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Cultural Aspects of Jawi Children's Literature

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This paper is the expanded version of a talk given at the ICLLIC Conference at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang in June of 2010. It is also one of a series of papers on Thai children's literature I have written over the past five years that have focused on the works of Nippan (Makut Onrudee, 1950–) works which portray the life of ethnic Malays living in the South of Thailand. The particular focus of this paper is to identify the issues and possible contradictions surrounding the phrase “Thai Islamic children's literature” and to show how precisely Nippan's early story “Bod-ka-vi-ko Rohim Mamat” (The Poem of Rohim Mamat) addresses those issues.

The ethnically Malay community known as the Jawi have occupied the area encompassed by the four southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun for all of recorded history. Annexed to Thailand a little more than one hundred years ago in a treaty with Britain that set the modern borders of Malaysia and Thailand, the area was once the Sultanate of Patani, “one of the most important trading crossroads of Southeast Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (LeRoux, 1998). Since the annexation by Thailand they have found themselves in the unusual position of being a linguistic and cultural island in a nation whose government handles their community with cruelty or concern, depending on the character of the administration. While they are a minority (about four per cent of the population) in Thailand, they are the majority in their homeland provinces.

Such a situation poses a challenge for our assumptions about the existence and function of children's literature within a community. Westerners might naturally imagine that such an embattled situation would lead to the creation of a children's literature aimed at strengthening the communal identity, but in the investigations I have carried out so far, that has not proven to be the case. What little children's literature does exist has been authored by writers like Nippan who do not belong to the Jawi community but express a deep sympathy for their plight, a sympathy Nippan indicated in the Preface to his best known young adult novel, *Phisua lae dokmai* (1978) (Butterflies and Flowers):

In an isolated village far from civilization there are lives that may not matter to you or to anyone else. Should the worth of a life be measured by its geographic location or by the education a person has received? To probe these questions more deeply, the present author lived with these villagers for a year and got to know them better . . . though much time has passed since then, their lives

have not changed. They are still out of sight, and injustice is still everywhere, and sometimes it seems that even God has no mercy on them.

Born in the southern province of Songkla in 1950, Nippan belonged to the idealistic generation of university students who sought to transcend social differences in a “know your neighbor” movement. He farmed and taught Thai to ethnically Malay villagers in Songkla before writing two works that would reflect his experience in the Jawi community: *Pleng nok yiao*, 1976 (The Song of the Eagle) and his best known work mentioned above, two years later.

Before entering into a discussion of how precisely Nippan depicted the identity issues of the Jawi living under a Thai-administered system in his short stories, I would like to examine the situation of the Jawi and some cultural elements related to the paucity of what might be called a communal children’s literature. These elements include the linguistic complexity of the community, the importance of Islam in the community, and the overloaded curriculum of the Thai Islamic secondary school.

Colonialism is not a word we ordinarily associate with Thailand, known as the one Southeast Asian nation that managed to escape being colonized by the European powers, but Tamara Loos (2002) claims that “two snapshots from Thailand’s past blur in the photo album of global imperialism” (1). One reflects the moment in 1893 when France had gunboats at the entrance to the Chaopraya River, and the other captures a moment a decade later when, in 1902, Rama V sent a Siamese warship to the estuary of the Pattani River to end Raja Abdul Kadir’s opposition to Bangkok’s efforts to incorporate the Patani Sultanate (1). (Patani spelled with one *t* refers to the historic sultanate, which included all four provinces of the South; with two it refers to the modern province.) As Loos points out, these two incidents show how complex any statement about Thailand and colonialism must be, as they show the nation both as victim of European aggression and as the perpetrator of its own colonial aspirations (2).

I Linguistic and Ethnic Complexity of the Jawi

In the villages of the four southern provinces, the language of the majority is not Thai but a dialect of Malayu (Malaysian). For many Jawi, Thai is a foreign language which they cannot speak. This linguistic reality is mirrored in their subjectivity; though citizens of Thailand, the Jawi are culturally and ethnically Malay and are part of the Muslim world. The educational systems in the South reflect this complexity. While some schools are Thai government schools, others (called *bono*) are Islamic schools with some degree of government support. In these schools, as I shall demonstrate later, the curriculum is divided into two segments: Islamic subjects and “secular” subjects. Islamic subjects are often taught in the morning, with the afternoon given over to the secular subjects.

Unlike the Malays over the border to the south, the Jawi write their own language in a modified

Arabic script. (Teachers in Islamic schools report that recently Jawi, as the language is also called is also sometimes written with the roman alphabet, just like Malay.) But Arabic must be learned in order to study, memorize, and recite the Koran.

This makes for a very complex linguistic situation to navigate, especially for students in the double-curriculum Islamic schools. Malayu is spoken at home; Malayu, Thai, and Arabic are used for instruction at school. At least one teacher reports that the students are shy about speaking Thai out loud in the classroom, and prefer to answer in Malayu. They must be prodded to use Thai.

LeRoux shows how this complexity is reflected in the self-labeling the Jawi employ, an act which produces a different result depending on the ethnicity/nationality of the other person:

. . . a subject is understood differently, depending on whether one adopts an outsider or an insider point of view. In our case it means that understanding is different depending on whether one accepts the government view or that of the official opposition, in this case the Muslims who are also Malays. Second, the language in which the subject is discussed is of importance. The inhabitants of Patani use the term *Malei* (from the English "Malay") to designate the nationals of Malaysia and *Nnayu* (from the Malay "Melayu") to designate people of Malay culture. (240–241)

While such self-definition among types of Malay ethnicities is complicated enough, self-definition for the Jawi in relation to non-Muslim Thais is even more fraught with complication. As Le Roux points out, the assimilationist government and the public in general prefer the term "Thai-Islam" to any other appellation for the Jawi, but this contains an internal contradiction for the Jawi themselves:

The Jawi are used to designating the Thai by the expression *ore Siye* ("people of Siam"), reserving the term *Thai* (in Jawi) primarily to indicate Buddhists. For Jawi and other Malays of Thailand, to hear themselves called Thai-Islam amounts to being called "Muslim-Buddhists" which is, to say the least, incompatible. (242)

Added to the frustration of such a contradictory label is the ignorance it demonstrates with regard to the distinction in meaning between Islam and Muslim; to refer to a person as Thai-Islam is to confuse the name of a religion with the name of its believers.

II Nippan's "The Poem of Rohim Mamat" and Jawi Identity

In this section I would like to show how Nippan's early story about an idealistic young Thai teacher in a Jawi classroom illustrates the difficulties of Jawi identity. I have discussed this story in a previous article, "Nippan's Gift to Songkla: Killing the Flaneur in 'The Poem of Rohim Mamat'" (2009) in which I pointed out the confrontation between modernity and the pre-modern faith community that occurs in the story. The young teacher fresh from Bangkok, I asserted, is a kind of *flaneur*, in the sense that Gilloch (1996) defines the term:

For Baudelaire, the ultimate hero of modernity is the figure who seeks to give voice to its

paradoxes and illusions, who participates in, while still retaining the capacity to give form to, the fragmented, fleeting experiences of the modern. This individual is the poet. (143: 14)

As I reconsider Nippan's story here in the context of the complexities of Jawi identity, I want to reassert that the young teacher in the story gives voice to the "paradoxes and illusions" of a nation-building effort on the edge of the pre-modern world.

The young teacher in the story takes the long train ride to the South full of apprehension about his destination and his job there. His university friends scoffed at him for choosing a school in the South, accusing him of having a victim complex. He himself is full of doubt about how the children will receive him. He wants to give his students a modern sense of what being Thai means, and so he announces to his Civics class the unsurprising fact that "We are all Thai." It isn't long before confrontation appears; a bright boy responds with, "I'm a Muslim." Here we can see the nuances of identity that LeRoux points out above; the label "Thai Muslim," as noted above, is equivalent to saying "Buddhist Muslim," and the young pupil in the story is sure he isn't that. The teacher remains blissfully unaware of the implications of his words, and continues in the same vein:

Let teacher explain. People who believe in Islam call themselves Muslims, or Hadj, or use other names, but we live in Thailand, so we are Thai. There are Buddhist Thais, and Hill Tribe Thais as well. You and your parents are Islamic Thais. (36-37)

Rohim points out the contradiction in the teacher's understanding with a simple declaration: "But teacher is Thai. Because he believes in Buddhism" (38). Here, in a fictional setting, we can see the conflation of the word Thai with Buddhism, from the Jawi point of view.

The young idealistic teacher's civics lesson is quickly disintegrating as the noon recess approaches. In his mind there is dawning a realization something like that formulated by Goebel (1998) in regards to the innocence of those who spread the doctrines of modernity: "Since the end of the nineteenth century . . . the bourgeois principles of reason and humanity have been criticized for making claims of power . . ." (380).

Nippan's story nicely captures the difficulty of obtaining an insider's knowledge of the complicated identity issues of the Jawi. It dramatizes an education that takes place, not of the students, but of the teacher who receives a shock from the poem Rohim hands in as his afternoon assignment in Thai. The poems is short but to the point:

Teacher is kind to me,
I am kind to teacher . . .
If teacher hits me,
I will stab him. (39)

As I pointed out in my previous article on this story and the place it holds in the evolution of Nippan's narrative technique, the Thai author abandoned the outsider-narrator point of view after this story and adopted instead the technique of "narrated monologue." This technique, Oberman (2009) observes

erases the identity of the narrator as it achieves a “fusing [of] a character’s subjectivity to the narrator’s omniscience” achieving a “bivocality that expands the reader’s perspective” (13: 2).

The advantages are obvious, in the case of the representation of the Jawi by a Thai mainstream author. The self-conscious narrator in such stories as “The Poem of Rohim Mamat” disappears, together with the irony directed at the self which cannot represent the community. At the same time, the reader experiences an expansion of subjectivity as a result of the narrative point of view, a window, as it were, upon an unknown world. Nippan used this technique in forging his classic young adult novel about the Thai South, the *Phisua lae Dokmai* (1977) (Butterflies and Flowers) mentioned above.

III Islamic Children's Literature

Re researching Islamic children's literature takes a Westerner back in time and imagination to medieval times and beyond, when the Western sea of faith, to use Matthew Arnold's enduring metaphor, had not yet receded. In his history of children's literature Seth Lerer (2008) suggests that the medieval world offered a unique (and irrecoverable) point of view:

Writing in the early twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor asserted, in the course of his instructional manual the *Didascalicon*, that the whole visible world was a book written by the finger of God. For the medieval child, the world *was* a book, full of signs and symbols and in need of interpretation. (60)

All learning for the medieval child was presented through the colored lens of the Christian faith; the very process of acquiring literacy involved symbols of belief. “The word amen,” Lerer tells us, “often follows lists of alphabets in manuscripts, and sometimes, too, the letters are arranged in the form of the cross” (61). Just how and when modernity arrived in children's literature, banishing the gods and making the child the center of her own world, has yet to be researched in a comprehensive way. Certainly the same forces that accompanied modernity in its adult version impacted the world of children's literature; the subjectivity set adrift in the Enlightenment found a mirror for the liberated self in the enterprises of colonialism. Kipling's *Kim* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* are epics of the liberated spirit in a world without God.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to trace the evolution of the concept of the child in Euro-centric societies since medieval times, but it is important here in approaching the reality of Islamic children's literature to re-imagine the function of children's stories within a faith community. A website devoted to Islamic children's literature (www.islamicedfoundation.com/syllabi1.htm) acknowledges the importance of children's literature on formation:

From *Aesop's fables*, and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* to *Goosebumps* and *Dr. Suess*, children's literature is designed to form attitudes and world-views which will result in the transmission of values the dominant culture accepts.

This is part of a plea directed at Muslim parents living in the United States to keep some control over

their children's reading. The site describes the dangers of what Islamic children in the United States are ingesting:

In North America today, then, we Muslims face a strange paradox. On the one hand, we encourage our children to become Islamically aware, yet, on the other hand, we sit by idly as they devour book after book whose themes and subjects are blatantly pro-secular. Our children read about Bobby and Sue or Matthew and Jill, their problems finding a date, their lifestyles filled with endless moments of gossip, lying, and mediocrity, and our children come to desire just such a lifestyle, because it is reinforced out on the streets, on TV and in their public (and sometimes Islamic) schools through their reading textbooks. (www.islamicedfoundation.com/syllabi1.htm)

This site provides sample children's texts for a curriculum at all grade levels.

Books for younger readers include picture books about Islamic holidays, books explaining the Koran, books on the life of Mohammed, and books introducing Muslim children from other countries. Books for young adults include stories about Muslim students maintaining their identity in challenging American settings. All the books on the site are related to faith issues; none of them are simply exercises in imagination or celebrations of the subjectivity of the child such as, for example, Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*.

A recent (2006) article on "Arab Children's Literature" by Tami Al-Hazza introduces books which seem to be of two different types: one, secular and authored by Western authors, introduces stories about children in Arabic lands, emphasizing the exotic bazaars of Cairo or the lives of children caught in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Some of these authors may be culpable of appropriating the exotic and newsworthy subjectivity of such children without really understanding their situations from within.

The other type of story catalogued in Al-Hazza's article consists of "Books about Islam," and lists titles by both Arab and Western writers. Some of these are of an inspirational nature while others are informational and meant for the reference section of the school library. Some, like those offered on Islamic book websites in the U. S., present stories of Muslim youth learning to stand up for their rights when taunted or bullied by non-Muslims.

The complicated linguistic and cultural situation of the Jawi has produced no such stories meant to boost morale and foster confidence. Asked what books they had read or were reading, two classes of high school students in an Islamic school near Pattani were unanimous in reporting that they did not read things outside of their school texts with the exception of an occasional fashion magazine. Part of this lack of involvement in print culture has to do with the linguistic complexity of the Jawi, and part is due to the enormous demands of the school curriculum, as I will show below.

IV The Islamic School Curriculum

My informant is named Anwar; he is a recent graduate of the prestigious national university in

Pattani, Prince of Songkla University. He now teaches in the same type of Islamic high school that he himself graduated from. His parents and grandparents do not speak Thai, but he is a polyglot who successfully ingested all four of the languages in his own high school education: Thai, Malayu, Arabic, and English.

His generation, he reports, thinks of the term "Jawi" as a very old term, one they themselves never use. Instead, he continues, they use *Nnayu* (Malay) to denote themselves or things referring to themselves; a mixed group of Buddhist and Muslim students at a seminar will break for lunch and head for different restaurants; the Muslims will find a *Nnayu* restaurant that prepares food in accordance with Islamic rules to maintain purity.

Now Anwar teaches at an Islamic high school. He is a home-grown success story, a *dek bono* (boy from an Islamic school) who managed the difficult transition from a Malayu-speaking home to successful completion of a university education in Thai. He is also a devout Muslim who prays five times a day and observes the fast during Ramadan, the holy month of self-purification.

He shows me the weekly schedule for his students, a schedule that is divided between mornings devoted to Islamic studies and afternoons to the Ministry of Education-regulated high school curriculum. The morning curriculum has little bearing on university entrance examinations for Thai universities; there is an Islamic University in the neighboring province of Yala where subjects are taught in Arabic, and for this university or universities in Malaysia or the Middle East the Islamic curriculum provides an important introduction. Anwar is the first in his family to have chosen a Thai university; his brothers went to the Islamic University or to universities in the Middle East which sponsored them with scholarships. His sisters attended the Islamic University.

The high school has two transcripts on file for each student; one for progress in the Islamic curriculum and one for progress through the "regular" secular subjects. Islamic studies are divided into ten levels based on the student's proficiency; a student can progress through this curriculum as quickly or slowly as he wants, and there is no need to complete the curriculum before graduation. A student can graduate from the high school once the secular subjects have been completed, even if he is only at level 5 or lower in Islamic studies.

The lower the proficiency level in Islamic Studies, the more reliance there is on Malayu in teaching. Upper level subjects are taught entirely in Arabic. The Wednesday morning schedule for Islamic Studies, Level Four, is divided into five thirty-minute subjects, three of which are taught in Arabic and two in Malayu. The Arabic-based subjects, Anwar explains, are mostly translated into Malayu at this level. History, and two sections of Arabic Grammar are taught in Arabic but explained in Malayu. The two Malayu-based subjects are Reading the Koran and Writing Malaysian in Roman Letters.

Three and a half hours in the afternoon are given over to the secular subjects required by the Ministry of Education for a high school diploma; the seven thirty-minute slots are assigned to the individual student in accordance with their science or humanities concentration. Mathematics and

science alternate with Thai and English classes. There is no Malayu in the regular curriculum; the students' native language is studied only for a few hours each week in the context of Islamic studies. The library has no young adult novels in any language.

Anwar himself seems puzzled by the idea of what children's literature might be; "You mean stories?" he asks. "Stories that are not real?" But he has watched and enjoyed the recently televised *Butterflies and Flowers*, based on Nippan's story of poverty-stricken kids on the Malay border. And he admits he is hooked on several Thai soap operas. It's clear that his imagination is as hungry for stories as anyone's, but the habit of reading was never his nor is it his students' as they move through a curriculum that taxes and rewards them as citizens of two very different cultures. The grace and good-willed acceptance of this situation is surprising in its strength.

V Children's Literature and the Cycle of Myth and Irony

Literary critics of no less renown than Northrop Frye have predicted that the current Age of Irony in Western literature will give way to another Age of Myth. Whether or not this might also be true in children's literature is a question worth investigating. The days when the staples of reading for children involved learning the alphabet through faith items or retold lives of the saints will probably not return, but the innocence of Milne's world has been lost and contemporary authors for young adults must show children who are disgruntled with adult failures and ready to take things into their own hands.. And just a step beyond the disappointing Muggle world is Harry Potter's world of magic. Certainly this is one indication that the turn beyond irony may well be the inexplicable world of mystery and magic.

The language of children's literature in English has much to do with the descent into irony. Milne's works incorporate a gentle self-deprecating irony offered to the child as a form of love. They are one gateway to a sense of exuberance in language, a celebration of the silliness and multi-layered possibilities of language. More contemporary children's books use a language of irony to examine the adult world. In Sue Townsend's *The Diary of Adrian Mole* Adrian looks at the foibles of his parents and their world; clearly he is the most responsible person around. The care he offers his parents in this admittedly comic world seems almost a reversal of the carefully constructed parental care of Milne's world.

The relative values and sense of irony that characterize Western children's literature at present are not part of the Jawi world. Looking at the portrait Nippan had drawn of the Jawi world in *Butterflies and Flowers*, the Japanese translator Tatsuo Hoshino was troubled by one critic's remark that Nippan had used a stream of consciousness technique. Hoshino went back and reread Joyce's *Ulysses* to see where any point of similarity might lay, and found there was not much similarity. The Jawi world portrayed in *Butterflies and Flowers* was "simpler and kinder" than the world constructed by Joyce,

the Japanese translator reported. The only point that might be construed as similar was the narrative strategy described above, the narrated monologue which Nippan adopted after the series of stories like "Rohim's Poem" failed to achieve the compassion he wanted to describe the Songkla community with.

Hoshino found that Nippan's narrative strategy was indeed a kind of stream of consciousness, but not the kind associated with the ironic fragmentation of the postmodern world:

The young protagonist's thoughts are given to us in an apparently direct way, but that directness is due to the unknown presence of someone else like the author who feels a good deal of sympathy for Hooyan. (231: my translation)

It is Milne's world, rather than Joyce's; there is neither fragmentation nor irony in *Butterflies and Flowers*, in which the narration is guided by a caring gaze no less gentle than the one directed at Christopher Robin.

When Northrop Frye imagined the return of an Age of Myth, he was looking at foreshadowings of such a return in the works of Joyce and Kafka. We can imagine, as we look more widely at the world and its stories, that a return to myth might occur which is not cyclical nor evolutionary, but geographical. Just as Frederic Jameson's ideas of what the developed world might expect from third world literature changed drastically with his reading of Japanese works, we might expect that the absence of irony in a community such as the Jawi holds possibilities for the West to re-experience the Mythic mode.

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