

***The Buddha on Mecca's Verandah: Encounters, Mobilities, and Histories along the Malaysian-Thai Border.* By Irving Chan Johnson. Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2012. Softcover: 223pp.**

Located in the north-east of Peninsular Malaysia, Kelantan is well known to anthropologists. The state is where Malay, Thai and Chinese cultures meet, and where Muslims and Buddhists live side by side. Accordingly, it is a location of unique anthropological value (at least since the early 1970s, the locals have become aware that there is a profession called “anthropology”).<sup>1</sup> Yet *The Buddha on Mecca's Verandah: Encounters, Mobilities, and Histories along the Malaysian-Thai Border* is more than just another anthropological work on Kelantan: it is also what the author professes to be “an exercise in reflexivity” because he was “among friends, relations, and strangers”. It is a place where his mother, a Kelantanese-Thai, grew up and, one that Johnson visited numerous times (p. ix). And as an academic, Johnson is well-equipped to help us understand the Malaysian state: he speaks several languages, including English, Standard and Kelantan Malay, Central, Southern and Kelantanese-Thai, and has a Ph.D. in anthropology from Harvard University.

The book begins with the history of Kelantan, a marginal place located on the Thailand-Malaysia border, where, for hundreds of years, traders, smugglers, thieves, officials and religious teachers have crossed each other's path. Ban Bor On, where Johnson conducted his research, is “one of Kelantan's largest Thai villages”. Its history was inextricably linked to the province of Narathiwat in southern Thailand long before the border was imposed by the British, and the “Long periods of Thai and Malay interaction have resulted in lexical convergences in both directions, with the Kelantanese Malay vocabulary incorporating a number of Thai words and the Kelantanese Thai lexicon including many Malay loan words” (pp. 12–13). Although many villagers are market gardeners, they seem quite mobile. Cross border travel is common, but crossing into Thailand to patronize the local sex industry, especially for younger men, can be risky or even deadly (p. 72).

Over the decades, Ban Bor On's residents have experienced many changes, some of which were introduced by tourists, Buddhist monks and government officials from Thailand. This is not simply the story of a Thai village located in the Malay world: it is about what ordinary people encounter in their daily lives and how they choose to live those lives. It is about how different ethnic groups

coexist. And it is also about the rise of Thailand's religious-cultural influence.

In the 1970s, contacts between Thai villagers in Kelantan and people from Thailand were minimal. For the former, Central Thai was a different language and, Thai cuisine foreign. Even in Sungai Golok, the nearest border trading town in Thailand, Kelantanese-Thais felt "much more like foreigners than in Kelantan" (Golomb 1978, p. 25). Many villagers even equated the "bars, dancing parlours, and houses of prostitution" in that town as "urban commercial sin", which they did not wish to be associated with (Winzeler 1985, p. 91). Thirty years later, as Johnson points out, Thailand is no longer perceived as a very different country and Central Thai culture is no longer alien. Kelantanese-Thai villages have become tourist destinations for Thais, where the locals sell "cold drinks, rice salad (*khao jam*), spicy green papaya salad, and fresh coconut juice" (p. 89). Others, including "academics, monks, journalists, and elite members of Bangkok's standard Thai-speaking bureaucracy" also travel to Kelantan in search of another Thai identity outside of Thailand (p. 79). When Kelantan's chief monk died in 2005, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, daughter of King Bhumipol, contributed five sets of monk's robes as part of Thai royal sponsorship of the funeral. In the past, such a ritual would have been a purely Kelantan affair (p. 134). Monks from Thailand have also been active spreading Buddhist teachings to the locals. Thammathut<sup>2</sup> monks established a Pali school in a local temple "sometime between 1973 and 1974" (p. 150) and the Dhammakaya<sup>3</sup> are among the newcomers of Buddhist monks from Thailand, who are involved in the teaching of Thai Buddhism and culture. Apparently, more Kelantanese-Thai villagers, especially the younger ones, are learning about Thailand, Central Thai culture and language. (In 2010 when my friends and I visited a Thai village in Perlis, another Malaysian state on the Malaysia-Thailand border, Central Thai was taught at the temple to local Thai children. The abbot was a native of Phetchabun in northern Thailand and the temple had strong relationships with those in Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south.) Influences, cultural and religious, from modern Thailand on Kelantanese-Thai villagers are real and strong. How the latter is going to respond to such influences would be a challenging topic for any anthropologists who are interested in Kelantan to explore further.

Irving Johnson tells many great stories, but I wonder whether it will be possible to retell some of them in a place like Thailand.

There is, for example, a story of a respected, local senior Buddhist monk named Than Khru Kio, who disliked dogs. When he met King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), who brought with him his favourite pet dogs, Than Khru Kio had to control himself. It is said that the monk revealed later that “If these were not the king’s dogs, I would have kicked them” (p. 149). I can’t help thinking how this story would be interpreted under the Article 112 the “lese majeste” laws. Perhaps, even an anthropological writing can be seriously affected by Thailand’s political instability and the enforcement of such a law.

*The Buddha on Mecca’s Verandah* is an excellent piece of ethnography. Readers will enjoy hearing about the local story of Malays, Thais and Chinese, onced being siblings but now separated (p. 67), smuggling activities across the border, local humour about “pig” as a logo for the local football team (pp. 52–53), and many more local stories. But this is not merely a study of the Kelantanese-Thais or ethnic relations in Kelantan. It also raises a number of principal arguments in the field of border studies, for example, mobility, marginality of border communities, multiplicity of cultural influences in the borderlands, and so on. This is a book that anthropologists who are interested in Southeast Asian societies, state-ethnic relations, local-national cultural interactions, or the dynamics of the borderlands should read.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> There are a number of studies, for example, Louis Golomb, *Brokers of Morality: Thai Ethnic Adaptation in a Rural Malaysian Setting* (Honolulu, HI: The University Press of Hawaii, 1978); Roger Kershaw, *The Thais of Kelantan: A Socio-Political Study of an Ethnic Outpost*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1969; Robert L. Winzeler, *Ethnic Relations in Kelantan: A Study of the Chinese and Thai as Ethnic Minorities in a Malay State* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Mohamed Yusoff Ismail, *Buddhism and Ethnicity Social Organization of a Buddhist Temple in Kelantan: Social Organization of a Buddhist Temple in Kelantan* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).
- <sup>2</sup> The Thammathut (literally, Dharmaic Ambassador) was established by the Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education, Thailand. With the full cooperation from the Sangha, the programme encourages Buddhist monks to travel to the countryside in order to strengthen the people’s attachment to Buddhism and the country. Their duties include “giving sermons which incorporate citizenship training, and modern hygiene and sanitation practices, as well as moral and religious teaching”. William J. Klausner, “The Thai Sangha and National Development”, in *Reflections on Thai Culture: Collected Writing of William J. Klausner* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1987), p. 186.

- <sup>3</sup> The Dhammakaya is one of the Buddhist reform movements in modern Thailand that has been very popular among urban middle-class Thais. The movement, however, has been attacked for its unconventional religious teachings, aggressive fundraising and the cult of personality of its leader.

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