

### Chapter III

#### Thailand's Mons

There is no official record of how many Mons live in Thailand today since they are all Thai citizens and are not legally distinguished from Thais in any way. Since much assimilation has occurred, it would be difficult to decide who is Mon and who is not. In the old days, Mon identities, both socio-cultural and professional, were much more marked than today since the Mons developed their own cultural traditions, belief system and occupational skills through interaction with traders and missionaries from outside their Kingdom, earlier than their Thai neighbours. Historic rivalry between the Mons and the Burmans has led exoduses of Mon refugees into ancient Siam (Thailand). The Siamese regarded the Mons as allies in their continuing wars with the Burmese, and entrusted them with positions of authority and special rank. At present, for the sake of practicality, virtually all Mons would identify themselves as Thai, but if one could count those who claim a strong cultural sense of being Mon the number would probably not exceed 100,000. If one restricted the count to those who speak Mon fluently, the number would be much smaller; if one counted everyone with some level of Mon ancestry, the number would be many times larger.

Brian L. Foster in his research on Mon communities , carried out in 1973 , revealed that most of the main Mon settlements at the time were near Bangkok. The largest extended along both banks of the Chao Phya River from Pakret district, which is in today's Nonthaburi province , to the border of Ayudhaya province. The second largest group was probably that in Ratchaburi province along the Mae Klong River in the Ban Pong and Photharam districts. The best known group is no doubt that at Prapradaeng, or Paklat, just south of Bangkok, well known for its colourful Songkran festival, which attracts many tourists every year. Other major groups were found in Samut Sakhorn, Lopburi, and Uthaithani. Smaller groups were found in many locations, including the provinces of Samut Songkhram, Phetburi, Chachoengsao, Ayuthya, Khorat, Lampang, Lamphun, and elsewhere. Many Mons were noted as having moved to Bangkok, but no major settlements exist within the city.

My field survey on Mon socio-cultural boundaries and self-ascription , carried out in 1994 , reveals that most of the Mon socio-cultural boundaries that prevailed two decades ago have become less distinct. Mon communities in general have held fast to the traditions of their people in Myanmar virtually all of which are related to Mon-style Buddhism. One of the most spectacular and distinctive of these traditions is the funeral ceremony of venerable Mon monks. Self-

ascription, the meaning of an individual's being Mon, varies from place to place. Mon people in Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi provinces, for example, describe themselves as Phya Ram's descendants and strongly adhere to Mon Buddhist values and tradition; Mon-ness is usually associated with a state of being a good Buddhist and loyal to "Muang Mon", the Mon State in Myanmar. The Mon temple or Wat is recognized as being a center for the preservation of Mon religious and cultural activities. Mons can distinguish their own temples from Thai temples by looking for the Saw Hong; a large pole with a swan on top, as a symbol of Mon-ness. The Mons in Ratchaburi province form the largest Mon concentration in Thailand and still maintain well-defined Mon cultural boundaries. Mon youths at Ko Kret and some in Pathumtani province are said to be most politically active in their contribution to their homeland. Of those residing at Prapadaeng, many are known to be wealthy and well educated but their present-generation offsprings educated in official Thai schools, seem to be unwilling to identify themselves with the label "Mon", but do not deny their ancestral lineage.

In respect of Mon socio-cultural boundaries, it is widely recognized that among other ethno-linguistic components, the Mon language has declined and that bustling urban life as well as modern surroundings have robbed Mon communities around Bangkok of the



colorful traditional atmosphere which characterizes their up-country counterparts. Thailand's modernization process is argued to be a significant factor eroding the strength of Mon socio-cultural boundaries across Thailand. For example, soaring land prices, a consequence of Bangkok's rapid urban expansion into surrounding provinces, has induced a number of Mon villages in Nonthaburi and Pathumtani provinces to move and eventually become dispersed. The eroding Mon cultural boundaries observed at Prapadaeng are traceable to rapid urbanization that has promoted assimilation and intermarriage between the Thai and the Mon as well as between the Mon and the Chinese. Even more significant are state policies such as compulsory education which is centered upon the Thai language and has contributed to the erosion of the Mon language. Another example is the adverse impacts of the Government policy on industrial development and relocation; transfer of industrial plants from Bangkok in an attempt to reduce pollution problems in the capital consequent to Thailand economic take off in the 70s; which has corroded the strength of the Mon socio-cultural boundary at Prapadaeng.

Given the disintegrative impact of Thailand's modernization upon Thailand's Mon communities, leading to the inadequate state of linguistic unity, most of the new generation of Thailand's Mon, educated in state run schools, no longer speak the Mon

language in the same way as their parents. The culture and language of ethnic minority children is neither taught nor recognised as an additional skill. However, the Mon language still plays a significant role within their own community life, especially at markets in Ratchaburi. Even at provincial schools supervised by the Central authority, the Mon language is spoken within the private sphere of communication and raises no serious problems even when it co-exists with the official language. Accent unity is another undeniable obstacle the Mon nationalists are facing in the area of mass communication. It is quite evident that the group of Mon nationalists, who were born and reside in Thailand and were educated in the Thai language at Thai-run schools, whilst still remaining very conscious of their ethnic Mon values and identities through family socialization, can barely understand the language spoken by their Burmese Mon nationalist counterparts who speak with their own, home-town based accents.

According to my field survey, Thailand's Mons in general exhibit little more than a sentimental tie with the Mon homeland, whereas Myanmar's Mons, a group of Mon refugee-warriors, in particular have harboured a strong sense of ethnic nationalism. With the exception of some of those Thai Mons who have been closely involved with the New Mon State Party, most Mons are found to nurture what

should be classified as a sense of remotely euphoric , rather than strong ethnic Mon nationalism accounted for by their working actively in conjunction with the existing Mon organizations , such as the Thai Raman Association and the Mon Youth Association for Mon cultural revival programme.



ศูนย์วิทยทรัพยากร  
จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย