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Disciplines

Anthropology

**BURMESE MIGRANT LABORERS IN BANGKOK: ASSIMILATION
PATTERNS AND THEIR INDICATIONS FOR GLOBAL MOVEMENT**

By

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University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract

The observations relating to the assimilation of Burmese migrant workers in Bangkok serve as a reference for how migrants around the world might integrate themselves into new societies. For this research, I traveled to Bangkok and interviewed 40 unskilled workers from Burma and implemented participant-observation. I also conducted literary research to contextualize the information gathered during fieldwork. The synthesis of these methods revealed that historical tensions affected the current relationship between Thai and Burmese people. This led to the belief that most Burmese migrants are only in Bangkok temporarily and will return home to avoid the discrimination they face from Thai people. When details of Burmese assimilation are compared with those of migrants in places like Europe, it is possible to discern what is or is not occurring with migrants on a global scale. As I expand the discussion from the case of migrants in Bangkok to those around the world, it is important to consider what the patterns of one population might indicate for other migrants.

Introduction

When tourists visit Bangkok they take in the sights of majestic Buddhist temples and whiff the scents of lemongrass and chili pepper from the street food vendors. The city provides ample opportunity for visitors to learn about the people, culture and history of Thailand. These outsiders in Bangkok, however, may be completely unaware of the current situation that pertains to migration. They may not know upon their first visit that some people they pass on the street may not actually be Thai. Instead, they may be some of the nearly 2 million Burmese migrant workers who have made their way to Thailand (Caouette & Pack 2002: 7). While spending time in Southeast Asia myself, I too was unaware of what was occurring. While in Hong Kong, I saw Filipino migrant workers leisurely chatting with friends on the streets during their days off. So, when I visited Bangkok and heard there were migrants from Burma, I looked for these people as I traveled. As a tourist I was unable to distinguish Burmese laborers in Bangkok and decided to return again as a researcher. I learned that laborers from South and Southeast Asia were moving to neighboring countries like Thailand, further to Hong Kong and Singapore, and even as far as the United Arab Emirates. I was curious as to what the situation was like for migrant workers from Burma who had traveled to the neighboring Thailand for work. In Bangkok, these Burmese are seen as inexpensive labor and are employed as nannies and housekeepers for working families, or as employees of local businesses. Ranging in age from 14 to 40, they have fled warfare and political turmoil, or have been sent by their families for economic reasons (Caouette & Pack 2002: 11,14). In addition to these challenges that push them to migrate they are met with new difficulties

in Bangkok. These include language barriers, economic exploitation from employers and discrimination from Thai nationals.

As will be discussed in the sections to come, modern prejudice seems to be rooted in historical tensions between Burma and Thailand. As some scholars view it, the strains between the two populations took off in the 1930s when Prime minister Phibun Songkhram spread the idea of ‘Thainess’ or *Khwanpenthai*—a notion that created a division of ‘us versus them’ (Faucher 2010: 66). However, I argue that these sentiments may have risen even earlier during the Ayutthaya period and spread more recently through literature (1350 A.D.-1767 A.D.). When tensions like this exist between migrants and their host society, questions arise regarding what exactly occurs to people like the Burmese once they begin working in Thailand? Do they assimilate or are there other processes that take place? Research up until now examines what has happened with skilled and educated Burmese in Thailand. It seems that skilled migrants who work with Thai colleagues in professional spaces also face ostracism, which they tackle passively with cooperative attitudes. However, they do not make efforts to integrate into society and often maintain a separate Burmese identity even up to two decades after living in Thailand (Mon 2014: 46, 57). Similarly, educated Burmese know that Thai people do not necessarily welcome them. This results in their belief that they are merely temporary migrants who will not adopt Thai culture during their stay and will in fact maintain strict socio-cultural delineations between themselves and Thais (Faucher 2010: 68). It therefore seems that sentiments rooted in history create contemporary difficulties that affect the desire and ability for Burmese people in Bangkok (and perhaps in the rest of Thailand) to assimilate into Thai society. It is important to note, however, that the research for this

paper involved migrant workers who are considered unskilled and have not had higher education, and therefore work in roles that do not require these qualifications. Despite these differences they still share the observations regarding social incorporation that were made by scholars about skilled and educated Burmese in Thailand. However, as countries around the world continue to demand inexpensive labor from overseas or across the border the number of migrants is sure to increase. Thus, the motivation for this work is to understand what is happening with the Burmese in Bangkok, and provide insights that may serve as references for the movement of people around the world.

It is also significant to note that migration of Burmese to Bangkok is just one of many human migrations occurring today. By exploring issues of Burmese in the context of other people, I hope to better understand how movement, assimilation and identity are intertwined and affected by different migrations. Of late, images of Syrian and other migrants from the Middle East struggling to make it to the shores of Europe have caused outrage and called for response. These people are largely moving to escape political turmoil and warfare, and are joining an already present group of migrants in Europe. For example, there were those who traveled to Europe to assist with post-World War reconstruction. People like North Africans in France or South Asians in England remained as immigrants and had families in the new country. When compared with their hosts these migrants in Europe may have distinguishing characteristics such as nationality, religion, social culture, dress and so forth. Looking at cases in Europe provides a comparative example that shows how marginalization and other social ills have excluded migrants in European culture and society, much like what has occurred with Burmese (Monshipouri 2009: 219). For example, migrants in Europe may have

assimilated by speaking European languages and attending European schools, but they still may not feel like they are a part of society. Instead, they might be integrating, or creating an identity that acknowledges the differences between themselves and their hosts. For example, negative perceptions vocalized by Europeans have led some Muslims to create new identities that signify that they are ‘European Muslims,’ a title for a sense of belonging that neither associates them with their ancestral homeland or where they currently live (Monshipouri 2009: 225, 237). Some Muslim migrants have also shown a heightened sense of religiosity compared to Europeans, which is theorized as a reaction to either entering welcoming societies where they are able to engage more with religion than others around them, or going somewhere less welcoming which makes them feel the need to become more religious (Connor 2009: 381). Some Burmese involved in this research did not become more religious, and in fact described that they actually had less time to worship. However, as will be elaborated later, the role of religion varied between those who were Buddhist or Seventh Day Adventist. The Burmese share similarities with European migrants in that they entered into an unwelcoming society and experienced the process of struggling to belong.

Analyzing the details that arise from Burmese migration to Bangkok and contextualizing these observations against other migrant people (like those moving into Europe) allows us to expand the theories regarding migratory processes. As increasing numbers of people around the world move to new places there are sure to be social outcomes that will need to be addressed. How will migrants and receiving societies deal with the numerous social transitions? What will be the consequences? The goals of this paper are to explore how Burmese migrant workers—a specific group of moving

people—are incorporating themselves into Thai society, and compare these findings with what has been occurring with other migrants. In doing so, I work to understand how processes like assimilation are occurring alongside other apparent societal factors like discrimination, with the hopes that this case study will explain how other migrants in similar situations may behave. Working to predict aspects of migration could possibly help avoid social pitfalls and streamline processes of global movement.

Research Strategy

In order to understand the current situation of Burmese migrants in Bangkok it was important to collect data directly from the source. To do so, I traveled to Bangkok in summer 2015 to better understand these migrants. Field research provided crucial details about the population itself, but this alone could not paint the history of the area and could not place the migrant group in the context of global migration. Therefore, it was also necessary to research existing literature surrounding the history of social tension in the region, themes in international migration and assimilation, and the situation of other migrants in places like Europe. Together, ethnographic research and the reading of supporting materials allowed for observations and theories about Burmese migrants to be placed within regional history and the global scene of migration.

I worked with an interpreter who introduced me to migrant workers in Bangkok. The interpreter I worked with was named Mai and she used to be a migrant worker. At the time of my fieldwork she was collaborating with a friend on a business. She interpreted for the business, which was focused on brokering housekeepers—most of who were from Burma. Mai introduced the migrant workers she was acquainted with and they introduced me to their friends. This snowball effect ensured that I interviewed a diverse group of people.

Interviews took place over five weeks in Bangkok, Thailand. Interview size depended on convenience—some were conducted individually while others were in groups. They were done while informally visiting job recruitment offices, public spaces (parks, churches) and private homes. The interpreter was aware of Burmese communities within the city and coordinated the meetings with a total of 40 subjects. The sample of

people had to meet the criteria of being born and raised in Burma, living and working in Bangkok at the time, and being unskilled. Samples of both specific and open-ended inquiries include:

- Biographical/Background information: age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, religion, number of years in Bangkok
- Are you connected to other Burmese people in Bangkok? If so, how?
- Has the idea of being from Burma changed in any way after arriving in Bangkok?
- What is difficult about living in the Thai capital?
- Do you still view yourself as being Burmese? Has this view changed at all since you arrived in Thailand?
- Are the friends that you have made only Burmese, or also Thai?
- Have you learned to speak Thai? If yes, how has this affected you? If no, how has not speaking Thai affected you?
- Do you view Thailand as your new home?
- Do you plan to return to Burma?
- How do you think Thai people treat you?
- How do other Burmese people in Bangkok treat you?
- What kind of contact have you had with foreigners?
- The next method used for this project was participant-observation. Locations were introduced by contacts or by migrant workers themselves and included public and private spaces, such as a Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church and the home of a migrant worker's potential employer. Church was attended during two consecutive Saturdays, while the employer's home was a single visit. This particular method was used not only to gather visual data on the lives of Burmese workers, but to also gain a more personal understanding of what research subjects were experiencing in Bangkok.

In addition to speaking with mixed samples of migrant workers from Burma I also implemented participant observation in public and private spaces such as churches, parks and markets. Through observing social patterns, communities and beliefs these methods shed light into the assimilation process for Burmese migrants.

As with many studies, there are often limitations in the collection of data that may affect accuracy. For this fieldwork shortcomings may appear with regards to certain interview questions. There were instances where interviewees were unsure of how to

answer certain questions, or replied with minimal detail. These responses were not accounted into larger patterns or ideas that were associated with particular interview questions. As a result, the situations and descriptions provided by all 40 participants may not necessarily be reflected in all themes.

Data collection was followed by various approaches to analysis, which included understanding the conditions within which ethnography was conducted. This aided in placing the descriptions and observations that were collected into larger themes. These included the possible roots of historical tension or cohesion, such as warfare, geographic borders, religion and previous migrations. It was also necessary to approach the situation of Burmese migrants within the context of international migration and its definitions, as well as within the different forms of assimilation. Lastly, I worked to introduce the situation of migrants in Europe, which led to the discussion of what is occurring between Burmese and other migrants. Using the Burmese as an example, I explore the possibilities for migratory processes around the world.

Connections of Thai-Burmese History to Contemporary Sentiment

In this section I provide a description of the region's people, border relations and culture. As it turns out, historical links are at the root of social disunity between Burmese and Thais. The movement of people from Burma to Thailand and the difficulties associated with this process have spanned throughout time. Tensions seem to range from as far back as the establishment of Burmese and Thai civilizations, up to the British occupation of Burma. Religion is also based in history and plays a part in contemporary problems. For example, both regions share Theravada Buddhism but this acts as both a unifying and dividing force. On the other hand religion, in addition to other methods, serves as an important way of coping with the historically rooted socio-political problems migrants face in Bangkok.

Thai and Burmese civilization may have originated in what is now Southern China with the Thai people likely being descendants of the Nan-chao people from present day Yunnan. The Burmese are somewhat related to the Nan-chao people but occupied territory closer to Tibet ("International Boundary Study Burma-Thailand Boundary" 1966). Certain Burmese people today may have belonged to the Tibeto-Burman group, which had 3 tribes: Pyu, Kanyan and Thet. The Pyu came to an end around the 6th century while the Kanyan are believed to be the ancestors of the Rakhine and Chin ethnic groups. Others like the Mon apparently belonged to the Mon-Khmer group from the East. They built their territories in Southern Burma and in Thailand's Chiangmai (Maung 1989). The Nan-chao groups slowly made their way southward into what is currently Thailand with smaller Thai kingdoms coming into existence around 11th century B.C. This southern migration occurred rapidly when the Mongols conquered China in the 13th century.

Around the same time the Thai kingdom of *Sukothai* claimed most of the territory that is modern Thailand. At this time the Shan people also conquered most of what is now Burma. Burmese power at the time was centralized around Bago (previously Pegu), while Thailand had its capital in Ayutthaya. These two regions brewed power that would eventually come to fight—resulting in Burma destroying Ayutthaya in 1767.

War between Burma and British India broke out and lasted from 1824 to 1826, which allowed Britain to gain control and annex Tenasserim, Arakan, Manipur and Assam, making them a part of India. Later, during the Second Burmese War, Bago was captured. Then the Third Anglo-Burmese War involved Britain capturing Upper Burma, bringing the larger region under British control where it was ruled like a colony until its independence in 1948. Before the British, Burmese rulers had already established unified Burmese states, which had borders that loosely resemble those of today. However, the acquisitions of land by the British established Burma's modern national boundaries. Thailand's national boundaries were solidified earlier in the 1909 treaty with Britain ("International Boundary Study Burma-Thailand Boundary" 1966). British occupation also helped minority ethnic groups establish their territory. The early 20th century was when the Chin, Karen, Kachin, Shan and Kaya emerged with power rooted in ethnic regions. In addition to territorial distinctions, some argue that the presence of the British may also have divided Burma into rebellious factions such as those of the Karen, Kachin and Shan (Maung 1989). Some people from these war-torn ethnic groups, including many I interviewed, would flee violence and seek economic stability as migrant workers in Thailand.

Despite the delineation of territory and the creation of national borders, religion has remained somewhat fluid in Southeast Asia. Buddhism prevails as a dominant religion with Theravada Buddhism being the main form in Burma and Thailand. Its origins are debated although Sri Lanka is a possible location for its rise. It is generally agreed that Buddhism really took hold in Southeast Asia around the 11th century. There are also two theories regarding how Buddhism grew in Southeast Asia. Theravada could have existed as a small religion before the 11th century and then have transformed into larger religious movements by King Aniruddha of Pagan (Burma) and King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai (Thailand). The second theory was that Buddhism arrived in the region, introduced to kings, and grew from there. The motives of these processes are explained as follows:

We can conclude that the adoption of Theravada Buddhism by King Aniruddha and King Ramkhamhaeng was neither an introduction nor a conversion to a new and hitherto unknown form of Buddhism. It was not a turning point in religious history, but rather, a new strategy by the two kings to apply or use religion in a political sense. The kings chose to patronize the Buddhism they found in the conquered lands. Had it been otherwise, the two kings might have persecuted all other creeds, but this did not happen. The form of Buddhism that the kings encountered in the areas in question was Theravada, or at least a form of Theravada that used Pali as its sacred language. (Assavavirulhakarn 2010)

Thus, it seems that the kings may have played a significant role in solidifying Theravada Buddhism as religions within and across their territory. Both still share visible aspects of religious culture, such as Loi Krathong and Tazaungdaing (Festival of Lights), which are celebrated to mark the end of the rainy season (Swearer 1981: 21). Issues over Buddhism still seem to arise although Burma and Thailand share religious history and practices. For example, some Burmese view Thais as misunderstanding the religion, although it is unclear if this belief is rooted in historical sentiment or is a contemporary idea (Faucher

2010: 68). The migrants who identified as Buddhist also described how they were too busy in Bangkok to forge communities through temples, let alone visit regularly. Thus, it is possible that religion unites or divides relations between Burmese and Thais, and may not even serve to bring Burmese together.

In addition to Theravada Buddhism migrants also identified with other minority religions. The largest of these was Seventh Day Adventism (SDA). Many migrant workers' families had been Adventists back in Burma. The history of Adventism begins much later than Buddhism in Southeast Asia with missionaries arriving in China and Hong Kong in the 1900s. In 1902 Herbert B. Meyers and A.G. Watson arrived in Burma. Meyers stayed for a few years and created an Adventist community. This community requested a minister and Heber H. Votaw arrived in 1905 to establish the 'Burma Mission,' or education center. As more missionaries arrived they began printing materials in Karen and Burmese languages, making the religious material more accessible and allowing the Adventists to better spread their beliefs. During World War II missionaries were forced to leave but returned shortly after the war to establish more schools, hospitals and a press office. In 2003 the Myanmar Union Mission was created with the purpose to lead the Myanmar Adventists Seminary and the SDA affiliated Kinsaung Publishing House in Yangon (Land 2009: 208-209).

Migrant workers seemed to use the religiously focused networks to foster community and maintain connections with the lifestyle they left in Burma. Many Buddhists explained that back home they would regularly visit temples, but working in Thailand meant there was not enough time for scheduled trips. Many Seventh Day Adventists on the other hand, gathered weekly in the Burmese SDA church in downtown

Bangkok. This was a place for migrant workers to meet one another, foster both platonic and romantic relationships, and worship together. Migrants often came together over lunch to discuss the failures or successes of the week and used the space as a way to find support. SDA migrants seemed to have a much different relationship with religion than those who were Buddhist.

Religion was one way for Burmese migrants to face the struggles that the city presented for them. The prejudicial treatment that many people described was not a recent phenomenon. In fact, the history of the relationship between the people of Thailand and Burma dates back centuries. This history is what seems to have created national differences in identity, resulting in the tension and discrimination that migrants described. This began after the 1767 fall of Ayutthaya, the previous capital of Thailand. The most notable story of this event, the *Thai Rop Phama*, was also a tool in constructing discriminatory sentiment toward the Burmese. The story, written by Thailand's Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862-1943), tells of the history of conflict between Siam and Burma, their battles for the ancient Thai capital Ayutthaya, and its subsequent fall. Prince Damrong argues that the fall of Ayutthaya was due to a combination of political disunion of the Siamese, as well as the Burmese desire to loot the city. According to Burmese texts they wanted to destroy Ayutthaya as a focal point, which is why they did so much physical damage to the area, such as demolishing walls and holy sites.

From Prince Damrong's writing we are told about the movement of different ethnic groups from Burma into what is now Thailand. The Prince describes how the Siamese would fight against the Mon ethnic group from Burma because Hongsawadi (presently Bago), a focal Burmese city was located in their territory. However, Mons

were not the enemy and would eventually become Siam's ally and seek refuge there. Instead the enemy was considered to be the Burman ethnic group. Mon territory, however, was between Siam and Burma meaning the Thais and Mons fought over this intermediary area for easy access to the enemy's land. Thus, certain Burmese ethnic groups like the Mon have held presence and familiarity in Thailand for some time. Mon migrations from Burma to Thailand would also continue until the 1980s and 1990s during Bangkok's economic boom (Barry 2013: 198). On the other hand, territorial warfare would set the stage for more tensions between Thailand and Burma.

Although heavily biased, the *Thai Rop Phama* gives a clear indication of how Thai people feel about their Burmese neighbors and how these sentiments carry over today. It was written with socio-political motivation that portrayed Thailand and its people as one nation and ethnicity, creating a sense of 'us' and 'them' with the Burmese. Citing Sunait Chutintaranond, Christopher Baker writes:

Thai Rop Phama represents a continuation of this trend toward constructing a public image of the Burmese-as-enemy, but also a significant change. The early Bangkok chronicles and other literary works of the same era portrayed the Burmese as a threat to the existence of Siam and to Buddhism. They argue that in 1767 the Burmese came to trash Ayutthaya and so erase the existence of Siam as a country. They stress that the Burmese broke down the Buddhist temples, and melted down their precious metals to carry away. The Burmese are portrayed as the agents of anti-religion. This interpretation provided a counterpoint to the role of the early Bangkok monarchy in reestablishing Siam as a Buddhist kingdom with the king as the defender of religion. *Thai Rop Phama* adjusts this theme. Siam is no longer a Buddhist kingdom, but a nation. The king is no longer just the protector of religion, but of a nation too. (Baker 2001)

The events recounted by Prince Damrong and the emotions they carry with them have been incorporated into Thai textbooks, allowing the perspective of the Burmese as the

enemy to spread throughout society. Discrimination stemming from this idea has affected migrants of all Burmese ethnic groups.

The Burmese people who were interviewed for this project described the resulting effects of this history. Interviewees described both specific moments of prejudice, as well as discriminatory sentiments ingrained in society. Being of Karen, Mon, Shan and Chin ethnicities, the migrants who were interviewed also noted differences in treatment between themselves and the those of Burman ethnicity. They referred to how historical attacks on Thailand by Burman ancestors meant that Thais continued to mistreat these particular people. Both the overall hostility towards Burmese people, as well as the particularly negative reaction toward the Burman ethnic group, supports the notion that historical events and sentiment still heavily influence the current relationships.

As mentioned previously, certain groups of Burmese like the Mon have been moving through Burmese and Thai territory for centuries. The contemporary, large-scale migration of Burmese citizens to Thailand was facilitated in the 1970s with the development of the “Asian tiger” economies, which included Thailand. This caused a demand for skilled and unskilled labor. All of the people interviewed in Bangkok were considered unskilled laborers because they lacked higher education or specific hard skills. These migrant workers were employed as nannies and housekeepers, factory workers, shopkeepers in markets and restaurants, and waiters/waitresses. These unskilled workers were “disposable people” who had unfair working conditions and held jobs that were unwanted by the majority of the host population (“The Moral Economy of Labor Mobility” 2014: 43).

Other difficulties they encountered involved identification and legal processes. Movement began after World War II (1965-85) when the borders of Thailand and Burma were used as a buffer zone to stop the spread of communism. During this time Thailand indirectly supported ethnic Burmese rebels and used colored identity cards to help distinguish these fighters and control their movements across borders. In 1988 there were student uprisings in Burma that triggered a large outward migration and Thailand was a welcoming receiver of these people who were seen as cheap labor (Martin 2014: 145-146). After 1989, these cards became a way to control the movement of all migrants in and out of Thailand. This made the lack of identification punishable and created vulnerable populations of people without recognized ID (Luangaramsri 2014: 150). Getting caught by police without proper paperwork was also a problem. Migrants described bribery, mistreatment and deportation as possible consequences.

Regulation of these ID cards quickly became out of hand as Thailand, especially Bangkok, became increasingly attractive as its economy boomed. Those who were interviewed either had Burmese identification in the form of a passport, Thai identification cards (with varying statuses), or no documentation at all— having left Burma without a passport and being unable to apply for legal status in Thailand. Over the past 30 years, issuance or revocation of Thai identification has played a part in social identity by distinguishing the Thai from the non-Thai, and again creating the idea of ‘we’ against ‘them’ (Luangaramsri 2014: 146). Legal status, in addition to the historical and religious roots for the social separation of Burmese and Thais, also factors into the assimilation of Burmese migrants.

The history of Burma and Thailand spanning from before the 18th century up until today conjures up complex emotions over enemies, territory and borders. I have established the connection between how Burmese and Thais view and treat one another. In the upcoming section I will explore how current sentiments affect migratory processes.

Theories in Migration

International migration, or the crossing of borders, began when the nation-state emerged in Europe. Currently, “The nation-state is a sovereign and exclusivist order that is tempered by international economic relations, political power relationships and humanitarian considerations. The nation-state draws a clear border line around it over which non-nationals may not step without its consent” (Bohning 1984: 3). As discussed before, Burma and Thailand have established their national borders and in turn have rigidly differentiated themselves from one another nationally and socially. The Burmese movement across these borderlines was fueled by the desire to have more economic or political freedom, opportunities, and better living standards. The migrants interviewed for this study were particularly interested in moving to Bangkok, Thailand because of the stark economic differences between their home country and the globalizing Thai capital. They were unable to secure comfortable living situations because many people had difficulty finding well paying work, or had income taken from them by who they described as “the military,” which could be any group with the ability to threaten people with violence or social pressure. These push factors were accompanied by pull factors that included the more liberal atmosphere of an urban city and the economic prosperity of the receiving state compared to Burma (Bohning 1984: 12). Bangkok was appealing for reasons of betterment but migrants were met with hostility and marginalization that quickly affected their opinions about migration and Thai society.

Before discussing the social aspects of migration, it is necessary to describe categories in which migrants may fall. *Return migration* and *permanent migration* are two patterns that describe what is occurring with people from Burma. *Return migration*

typically refers to movement that is temporary. These migrants willingly return to their home after time abroad as part of either a pre- or post-movement plan. It seemed that Burmese in Bangkok were deciding to follow this pattern of return migration. Likewise, other migrants such as Muslims in Europe have also fallen into this category. Many Burmese reiterated the fact that they were only in Bangkok temporarily and would return to Burma as soon as possible. The reason for this was mainly because they could not make themselves feel at home in Bangkok. So, why might migrants return or stay in their host country? Bangkok was economically secure compared to their home country. However, discrimination from Thai people penetrated multiple facets of their lives. When it came to jobs, interviewees explained that if they were competing for a position with a Thai person, they were much more likely to not be hired even when they were more qualified or had previously worked in the particular industry or role. With regards to payment, some explained that they were not given the pay that they were promised by their employers (Thai as well as Indian employers). Those who withheld pay or did not provide as promised also tended to mistreat their workers. One woman even recalls having to sleep in a room with bird excrement. Nearly every person with whom I spoke described stories like these. From their accounts it seemed as though Burmese migrant workers were attracted to Bangkok for its economic opportunities but were met with surprising circumstances and unfavorable treatment, which encouraged their decision to eventually return home. Many continued to hold on to connections to their homeland through culture and relationships, and vowed to go back to Burma when they had enough money, or when socio-political situations in their home villages improved. One woman with a toddler born in Bangkok stated that she did not want her son to grow up in

Thailand, and was planning to return home. On the other hand, two migrants explained that they were content and rather indifferent toward the treatment they received in Bangkok and would stay as long as possible. This was a case where *return migration* transformed into a *permanent migration*, or when people decide to stay in the host country (Dustmann 2000: 9). Together these cases show that permanent migration is possible for an oppressed group of migrants but it is more likely to be a rare occurrence in situations where host societies hold negative views of the migrants in their country.

The Difficulties of Assimilation

Why do some migrants choose to stay in the host country while others decide to return home? It seems likely that in addition to the discrimination that was described, the answer is also associated with levels of assimilation. Currently, some Burmese migrants such as restaurant or market workers may hold the same living standards as their Thai employers--residing in small apartments with no kitchens (typical of urban Thailand) and eating street food from the numerous vendors. Others live in apartment complexes inhabited mostly by other Burmese migrant workers where they share rooms with other laborers. In other instances there are stark contrasts between the living conditions of migrant workers and the majority population, such as their employers. Domestic workers holding positions such as nannies and housekeepers are often given a small room in their employers' apartment, one day off per week, and are often mistreated by employers with long work hours, little rest and strict rules. One migrant worker who was working as both a nanny and housekeeper recalls an instance where she faced troubling treatment from a couple that employed her. She consumed a Coca-Cola from the refrigerator after the wife invited her to eat freely, but was confronted by an infuriated husband who scolded her for taking the house's beverages. She felt as though this incident drew clear boundaries in her relationship with those in the house for which she worked. The lack of communication between her two employers made future behavioral decisions unclear and the reaction of the husband made her feel inferior. Mikael Hjerm argues that an outside group like migrants are fully integrated into society when they have the same living standards as the majority (Hjerm 2005). Not only do most migrant workers not have the same living standards, but they are also mistreated.

Another example of the inequality between Burmese and Thais, which acts as a barrier to migrant assimilation, is the issue of shared space. During fieldwork I was able to join a Burmese Seventh Day Adventist Church in Bangkok. Many attendees were of Karen ethnicity, but the church was open to all. On our first visit my translator, who was also a member of the church, pointed out how their space for worship was actually situated behind a Thai SDA church and school. The Burmese space was located on the second floor of the rear building in a small room with minimal furnishing. This consisted of stacked plastic chairs for worshippers and guests, a keyboard for singing, and an altar. This space and its components were minute compared to that of the Thai church and its spacious rooms just a level below. What was important here was the fact that attendees were aware of the differences in size, location and resources of their church compared to that which belonged to Thai people of the same religion. Because there was no collaboration between the Burmese and Thai SDA churches (despite their proximity) there was a clear separation between the two churches.

Communication can often facilitate amicable interaction and allow people to become acquainted with one another. Most migrants had small social circles and solely interacted with other migrants (this was even if the Burmese spoke Thai). The Burmese SDA church, restaurants and other social gathering sites such as parks, shopping malls, markets, and apartments served as spaces for which migrants could interact with one another on their days off. Through these spaces they could form relationships and communities while away from home. However, these places were not helping Burmese and Thais to interact with each other.

Here I expand on the topic of discussion by shifting the focus to migrants in Europe. They are a contrasting example to Burmese and Thais who share aspects of culture (even if it unites or divides) and therefore shows other possibilities in assimilation. Migrants in European countries like Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands have starkly different cultural values and experiences (i.e. religion, language, food, custom, and so on) to offer the people of Europe. Muslim migrants for example, offered strong family values, which seemed to enrich European society. On the other hand, the migrants' views on gender, family relations and polygamy did not seem to mold well with existing European ideals. These clashes hindered the acceptance of Islam and the social integration of these migrants ("The Bicultural Identity Performance of Immigrants" 130). It therefore seems that differences in culture could lead to both acceptance of people and their customs, or a rejection of these migrants and their beliefs.

Assimilation may also come at various points in time for migrants, such as with different generations. For Americans before World War II, scholars predicted that it would take at least three generations for migrants in America to fully assimilate ("The Bicultural Identity Performance of Immigrants" 115). All 40 Burmese migrants were the first generation in their family to move. I encountered some second-generation children, but many were born in Burma and were only in Bangkok temporarily with their parents. One idea as for why Burmese migrants seem to not be assimilating in Thai society could be because they arrived at a much later age and have not had enough time to integrate into society.

If Burmese migrants are not showing signs of assimilation then how do we explain their situation? Citing Horace Kallen, Neil Sandberg explains the theory of

cultural pluralism as a “process of living in both worlds at the same time in order to take advantage of primary group associations for personal, familial, and cultural needs, while utilizing secondary group contacts in the civic, economic, and political environments.” This reasoning fits well with the patterns discerned from the field. Migrants in Bangkok fulfilled their personal needs by contacting their families back in Burma (via technology like Viber, Skype or Facebook) and by forming relationships with other people in similar situations. Their secondary group contacts were their employers (either Thai or of other nationalities) and the Thai people amongst them. This group was mainly a source of financial stability and opportunity, not social and emotional support. Burmese migrants might also be classified as culturally plural due to their activities. Sandberg explains how ethnic churches serve as symbolic references for populations that continue to live in two worlds. As mentioned before, many Burmese migrants I interviewed who were of Karen ethnicity belonged to the Seventh Day Adventist church in Bangkok. Establishing a place for Karen people (although open to other ethnicities) served as a space for people working and struggling in Bangkok to come together as a community and forge meaningful relationships. Through the church people could speak Karen and effortlessly express customs through means such as worshiping, story telling and sharing food (Sandberg 1974: 3, 72).

Analyzing the different possibilities and factors that are associated with assimilation show that Burmese migrants were generally not integrating into Thai society for a variety of reasons. The largest of these was the separation between themselves and Thais that is a result of historically rooted sentiments. Is this the same with others around the world? To explore this question I delve into the details of other migrants in Europe.

Widening the Scope: Burmese Migrants in Relation to Migrants Moving to Europe

Although migrants to Europe are diverse, there is also a large Muslim population that faces marginalization. In 1945 there were fewer than 1 million Muslims living in Western Europe (AlSayyad 2002: 35). This number grew and in 2007 there were approximately 21 million Muslims in Europe. Of these were 7.5 million ‘old Muslim’ communities of people who moved from the Balkans and Baltic states after the Ottoman and Russian retreat. The 13.2 million ‘new Muslims’ were the post World War II labor migrants and more recent refugees. The first wave of this larger group of Muslims traveled to Europe mainly between 1950 and 1973. Their families later migrated to join them and became part of the second wave of Muslim migrants. The third wave would follow in 1979, consisting more of refugees due to conflict in Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and North Africa. Lastly, the children of these people or the second generation make up the fourth wave. Out of the 13.2 million new Muslims, a third lived in France, a quarter in Germany and 10% in England. Germany was the overall largest receiving nation and continues to be so (in addition to France and Scandinavia). In 2007 the largest populations were from Turkey, whereas in 2002 surveys conducted in France showed that the majority were from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa (Angenendt et al 2007). On the other hand, Muslims in England are mostly from South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh) (AlSayyad 2002: 33). Although the number of Muslim migrants has been growing since the 1950s, the influx of migrant labor changed in the 1990s. It was around this time that the European economies saw the end to their economic booms. Unemployment rose and the demand for unskilled migrant labor diminished (AlSayyad 2002: 35). Current migration therefore has little to do with European need for labor but

rather with the worsening state of Middle Eastern politics and economics. This has pushed illegal migration and the abuse of asylum seeking practices to become one of the main forms of migration for Muslims.

Stepping back, the situation of Muslim migration to Europe and the difficulties migrants face can be analyzed in the context of globalization. AlSayyad describes:

The globalization process has been characterized by the large-scale movement of people from former colonies to the countries of the former colonizers, sometimes leading to confrontations over identity issues. Muslims in Europe resist being treated as ‘outsiders,’ but at the same time many of them also resist—and face barriers to—assimilation as traditional European citizens. (AlSayyad 2002: 9)

This sets the stage for understanding how migrants in Europe are assimilating (or not) and working to shape or re-shape identity.

Migrants in Europe also face the typical deterrents to assimilation, such as the discrimination faced by the Burmese. In Europe this is in the form of stereotypes that stem from misunderstanding about the incoming population. For example, news that migrants were receiving welfare benefits (with some even abusing the benefits) has furthered xenophobia and anti-Islamic sentiment in Germany (AlSayyad 2002: 35). Europeans view Muslims as dependent and unwilling to work, although the high rates of unemployment are typically correlated to the fact that they are migrants and discriminated against in the work force (Johnson 2011). Turkish people in particular have also had difficulty with acceptance. Turkey has been viewed as a region associated with “Christendom, fears of Islamic revival, and resentment against Turkish migration” (AlSayyad 2002: 16). It therefore seems that these migrants face exclusion in economic areas like work, as well as in social settings due to negative perceptions. This is very

similar to what was described as occurring with Burmese populations where employment was unreliable and often unfair.

There are also legal issues that hinder the acceptance of migrants. In Germany, receiving citizenship may come as relief for migrants but it does not create an identity. Social inclusion in Germany is not immediate or guaranteed simply because of citizenship. The sense of inclusion only comes when other Germans recognize cultural similarity and view migrants as being a part of society (AlSayyad 2002: 34). In Bangkok too, Burmese may have temporary work permits, other forms of identification, or none at all. As mentioned before, documents mean that police cannot abuse them for monetary gain and that they will not be sent back to Burma. Legal paperwork brings relief to migrants as well as a general sense that government recognition protects them against any harsh social treatment they receive. Although there is a sense of belonging through such documentation, Burmese migrants still remain socially separate from Thais.

In the previous section assimilation had numerous definitions and various degrees of success. Before, assimilation in Europe may have been viewed by the majority of people as the adoption of culture, religion and state practices. However, Muslims in Europe are no longer expected to assimilate in a traditional way that Europeans might have seen with previous waves or generations. Instead AlSayyad argues that “Islam is now a European religion” and that Muslims are incorporating Islamic and European culture to create a new dynamic identity (AlSayyad 2002: 10).

Like most immigrants or migrants, first generation Muslims tend to hold on to components of their home culture, while succeeding generations may display a decline in these practices. Bassam Tibi puts forth the notion that people might not be losing Islamic

identity, but are instead incorporating it in a different way. 'Euro-Islam' consists of people becoming involved in European democracy and integrating themselves in the political body without giving up their Islamic identity. This is essentially a combined identity of European and Islamic involvement (AlSayyad 2002: 19). So, when in 2005 *Jyllands-Posten*, a Danish newspaper, printed a cartoon depiction of the Prophet Muhammad (in Islam it is said that the Prophet should not be depicted as an image), Muslim people in Europe protested legally. When the incident and its associated reactions are analyzed as part of the study of Euro-Islam identity, it shows that Muslim people are combining aspects of European legality with Islamic morality (Johnson 2011). This eclectic sense of identity is most likely possible because Muslim identities already include culturally different groups of people who share the same faith (AlSayyad 2002: 37). The relationship between Islam and its worshippers is typically determined by the cultural characteristics of nations or communities. Thus many scholars believe that as more Muslim migrants move and settle in Europe the Euro-Islamic identity will grow (Johnson 2011).

With Burmese migrants, differences stem from ideas such as urbanization, economic development, and sometimes the rifts within religion. The similarity here lies in combined identity formation. Burmese migrant youths, like those at a school I visited in downtown Bangkok, were expressing their identity through apparel and accessories. For example, teenage boys were seen carrying traditionally woven, ethnic Karen-style bags along with Nike sneakers. Although not particularly Thai, the combination of brand name sneakers and traditional textiles spoke of a mesh between cultures.

Contemporary migration is not only occurring in Southeast Asia. As discussed in this section, it also largely involves the Western world and the Middle East. Exploring how the processes in Europe compare with those that Burmese migrants experienced not only allows migration to be placed in a global context, but also reveals situational differences that may be significant for global movement.

Going Forward: Insights into Global Migration

This research will hopefully provide insight (or at least examples) for work that is currently being done and also expose questions that have yet to be examined. I therefore offer the possibilities of how this case study shines light on issues in global migration by putting forward generalizations about migrants that stem from the example of the Burmese.

I would first argue that this work tells of the difficulties migrants face in their host country and what kinds of jobs they have. For example, migrants in Bangkok are usually housekeepers and caretakers, or work at salons, restaurants and shops. Burmese are typically the lowest ranking workers at these positions. This seemingly hinders a cooperative work environment where Burmese and Thais contribute on equal grounds. The type of employment is important since jobs have the ability to determine social status and in turn the relationship between migrants and hosts.

This research also shows that historical tension can affect migrant assimilation just as much as contemporary affairs. As discussed before, it seems that a long history of socio-political divides between Burmese and Thais has contributed to current tension that has affected the way migrants in Bangkok interact in their host society. Other migrations may see the opposite where modern sentiments affect the treatment of people.

The Burmese are also an example of what might occur when people from places with heterogeneous ethnicities (many ethnic states) move to one large homogenous city. This is in addition to what happens when people move from rural to urban areas. The Burmese in Bangkok are adapting to the differences in Thai infrastructure such as transportation, technology and urbanization. However, adjusting socially seems to be

occurring at a different pace. If the Burmese were assimilating into Thai society they would ideally incorporate themselves into communities and Thais would accept their presence and treat them (more so) as equals. However, this ideal form of assimilation does not seem to be occurring. The migrants limit their relationships to other Burmese and typically believe they are unable to build friendships with Thais.

The Burmese are also an example of a situation where there are no established areas for communication and interaction between people to occur. For example, American Chinatowns or other ethnic areas serve as mediums of understanding where hosts share migrant culture. The host population typically comes to accept the presence of people from other places through the exposure to foreign food, items and activities.

Lastly, this research exposed how some factors thought to affect assimilation actually do not. For example, common religion would seem like a unifying social factor. Burmese and Thais share similar aspects of culture like religion, but this sometimes causes tension between them. Depending on which migrant population one is examining, these surprising factors affecting assimilation may be different.

I have discussed what the patterns for Burmese people might tell about migrants in general. But what might the implications of the current explanations mean for Burmese? One very real possibility is that they will not assimilate into Thai society at all. Failure to assimilate might be typical of seasonal workers, but many of these Burmese have spent a considerable amount of time in Bangkok, ranging from 6 months to nearly 10 years. Perhaps in situations like this where hostility and other emotions exist between two national groups, it may take more than just time in generations and presence in Bangkok to become part of Thai society. Stable legal recognition, equal treatment, and

cultural acceptance are just a few of the conditions that may need to improve for Burmese migrants in Bangkok before they participate on a social level with Thai people and vice versa.

The struggle Burmese migrants seem to have with assimilating into Thai society does not necessarily mean that they are not thriving. Despite having trouble communicating in Thai people are still determined to find jobs after making perilous journeys across the border. Social communities are forming amongst Burmese people to support one another in a city where discrimination towards them runs high. The Burmese are therefore an example of how a complex combination of history and culture affect the way people adapt to life in a new city.

As the world enters into a phase of increased globalization we are bound to see more integration of people and ideas. Like Bangkok, Europe and now the Persian Gulf, areas that are urbanizing and economies that are flourishing will increasingly demand inexpensive labor and encourage people to migrate from neighboring countries or from across oceans. Also, as warfare continues to destabilize certain regions, it too will cause people to relocate to safer places. More people will move from one geographic location to another and bring culture along with them. This case study described what was occurring in one particular case of migration, and when contrasted with other movements may be used to help predict what other cases might be like. For example, when people from similar culture areas move to different locations and encounter different societies they may have just as much trouble adjusting as those moving from places with very different backgrounds. It is difficult to say who is assimilating more easily but certain factors seen in the case of Burmese migrants pinpoints what discourages integration. For

example, historical tension between people seemed to play the largest role in why Burmese and Thais were not interacting and therefore why migrants found themselves unable to assimilate. Through history, Thai and Burmese people created distinct identities that led them to make social divides between them. Penetrating these divides has proved difficult, hence why migrants have had trouble with their host society. However, in other cases like with migrants in Europe it seemed that cultural differences such as social beliefs and religion played a larger role in identity and differentiation of people in society. Understanding the difficulties associated with the integration of migrants and host people are meant to help with the results of globalization. As more people move to new areas it may be possible to avoid the creation of pocket communities and the distress that seems to accompany these smaller groups of people in a new social environment. Perhaps when historical and cultural differences are overcome migrants and people of host societies will be able to interact freely and benefit from the diversity that is present.

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