occurrence. And since the cultural maps, which are employed to interpret the event by reporters, are also shared by readers living within same cultural milieu, news products are comprehended by the readers through this ritualistic practice.

In terms of language used in the press, [6] argues it neither belongs to journalists nor readers. News reporting is a process where journalists and editors transform their cultural knowledge to fit with styles of a newspaper they are working for and an assumed audience. He terms this transformed news product "the public idiom": "*the language employed will thus be the newspaper's own version of the language of the public to whom it is principally addressed: its version of the rhetoric, imagery and underlying common stock of knowledge which it assumes its audience shares and which thus forms the basis of the reciprocity of producer/reader*" (p.345). Consequently, even though reporting styles and audiences vary from newspaper to newspaper, the pluralistic range of voices is still limited within shared conceptual maps embodying "the public idiom".

Applying Hall's media representation to his study of ideology and the press, [7] asserts that journalists have to use language and styles that can be interpreted meaningfully by the audience, thus "an ideology which is already embodied in the language (p.46)" is reproduced in the media text. Fowler further argues "thus, values which has already exist – ideas

about sex, about patriotism, about class, hierarchy, money, leisure, family life, and so on – are reproduced in this discursive interaction between the newspaper text and the reader (p.47)"

B. News as Discourse

In critical discourse analysis, news is not only the way a journalist represents a fact to a reader, but it is also the process of selecting and emphasizing some information and sharing a communal belief or perception within a social group.

Not everyone has an equal opportunity to produce discourse; people who control message production in the media have power over the discourse. In Western societies, [8] notes that white groups dominate ethnic minorities, but it is a symbolic discrimination which is hardly perceived. He argues minority groups are systematically denied rights to access to both material and cultural resources and equal opportunity in housing, jobs, and public welfare in indirect and subtle ways. Moreover, he asserts that the news media do not passively explain the details of the present ethnic situation in society, but their role is more active. He says the processes of news production involve more than just choosing and summarizing important events. On the contrary, [8] posits that white journalists also share the same belief as the dominant ethnic group and unconsciously express their values in the news.

Mass media are the venue where meanings are circulating. In the coverage of minorities, many words and sentences are used to construct and reproduce representation of certain racial groups.

C. Minorities in the News

Research on media and minorities suggests that the portrayal of minorities in the media is usually imbued with stereotypes and myths. This kind of constructed reality is utilized by dominant groups for discriminating against and controlling minorities. Sometimes, it helps legitimize exploitation of minorities for the benefits of dominant groups. The coverage of minorities, even from different countries with minority groups, shares similar themes such as 'minorities cause problems,' 'they are a threat to the nation, thus we need to control them,' and 'unlike us, they are inferior culturally.' While in the past racism was obvious, today it is more subtle and the media play an important role in perpetuating it.

[9] articulates in his study of racism in Australian media that "the media are not separate from society, but closely implicated in its core relationship of race and ethnic groups" (p.7). As a result, the media, even in a liberal democratic society, create public discourse to serve the interests of dominant groups including political, corporate and social elites. [10] posits that the media tend to give little attention to ethnic minorities. In his qualitative content analysis of the newspaper coverage, he asserts that those newspapers reflected the rights of Anglo settlers who committed crimes against property, while putting Aborigines beyond the protection of law.

In the U.S news media, [11] argue that Black, Native Americans, Asians, and Latinos are not treated as people in the mainstream society; thus, they were ignored, but if they are covered, stereotypes will be attached to them such as a Black mammy, an Indian maiden, a Latin lover, or sinister

Asian warlord. They are perceived as posing a threat to society. In the U.K., [12] in her case study of the coverage by British media of the 1958 disturbance, she posits that when white gangs attacked black people in Nottingham and Nottingham Hill, the coverage in British media, especially the newspapers, was sensational, insensitive and prejudiced. Hence, it was easy for readers to get the impression that it was Black people who were rioting, whereas it was actually the Whites.

Similarly, [13] studied how Israeli news media covered marginalized people and found that social groups that share social-political closeness to the center of power are those that are also close to reporters and editors. Because of minority groups' geographical, cultural, political and economic distance from the center of power, journalists may lack information about the groups, stereotypes to portray the groups as a threat. [13] argues that it is more difficult for the less powerful group to go beyond journalist's tendency to cover them from a "law and order" perspective.

Even though scholars have paid attention on how minorities were depicted in the media, much research on minority groups and the media were done in the context of western culture or the global north. Examining the portrayal of Malay Muslims in Thai media might yield an insightful discovery which fits more with Thai contexts.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This section is divided into three parts. The first part provides information on data collection. It also gives backgrounds for the two chosen newspapers, which are *Thai Rath* and *Matichon*. The second part explains how to do sampling. The third part shows how the methodology, which is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is applied with the data.

A. Data Collection

This study analyzed two Thai-language newspapers: *Thai Rath* (a mass-circulation, tabloid style newspaper) and *Matichon* (a "quality" newspaper). *Thai Rath* is the highest circulation newspaper in Thailand. It has a countrywide distribution network, thus it can reach more Thai readers than any other Thai newspaper [14]. The coverage of *Thai Rath* is characterized by "yellow journalism," while *Matichon* was known as a newspaper that was full of political coverage. These two newspapers are on the opposite sides of the continuum of the Thai language press, and will give a fuller picture of the portrayal of Muslims in the south of Thailand.

The time period of this study is the year 2004. The tension between the Thai government and Muslim separatists has existed for more than a hundred years, but the year 2004 marked a new height in violence [15].

B. Sample

News stories only appearing on the front page of these newspapers in the year 2004 was analyzed. Only stories with 300 words and longer were included. This sampling excludes columns, scoops or news analysis about the conflict appearing on the front page. *Thai Rath's* news stories were photocopied at the newspaper's library. There are 339 news stories about conflicts in the south of Thailand on the front page of this year. This was reduced to 60 stories using random sampling.

In the case of *Matichon*, it has digital resources. CD-ROMs

that contain front-page news stories for 2004 were obtained from the paper's library. There were 323 news stories appearing on the front page that were about the conflict in the south. 60 stories were selected for analysis using random sampling. Consequently, there were total 120 news stories for the analysis.

C. Data Analysis Procedure

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was chosen as the methodology for analysis because this method can be applied to any kind of language use in order to "demystify ideologies and power through the systematic investigation of semiotic data, be they written, spoken or verbal" [16]. Consequently, in this research, the language used in the news stories sampled from *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* was analyzed.

We created a code sheet to help me assess the news stories. In the code sheet, there are two main categories: language used to describe the Muslims in the south of Thailand; and sources in coverage of the Muslims in *Thai Rath* and *Matichon*.

Characteristics: This category analyzes how Muslims are described or characterized in each story. [17] says that "the local structures" in news stories may also contribute to depictions. He further explains, "the choice of words used to denote such groups may especially signal journalistic as well as public attitudes about news actors and events" [17]. The local structure is dealing with certain kinds of language such as adjectives, verbs or phrases in the text. We examined the language used to talk about Muslims in the south of Thailand.

Sources: In this category, sources appearing in the stories are coded under the following categories: Thai government officials, non-ruling party officials/politicians. Muslims in the south, Thai Buddhists in the south, experts (university professor and scholars), journalists, representatives of foreign organizations (such as UN, Human Rights Watch), foreign governments and foreign news organization (such as AP and AFP).

After we finished coding the data, an analyzing process started. We, then, described, classified and interpreted. In the describing process, [18] suggests, the researcher "describe in detail, develop themes or dimensions through some classification system, and provide an interpretation in light of their own views or views of perspective in literature" (p. 144). Besides interpretations, we compared and contrasted the results from the two newspapers.

V. FINDINGS

This section explains the main topics discovered through analysis of news stories about Muslims in the south of Thailand found in *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* newspapers in 2004. Analysis revealed that coverage of Muslims can be categorized under five main topics and several subtopics. The main topics are:

1. Southern bandits
2. Por Noh and Islamic private schools
3. Brainwashed Muslim teenagers
4. Law and Order
5. Muslims in the south

This paper focuses on the portrayal of "southern bandits,"

thus this theme and its sub theme will be discussed below.

The 'Southern Bandits' Pose a Threat to the Region

Among groups of Muslims in the south of Thailand, southern bandits or in Thai, *jone tai* (in Thai language, *jone* means bandits and *tai* means the south) were presented as the biggest cause of the troubles. Their activities were covered almost every day in front-page news stories in 2004. While their cruelty was emphasized, their political agenda and the historical contexts that underlie the Muslim discontent were hardly discussed.

This main topic category is supported by 4 subtopics, including southern militants are labeled as "*jone tai*" the southern bandits; Muslim militants try to create a conflict between Buddhist and Muslim people in the region; Muslim militants are creating unrest in the south.

A. "*Jone Tai*," *The Southern Bandits*

The word *jone* or *jone tai* is a term widely used in the coverage to describe the Muslim separatist groups in the south of Thailand. It constantly appeared in the coverage of *Thai Rath*. Examples of phrases related to the *jone* that appeared in *Thai Rath*: 'a group of bandits' [19], 'Mojahedin bandits' [19], 'a gang of cruel bandits' [20], 'dreadful bandits' [21]. As these examples show, the word bandit is usually associated with negative words or phrases such as 'cruel,' 'dreadful,' 'terrorist,' and 'who has caused unrest.' This suggests that they employ violence and cause problems for Thailand. Moreover, some are associated with names of terrorist groups such as '*Bursatu*' and '*Mojahedin*.'

In the coverage of *Matichon*, the word 'southern bandits' or '*jone tai*' was used less frequently although it was also found in the headlines and news stories. For example, the separatists are called: 'terrorist bandits' [22], 'a group of bandits' [23]. The term 'bandits' suggests the Muslim separatists aim to take or steal something from the Thai people, that they are simply thieves. Labeling them thieves eliminates the political dimensions of the conflict: they are simply 'bad and threatening.' It ignores the historical and political context between the government and the separatists.

B. *Creating a Conflict between Buddhists and Muslims*

The three provinces in the south are Muslim-dominated regions; Buddhists living there are in the minority. Coverage in both *Thai Rath* and *Matichon* suggests that the 'southern bandits' are the only source of conflict between the two racial groups. In the news stories, this topic is mostly addressed by government sources, while the Muslims in the region are rarely the sources in the coverage.

In *Thai Rath*, a deputy prime minister says "it is an effort by a group of people who wants to create a conflict between the Buddhist and Muslim" [24], while the minister of interior is quoted saying, "These people cause a conflict between the Buddhists and Muslims, but fortunately, both Buddhists and Muslims in those areas have been patient enough with the situation" [25]. These examples suggest that there was no conflict between Buddhists and Muslims before but somebody has been trying to create one. It suggests that the Muslim militants are posing a threat to the Buddhists in these provinces. This kind of discourse was also regularly found the coverage by *Matichon*. For example, the deputy prime

minister is quoted saying, "a group of people is trying to create a conflict. For example, they created a situation that seems like Buddhist people are a target of this violence, but the Muslims are fine" [26]. These examples suggest that Muslim insurgents in the south are culprits, while policies initiated by the Bangkok government since the twentieth century that have contributed to the resistance of the minority and conflicts between the central Thai authorities and local Muslims are rarely addressed.

Interestingly, the voice of ordinary people was not included even though they are portrayed as the perpetrators of the violence.

C. *Creating Unrest in the South*

Another topic in this category that constantly appeared is that the militants are aiming to create turbulence in the south. The words 'unrest,' 'turmoil' and 'turbulence' were regularly used to describe the separatists' goals. This topic was mostly articulated by government sources. For example in *Thai Rath*, the minister of education is quoted saying "people who want to generate turmoil have created events in many ways" [27]. Reports noted that "terrorist bandits are spurring turmoil relentlessly" [28]. "They create *unrest*" and "They create *turmoil*" suggest all the actions taken by Muslims are threatening to the country's stability.

Matichon employed similar language: "the military security systems are weak, thus bandits created turbulence in Yala... after southern bandits were killed by the army, they are angry and plan to gather again to create unrest" [29]. This suggests that the military needs more control over the region, even though that could actually affect the everyday life of ordinary Muslims, creating turmoil for them. But like *Thai Rath*, *Matichon* suggests Muslim militants cause all the unrest in the region. An article notes "bandits hiding themselves in Songkla province are planning to commit an atrocity or create unrest in the region" [26].

These examples suggest that the Muslims are uniformly blamed even for actions that are hypothetical. As a result, the government has to keep the Muslims obedient to the Bangkok government.

The coverage neglects to explore why Muslim militants might create unrest. The efforts of Muslims in the south to negotiate peacefully in the past are not mentioned. The Muslims and militants themselves are rarely used as sources.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research examined the portrayal "southern bandits" in the south of Thailand in two Thai language newspapers. For the most part, the two newspapers shared the same discourses about the militant groups even though their positions in the newspaper market are at the opposite ends (one is sensational and the other is serious). This means that despite their differences, the two newspapers operate under the same culture shared by the majority of Thai people or as [30] posits they share the same overall "conceptual maps" for talking about Thailand. These shared concepts may be expressed through different forms of language: formal and serious in *Matichon* and sensational in *Thai Rath*. This also supports Hall et al (1978) argument on media representation that even though each newspaper has its own writing styles and formats, inevitably, it is operated under "the public idiom" that is

constituted by “common stock of knowledge which it assumes its audience shares and which thus forms the basis of the reciprocity of producer/reader” (p.345). Accordingly, ideology rooted in Thai culture is reproduced in the two newspapers when depicting “southern bandits.”

In the news coverage, the Muslim militants or *Jone Tai* are portrayed as a threat to the region’s stability, thus violence employed by the government to do away with ‘these trouble makers’ is legitimate. Calling the militant “southern bandits” suggests that they are just the culprit of the violence: they are only a trouble makers. This kind of word choice helps obscure the fact that violence in the south is deep-rooted and is the result of the formation of Thai nation state. Other aspects of the causes of the violence such as their grievances, poverty are downplayed or even omitted in the news stories examined.

Furthermore, the discourse of “southern bandits” helps legitimize the emergency decree declared by the Thai government and the military operation: they are “bandits,” thus they have to be cracked down and this will bring back normalcy to the country. However, historical contexts on the militant groups or their political agenda were not mentioned. This sort of discourse upholds legitimacy of the authorities in imposing ‘law and order’ to stabilize the region.

Through the lens of cultural studies, Thai nation state and Thainess are socially constructed, yet dynamic. Thus, as a cultural site where ‘shared meanings’ are circulated, Thai news media and journalists are challenged to go beyond the taken-for-granted worldviews about relations between the Muslim minority and the Thai state. The case of “southern bandits” shows that “the public idiom” of when talking about the insurgents is still limited to a certain discourse which upholds the use of military operation in solving the conflicts. The Muslim region and its people (both Muslims and Buddhists) have encountered chronic violence for several years and it is obvious that the existing cultural maps on the homogeneous and centralized Thai nation-state are not efficient to solve the minority conflicts in the 21st century. Consequently, alternative viewpoints such as going toward multi-culturalism and a wide range of possibilities in dealing with the conflict other than using ‘law and order,’ should be generated by Thai media and perhaps, this could be an impetus for having the imagined community redefined.

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