

Muslim Face-veiling in the *Da'wa* Movement — Mae Sot as Living Space

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Abstract

Situated on the Thai-Myanmar border, Mae Sot has a distinctive demographic mix. It is estimated that it hosts ten times more Burmese Muslims than Thai Muslims. Most Burmese Muslims trace their origins to Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, so it seems natural that the *da'wa* movement which started in India entered Thailand through Mae Sot. In *da'wa* activities, most women cover their faces. Covering the face not only displays strict observance of Islam, but has additional peculiar effects for the women who do so. In everyday face-to-face communication, the importance of facial expression is often noted in the phenomenological context, or by philosophers such as Emmanuel Lévinas who has written deeply on the power of face presentation in relation to ethics. In these respects, covering the face changes everyday life drastically. This chapter uses the practice of veiling, especially the full covering of the face, by Muslim women to illustrate the transforming situation in Mae Sot as a living space of various peoples.

Key words: Veiling, Muslim women, *Da'wa* movement, Thai, Burmese

1 Introduction

Veiling is a popular topic concerning Muslim women. It is studied from various perspectives: religious symbolic studies, social women's status, gender studies, semiotic hermeneutics, and so on. Okawa pointed out two streams of controversy (Okawa 2000: 188). One is the Islamist position which covers the relationship between veiling and religious influence. These studies emphasize the symbolic and political meaning of veiling. Another is psychological analysis which focuses on women's attitudes in modernized societies. Veiling is also studied in relation

to other social phenomena such as class and politics.

This chapter examines the veiling, especially the full covering of the face, by Muslim women in Mae Sot. However the main purpose is not to investigate the veiling phenomena itself, but to describe the transforming situation of Mae Sot as a living space of various kinds of people through analyzing women who decide to cover their faces.

Covering the face not only displays strict observance of Islam, but also has additional peculiar effects for the veiled women. In everyday face-to-face communication, the importance of facial expression is often noted in the phenomenological context (cf. Sugawara 2013), or by philosophers such as Emmanuel Lévinas who relate face presentation strongly with ethics. In these respects, covering the face changes everyday life drastically.

In the next section, I will describe the town of Mae Sot and the *da'wa* movement, in which many women involved decide to cover their faces.

2 Outline of the *Da'wa* Movement in Mae Sot

2.1 Mae Sot town

Situated on the Thai-Myanmar border, Mae Sot has a distinctive demographic mix. Comprising some 4.8% of the town's population (63,439) are 3,036 Thai Muslims, according to the Mae Sot Municipal Administration Office (the data publication 'Population of Mosque in Mae Sot' records 3,066 in 2013). There is no official data on the Burmese Muslim population, but some NGO research shows 8,461 Burmese Muslims living in the Islam District, where the population is mostly Muslim (Mae Sot Zakat Organization for Occupation and Education, 2013). It is also reported to have 20,000 to 30,000 Burmese Muslims living there illegally. Residents of the town also say that there are ten times more Burmese Muslims than Thai Muslims. Most Burmese Muslims trace their origins to Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. So it seems natural that the *da'wa* movement which started in India entered Thailand through Mae Sot.

2.2 Outline of the *Da'wa* Movement

In Thailand, the most popular *da'wa* movement is Tablighi Jama'at¹. In fact, this chapter describes the activities of Tablighi Jama'at at the local level. However, I use the term '*da'wa*' instead; the word the villagers use when referring to such activities.

In Arabic, '*da'wa*' literally means 'to call' and can connote any of the following: an invitation to a meal, a prayer, an invocation, a vow, an appeal, a claim, or a lawsuit. The verb '*da'a*' usually means to 'call on', or 'pray' if the call is addressed to God. 'Tablighi' is the root verbal form of '*tabligh*', which connotes the following meanings: to reach one's destination, to arrive, to achieve one's objective, to come to hear, or to come of age. In modern Urdu usage '*tabligh*' by itself has acquired the meaning of 'mission' or 'to proselytize'. However, probably to avoid this particular sense of *tabligh* and *da'wa*, the Tablighi Jama'at has defined *tabligh* without reference to conversion (Masud 2000: xx–xxi). Rather than literally "calling others toward one's religion", the avowed purpose of the Tablighi Jama'at is to bring about spiritual revival among Muslims themselves. Tablighi Jama'at calls Muslims back to Islam through regular practice modeled upon the life of Prophet Mohammed (Preeda 2001: 110)².

Now let's consider what is known about the origins of Tablighi Jama'at. While there is some controversy about when Tablighi Jama'at actually began its work, most researchers agree that the founder Mawlana³ Llyas began his activities in the mid 1920s. Some report that Mawlana Llyas began Tablighi in Mewat to the south of Delhi in Central India, some time after his return from Hajj in 1926 (Masud 2000: 9). Throughout its history, the South Asian Muslim community has remained conscious of its minority status. Living on the periphery of the Muslim world and fear of absorption into the local Hindu majority has made the community sensitive about its separate religious identity. This sensitivity was heightened with the advent of modernity and the arrival of Christian missions under British rule. When Muslims began converting to Hinduism and Christianity it was feared that modernity was corrupting the faith. It is quite common

to describe Mewatis as Muslim in name only. Often, Mewatis are described as nominally Muslim or even, under influence of local Hindu tradition, ‘regionally Islamic’. But Muslim Mewatis continue to remain ethnically distinct from Hindus (Masud 2000: xxxvii).

The historical headquarters of the Tablighi Jama’at is at Nizamud Din in Delhi, India. The movement currently operates in more than eighty countries (Masud 2000: vii). The movement’s annual gatherings in many countries are generally well-attended. The largest congregation occurs in Raiwind, just outside Lahore in Pakistan. It may accommodate over a million people under makeshift arrangements at any one time (Azmi 2000: 239). In effect, “The Raiwind International Conference of the Tablighi Jama’at has become the second-largest congregation of the Muslim world after the Hajj” (Masud 2000:vi) (Ahmad 1991: 510). At the same time, the importance of Raiwind in Pakistan as a decision-making center is said to be growing (Gaborieau 2000: 130).

3 Current Status of *Da’wa* in Mae Sot

3.1 The *Da’wa* Movement in Thailand

The *da’wa* movement is reputed to have been spreading through the country since the 1980s (Preeda 2001:110). The introduction of Tablighi Jama’at around 40 years ago is usually attributed to Haji Yusuf Kan, a resident of Mae Sot (Sawani 1988: 239, Ogawa 2012: 316). He is said to have been of Indian Muslim origin. He died in 2000. In August and September 2007, during research in Muslim communities in Chiang Mai, I discovered that Tablighi Jama’at had spread earlier into Northern Thailand than other areas, including Southern Thailand, where the majority of Thai Muslims live. Many Muslims in Chiang Mai knew Haji Yusuf Kan personally and informed me that twenty to thirty years ago most Muslims in the local communities were attending Tablighi activities. As mentioned previously, there are presently two main Tablighi Jama’at centers in Bangkok (Minburi) and Yala (established less than thirty years ago.)

When I interviewed Bai⁴ T, a man of Indian origin who was living in the

Chang Klang community of Chiang Mai in 2007, he told me that when he was twenty-two years old he first encountered Tablighi Jama'at members of Indian origin who had come from South Africa. They kept to themselves at Chang Klang mosque and did not try to teach or persuade others. After that, other groups came from Sri Lanka. In those days Haji Yusuf had influence (*ithiphon*) and propagated Tablighi Jama'at all over Northern Thailand. Bai T told me that Haji Yusuf's son had become addicted to drugs, but when he returned after four months traveling in a *tabligh* group, he had become a good Muslim. This transformation so impressed Haji Yusuf that he mobilized many Muslims in Northern Thailand to spread Tablighi Jama'at⁵.

Initially, the movement spread among ethnic Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian Muslims in the city. It later spread into villages. Still today, the *tablighi* movement uses peculiar words (of Urdu origin) in referring to their activities, organization, and institutions. Their distinctive style of dress, such as long robes, also follows South Asian Muslim style, and is different from that worn by local Muslims in Thailand. Villagers can recognize *tablighi* adherents when they see them walking in these robes.

Mae Sot is the entry point of the *da'wa* movement into Thailand, situated on the border between the South Asian and Southeast Asian worlds. Mae Sot retains ethnic complexity as a result of its historical role as a border town.

3.2 Introduction of the *Da'wa* Movement into Mae Sot

In 2012 August, I visited Mae Sot to verify and expand on the information I had learned from Bai T. I was able to meet several informants who had participated in the initial period of the *da'wa* movement in Thailand, and many descendants of the first-generation participants. Having occurred only forty years previously, the events were still in living memory. I discovered that Haji Yusuf had some *da'wa* precursors. In Mae Sot, informants said that the first persons to introduce *da'wa* were in fact Nana Suai and Tongasuk.

Nana Suai was born to an Indian Muslim father and Thai mother who had

converted from Buddhism to Islam in 1908. His father was a doctor in India during the colonial period.

Nana Suai spoke Urdu fluently but could not speak Thai very well. He started his *da'wa* with Tongsuk who, born in 1934, was a much younger man. As with Nana Suai, Tongsuk's father was also an Indian Muslim and his Thai mother had also converted to Islam. His father, however, was a businessman. Tongsuk could speak Burmese as well as Thai. He was interested in language, so he learned Burmese at a temple near his house. Of these two men who went around northern Thailand preaching Islam, their descendants remarked that they were not so rich but had plenty of kindness.

Tongsuk recorded in his diary that the first day he went on *da'wa* was 4th February, 1970⁶. Tongsuk diligently noted important days in his diary, which his daughter showed me. In the volume containing the entry recording the beginning of *da'wa*, he wrote on the cover: "Tongsuk's best one, there is no book better than this." In another volume, Tongsuk recorded the first overseas *da'wa* to Bangladesh in 1979. According to an informant, Haji Yusuf would only begin to explore *da'wa* 10 years later.

3.3 Opinion of the *Da'wa* Movement in Mae Sot

In Mae Sot some feel positively and others negatively about the *da'wa* movement. While it is said that more than 90% of Muslims in Mae Sot have been on *da'wa*, not everyone is an enthusiastic or even willing participant. One Mae Sot Muslim reckoned an even split between those who think *da'wa* is a good thing and those who do not.

One enthusiast said, "*Da'wa* teaches us to practice good things and avoid bad things." Another said, "The purpose of *da'wa* is personal practice. It is more about practice than about speaking".

One of the characteristic tenets of Tablighi Jama'at is that travel is the most effective means of personal reform. In previous research in Chiang Mai, one Muslim who used to go out on *da'wa* told me, "When I was out on *da'wa*, I felt

that I touched the truth.” When on *da'wa*, adherents are cut off from their ordinary lives and are absorbed only in religious activities. They stay in a mosque and contemplate the afterlife and other religious matters. They say that *da'wa* is a means of personal transformation.

This is what Afmad takes to be the secret of Jama'at's success:

“The core of its methodology is to isolate individuals from their familial, occupational, and geographical environment for a period of time, form them into a micro-community or group, and as a result of the group's inner dynamics and exclusive internal network processes, organize a system of religious learning and other devotional activities (Afmad 1991: 515).”

When adherents go out on *da'wa*, they travel in a group of at least ten persons. They stay three days at one mosque and then move to another. Whether the duration of the retreat is three days, 40 days, or four months, the pattern is basically the same. *da'wa* enthusiasts say that seclusion from their daily lives reminds them of Islamic teaching and practice, and that these activities thus transform them. This same seclusion evokes anti-*da'wa* sentiment.

The grandson of Nana Suai, Suchat (fifty-eight years old), and his wife, Sutra (fifty-seven years old), are now anti-*da'wa*. Sutra told me Nana Suai used to go out for *da'wa* only after planting and harvesting rice. That is, after securing food for his family. In contrast, present day *da'wa* participants abandon spouses and children, leaving them hungry, saying that Allah will help them. Nana Suai's son's wife also criticized *da'wa* as it is practiced today. Whereas Nana Suai went out for teaching only after ensuring that his family would not have difficulties, she said, recent *da'wa* participants are largely from younger generations and tend to neglect their families to follow their own pursuits. *da'wa* participants have an ethnic bias. The present majority are Burmese Muslims. One Burmese Muslim teaching Islam to Burmese children told me that many Burmese Muslims came to Mae Sot for the *da'wa* movement. He said 95% of Burmese Muslims attend *da'wa* activities (Interviewed on 27th December 2013).

4 Women Face-covering in the *Da'wa* Movement

Da'wa provides occasion for Muslim women in Mae Sot to commune with each other through religious activities. *Talim* is the *da'wa* practice of holding gatherings at a home for studying Islam. Most *talim* attendees - both Thai and Burmese – publicly practice face covering with black veils.

4.1 *Talim* – women studying Islam in Burmese and Thai

Talim was started ten years ago in Mae Sot by a woman called Nani (who I refer to later). Four years ago they began to take turns to hold *talim* every two months in rotation among four houses. Meetings are held every Friday in Burmese and every Sunday in Thai. I attended *talim* in Burmese for the first time in August 2012. Among twenty-three participants, only three could speak Thai. Most wore black veils daily in public, which cover the whole body including the face. Sitting in the small crowded room, they removed their veils and showed their faces. After reading a chapter of the *Quran*, Maorana (a male intellectual) delivered a lecture through a curtain. During the talk the light in the women's space was turned off. In this dark congested space full of women I felt hot and sleepy. After the lecture the light was turned on again. Finally, tea and Burmese snacks were served. The gathering began at two o'clock and finished at 3:50. The all-female chador-wearing participants covered their faces again before going outside.

In December 2013 I had the chance to attend *talim* in Thai. Among twelve participants, four were Burmese. I also attended another *talim* in Burmese in 2013. There were twenty-six participants, with only one Thai and the rest Burmese. I felt that the Burmese were more active with their *talim* than the Thais were with theirs. For instance, attendance was higher at Burmese *talim*. Furthermore, the Burmese held lively chats with sweets after the lectures formally concluded, something the Thais did not.

Nevertheless, It seemed as if the *talim* participants, by covering their faces, were hiding themselves from the secular world and maintaining a sacred space inside their veils, where they were there ordained as nuns, instead of in a temple.

4.2 Motives/reasons for covering the face

Abu-Lughod pointed out that veiling is both voluntary and situational (Abu-Lughod 1986: 159). Women in Mae Sot are not forced to veil. Each woman decides independently whether to cover her face. However, motivation is strongest when attending *da'wa*, where most women participants cover their faces.

When they on *da'wa*, women must go with their husbands, or men they can not marry, like their sons or their brothers. These journeys are called '*masturo*'. *Masturo* participants must be in a man-woman pair: four pairs, five pairs, and so on.

During *da'wa*, women and men do not mix even if husband and wife; they have to stay separately. Men usually stay at the village or town mosque, and women stay at another Muslim house nearby. If women on *da'wa* stay at a house, the men of the house have to stay elsewhere; women may stay only with women.

I attended a lecture on *da'wa* given by a male Islamic intellectual on 24 December 2013 while a *masturo* group including four pairs from Burma stayed at a Muslim house in Mae Sot. Women attendees staying in the house numbered around fifty-five. Most covered their faces outside but unveiled them inside the house.

After the lecture the women discussed their experiences. They talked about religion and the value of women in the religion. Some felt strong emotional ties with other *da'wa* attendants and began to cry when they left.

Some said that women are like diamonds, to be kept in the drawer and not shown outside; only husbands should be able to view their wives' faces. The *da'wa* lecture used another metaphor: women are like bananas. If unpeeled, the fruit remains fresh, but once peeled, the fruit soon spoils. So when women go out, they should cover their face (*pit na* - Thai. Literally, close ('*pit*') the face ('*na*').

Many cover their face for the first time during *da'wa* journeys. After returning from *da'wa* they may remove the veil, but the *da'wa* experience seems to bring about a desire to continue emulating women on *da'wa*. Like Saida and

Fatima - who I interviewed during my field work in December 2013 – say, “I have a feeling that I want to cover my face (*mi cai yak pit na*)”. Saida said, “On going *da’wa*, everybody covered their faces except me. After coming back from forty days *da’wa*, I still wanted to cover my face, so I covered.”

Their decisions to cover their faces were adopted organically from women they met during *da’wa*. This is part of a greater life-change from seeking secular interests to living in religious peacefulness. Of course, if other family members do not share the same thinking, this drastic change sometimes attracts opposition.

Saida (thirty-eight years old) is a Thai Muslim woman who attends *da’wa* enthusiastically with her husband. I met her at *talim* in Thai. She usually wears a black veil in public, which covers the face except the eyes. She and her husband were working in Bangkok when they began *da’wa*. Her husband was initially invited by his friends to attend *da’wa* meetings, and he gradually became more involved and enthusiastic. He then brought in Saida. They claim that becoming more involved with *da’wa* has led to calm and happiness. Eventually, her husband resigned from his air force job and Saida also resigned from her job at an IT company. They returned home to Mae Sot in 2003 when Saida was twenty-eight years old.

When Saida returned to her parents’ home with a veiled face, her mother did not permit her to enter the house. Her father did not greet Saida, he said, because he could not recognize his daughter. They said their daughter was now too religious. It took more than one year for Saida’s parents to accept their daughter’s decision to cover her face.

Fatima (twenty-eight years old) is Burmese Muslim. She moved to Mae Sot with her parents and seven brothers fifteen years ago. As she speaks Thai fluently, she translated Burmese to Thai for me at the Burmese *talim* in 2012. I met her at Nani’s house. She helped to prepare the morning service of drinks and sweets for children. On the second visit to Mae Sot in 2013, I found her living with her ten year old son. She had married twice by that time. When she was fifteen, her

parents made her marry a twenty year old Burmese Muslim man. She disliked him and ran away to Bangkok to stay with her relatives. Her parents eventually persuaded her that he was a good man, and to reunite. They lived in Bangkok with her father's younger brother and she soon became pregnant. When she was seven months pregnant, her husband died in a traffic accident.

She returned to Mae Sot and married again when her son was one and a half years old. Her second husband was forty-five years old, much older than her twenty-two years, and already had a wife but no children. He said that her child was piteous without a father, and that he would like to take the role of father to her son. He was Muslim but his first wife was Buddhist. He came to ask Fatima and her parents for marriage three times. They turned down his proposal twice, but on his third attempt Fatima decided to marry him because she wanted her son to have a father. Fatima's second husband sold *roti* at Ko Samui in Southern Thailand with his first wife. He often came back to Mae Sot, where his parents lived, to generously give her one hundred Baht per day. But after marriage she discovered that her new husband had a quick temper and hit her and her son. Sometimes he throttled her to the point where she could not eat anything. He also whipped her son with electric cords. She told me that she could endure her mistreatment, but not the violence towards her son. Her son once said, 'I will revenge mammy. I will stab him with a knife.' He hated his step father. She eventually divorced two years ago, after seven miserable years of married life in which she was hit every day her husband stayed in Mae Sot.

She went on her first *da'wa* four years ago, while still in her second marriage. Her son warned, 'Mammy, you had better not to go to mosque, or father will hit you again'. On *da'wa*, she was surprised at how everybody helped each other and displayed love for each other. She said, "They share food by eating from the same plate with their hands. Though we are not brothers and sisters, we helped each other, washing dishes, and sleeping next to each other. Allah is great and Mohammed is great. After three days journey, we cried when we separated even though we are living in the same community [Mae Sot]". When

she later went on *da'wa* with Pakistanis, she was asked why she did not cover her face. The Pakistanis told her, "Every man has his taste; some prefer fair skin, some like dark skin. [If women show their faces] men will desire the women, and this will create problems. The prophet does not like women to show their faces." Fatima is beautiful, though she thinks her skin is rather dark. She decided to continue covering her face even after her *da'wa* excursions ended.

Religious fear of committing sin is the standard reason given for covering the face. Saida explained that she wants to prevent men from bothering her, thus preventing sin from being committed, and earning merit in the next world. Saida summarized, "I can be rewarded in another world, and get safety in this world by covering my face".

Returning to Fatima, she wondered at first if she could persevere with veiling, but soon found that covering her face felt beneficial. When she began veiling, she had not yet divorced. Her husband did not like this and tried to make her give up. She said, "He doesn't fear hell. He doesn't want heaven". Though covering her face may not have led to divorce, it is of note that Fatima's new-found *da'wa* women's network – who similarly practicing face covering – assisted her with food and other basic necessities. Fatima attends every *da'wa* meeting riding a motorcycle borrowed from a friend. Now when her ex-husband returns to Mae Sot, she can avoid him in the street without greeting him. She said, "As I cover my face, I can ignore him".

Apart from going on *da'wa*, the motivation to cover the face can come from growing up in a religious family and following older relatives. Suniya (twenty-three years old) is a beautiful religious teacher, a daughter of a Pakistani father and a Thai Muslim mother. She began *da'wa* with her aunt and her spouse, and has since been on *da'wa* with her brother many times. When she was in the second grade of junior high school she asked her mother for permission to cover her face, hoping to follow her sisters-in-law and other women around her, even though her mother chooses not to veil.

I also met a Burmese girl, sixteen years old, who started covering her face

two years ago. She also went on a *da'wa masturo* and subsequently decided to cover her face like her relatives, including her mother. They moved from Burma six years ago. Her father is a religious teacher who came to Thailand to work on *da'wa* projects.

I asked her father how his daughter would find a husband with her face covered.

He replied, “Don’t worry. The prospective groom can look at her picture. And his mother can come to see the real person and describe her to her son”.

I said, “It is impossible to love each other before marriage, isn’t it?”

He replied, “How can they love each other without meeting? After marriage they can love, like me and my wife. There is no problem”.

4.3 How does the world change after covering the face?

Many women report similar results with face veiling: that their minds become more peaceful (*citcai sangop khun*), that they are happy (*mi khwam suk*), and feel more at ease (*sabai cai*).

Often, they mention their husbands as a change, telling me that he would be more loving than before. Rafmad (forty-two years old) began covering her face nine years ago. She came with her sixteen year old daughter to *talim* in Thai. She married when she was twenty years old, and her mother chose her husband. She said, “Allah put love in him because I differ from other women by covering my face. Other men can’t see my face. I appear beautiful in his sight forever. He told me, ‘You are beautiful’”. Her husband came from Burma to trade and he also goes on *da'wa*.

I heard no disadvantages of face covering from women attending either Thai or Burmese *talim*. But outside *da'wa* groups, I have heard contrasting opinions.

4.4 Criticisms of face covering

There are roughly two bases for criticizing face covering: practicality and reli-

gion.

The practical reason was suggested when an Islamic school principal in Mae Sot told me about trying to persuade an Arabic teacher not to cover her face during class. He believes that it is important to show her mouth when teaching language. Besides, he says, in the classroom there are only children and no chance of influencing adult males. As a precedent, a former English teacher who I met covering her face in public at a *da'wa* meeting said she could not cover her face during her time teaching, but started doing so after retirement.

The religious critique of face covering is common outside *da'wa* groups. Saida's parents believe that covering the face is too strict. The wife of the Imam of Nurun Islam Mosque - the oldest and biggest mosque in Mae Sot - Farida (forty-two years old), is a teacher of Islam. She graduated from Islamic school in Chachensao in central Thailand and taught there for six years. After marriage she and her husband moved to Mae Sot, his home town. She said women need not cover their faces and hands, and that covering is completely voluntary. Another Thai Muslim woman who is critical of face veiling is Halima (seventy years old). She is an active volunteer at hospitals and communities, and commuted every weekend to study Islam in Bangkok for more than twenty years. She is confident that she knows Islam the best in the community. She also said to me that Islam does not order the covering of face and hands, citing the Quran, "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of adornment only that which is apparent and to draw their veils over their bosoms (Quran, *Surah* 24, 31)".

I think that Saida's parents' disapproval has an added rationale. Those who presently practice *da'wa* in Mae Sot are mostly ethnic Burmese, as are the majority of women who cover their face in Mae Sot. This seems to be one of the reasons Saida's parents disapproved of her covered face.

Here, I point out the connection between ethnicity and attitude to *da'wa*: pro-*da'wa* opinion is associated with Burmese, and anti-*da'wa* with Thai. But this alone cannot delineate the boundaries of groups for and against *da'wa*. Some

Thai Muslims are involved in the *da'wa* movement, and a few also practice *da'wa* activities enthusiastically.

5 Remarks in lieu of conclusion - Mae Sot as a Living Space between Thai and Burmese

5.1 Transformation of the *Da'wa* Movement

Imam Suk - Nana Suai's son - told me that to him, *da'wa* means activities to promote knowledge of Islam as a way of life. The purpose of *da'wa* activities in the days of Nana Suai was to contribute to the Islamic community through spreading Islamic knowledge.

Comparatively, the aim of *da'wa* in the present is to obtain personal salvation. As a *da'wa* participant tells me, *da'wa* is a means of self-transformation. Participants are not interested in the present political situation in Thailand. When I did research in December 2013, many Muslims in Mae Sot were watching TV broadcasts of democracy demonstrations in Bangkok all day long. But when I asked *da'wa* enthusiasts what they thought of the political demonstrations, everyone answered that they were not interested, and did not concern themselves with the present political disturbance. The answer was also the same from the women at *talim*, both Thai and Burmese. Their focus is personal salvation and their personal afterlife. For a rewarding afterlife, they try to adhere to Islamic ways as emphasized by *da'wa* teaching in this lifetime: following Prophet Mohammed's example, prescribed ways of eating, prescribed ways of drinking, etc. The character of the *da'wa* movement in Mae Sot has transformed from social Islam-spreading activities, to personal salvation.

Saida's life is a typical example of a present-day *da'wa* transformation. Saida changed her life with her husband, and discarded her high salary job to return to her home town where it is easy for them to devote themselves to *da'wa* activities. Her friends and former colleagues now earn forty-to-fifty thousand Baht per month, but she has never regretted her decision to leave her job. Even in religious life there are minor everyday dis-satisfactions and disorder, but she believes

that she can live peacefully, trusting that Allah will aid them. She previously valued socially high-ranking jobs in medicine or law, but after changing her life she wants her children to follow *da'wa* teachings and lead religious lives.

5.2 Mae Sot as a Living Space between Thai and Burmese

Muslims enjoy greater religious freedom in Thailand than in Myanmar. One *da'wa* leader who is originally from Myanmar told me the story of his son's troubles in Yangon: Burmese Buddhists set fire to the Islamic school where his son studied and he barely escaped with his life. His brother who recently came from Myanmar to Mae Sot said that Islam is comparatively tolerated in Thailand. In Myanmar, *da'wa* activities are watched vigilantly by soldiers. He said, "Here in Thailand, police do not arrest *da'wa* participants. In Myanmar, they arrest and examine every word. We can't enjoy religious activities. But in Thailand, they regard those who engage in religious matters as good persons. So, I don't want to stay there [in Myanmar]. Going for journey [*da'wa*] is not enjoyable there". He teaches Islam at a Burmese school with about 130 students.

I previously mentioned that *da'wa* participants have an ethnic bias: the present majority are Burmese Muslims. And through attending *talim* in both Thai and Burmese, I formed the impression that Burmese *talim* is more active. When a *da'wa masturo* from Myanmar visited Mae Sot, there were only two Thai women among fifty-five participants in lectures held at the house where *da'wa* women stayed. The lectures were delivered in Burmese, so Thai women who couldn't understand the language didn't come. Even so, many residents in Mae Sot understand and speak Burmese in daily life, so we can safely assume that Thai women are the minority in Mae Sot's *da'wa* movement.

Economic conditions for Thai Muslims are much better than those for Burmese Muslims. In Mae Sot, slum quarters house mostly Burmese, while Thai Muslims tend to live in upscale residential areas. Saida, a Thai Muslim woman, lives modestly and – with parental assistance – does not find it difficult to have enough money for food and her children's education. Saida's family live in a

townhouse which her parents own, and she runs a clothes shop in front of it.

Contrast Fatima, a Burmese divorcee, who lives with her son. Fatima's parents also live in Mae Sot but have difficulty assisting Fatima and her son. Her father, fifty-seven years old, pedals a tricycle. Her mother, fifty-four years old, is not in good health, but loans out an old tricycle for thirty Baht per day. I was impressed by Fatima's grasp of inequality between families when she said, "In some families only one member working can earn enough money, but in some families ten members work but can not earn enough money."

For Burmese Muslims, the *da'wa* movement is useful as a network to help integrate into, and survive in, the Mae Sot community. Of course, Thai and Burmese Muslims are not completely separated. Some interact, help, or even intermarry.

Nani (85 years old) plays a Thai-Burmese intermediary role. She was born Thai Buddhist and converted to Islam when she married a Pakistani. She has nine children. Nani's house is often visited by Burmese. One of Nani's sons' wife was born Burmese Buddhist and converted to Islam.

Every Friday, she opens her house to Muslim children who come to study Islam and treats them to tea and snacks. She began doing this fourteen years ago. In those days, many poor Burmese Muslim children came around to her house to beg. She did not want them to get too used to begging, so she gave them notebooks, socks, and other necessities. Then she began to give them the chance to study Islam by hiring Islamic teachers every Friday. As a result, the Burmese children stopped begging.

Several Burmese Muslim women, Fatima one of them, come to help Nani prepare the tea parties on Friday mornings. Fatima told me, "Nani does not make distinctions. She treats Burmese indiscriminately. She does not care that they are poor. She loves equally. If they want to marry but have no money, she helps them to marry (by offering her house, preparing food, etc.) She is not selfish and shrewd. So many people love Nani." Nani herself said, "I have never said Burmese should not enter my house because they are dirty. During Ramadan,

Burmese visit from Yangon and Myawaddy (the Burmese town across the border from Mae Sot) every year.” Fatima said, “They know Nani is kind and her daughters-in-law are good. They do not bother to visit another Thai Muslim house.” (Interviewed 20th December 2013.)

5.3 Covering the Face

In the introduction I referred to Emmanuel Lévinas, who delves into the power of facial presentation in relation to ethics. I will close my chapter by integrating the experiences of Muslim women who cover their faces.

Lévinas wrote, “... the face stands up to murderous intent. Because the face has meaning by its own strength (Lévinas 1999: 361)”. Kumano points out that Lévinas does not mean the face in general, but face meetings, ‘face-to-face’, and confronting (Kumano 1999:132). Covering the face partially prevents confronting the world. Women reveal themselves to family members and other women, thus selectively closing their worlds. A woman told me that when she walks on the street with her face veiled, men avert their gaze. But what is the greater effect of veiling on their lives ?

The important point is that the decision to cover the face is not forced. The women I interviewed told me that they decided independently. However, the motivation to cover the face came from their *da’wa* companions. This means the decision to veil does not so much show singleness as an individual, but indicates involvement in the *da’wa* community. Covering the face also opens the possibility of more intimate relationships among family - especially husbands also practicing *da’wa* - and other Mae Sot *da’wa* practitioners.

Notes

- 1 Several other observers have mentioned this movement: for example, it is referred to in Malaysia as Jemaah Tabligh (Nakazawa 1988) and Jema’ah Tabligh (Nagata 1980); in Thailand as Jema’ah Tabligh (Preeda 2001); and in South Indian as Tablighi Jama’at (Masud 2000) (Oishi 20029) and Tablighi Jama’at (Afmad 1991).

I follow the original Urdu in this text. Because most villagers in Thailand call this movement 'da'wa', when they go on a Tablighi journey they say 'ork da'wa' (going out *da'wa*). The *da'wa* movement in Malaysia is called *Dakwah* (Shamusul 1997, Nakazawa 1988).

- 2 Gaborieau writes, "scholars also drew attention to the fact that the Jama'at no longer aimed only at helping Muslims to strengthen their faith: it also attempts, often with success, to convert non-Muslims to Islam (Gaborieau 2000: 121)." This new tendency has not yet become apparent in Southern Thailand, although village rumor has it that missions to convert hill people in Northern Thailand have succeeded in a few villages.
- 3 'Mawlana' is an honorific, meaning 'our master' in Arabic.
- 4 'Bai' refers to a 'brother' of Indian origin in Chiang Mai. The original Urdu word would be '*bhai*', meaning 'brother', but with the Thai pronunciation of the aspiration, it becomes '*bai*' (comment by Prof. Machida Kazuhiko, a linguist specializing in South Asian Languages, ILCAA, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies).
- 5 Muslims in Chiang Mai are often classified into two major groups: Subcontinental Muslims and Yunannese Muslims (*Suthep, Scupin*). Tablighi Jama'at spread to Subcontinental Muslims first and then to other Muslims, including Yunannese.
- 6 Sawani mentioned that Haji Yusuf Khan began Tablighi Jama'at in 1966. But residents of Mae Sot who are witness to the inauguration of this movement told me Nana Suai and Tongsuk were his precursors.

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