



Roles of Buddhist monks in strengthening relationships between Muslims and Buddhists in the three southern border provinces

Punya Tepsing^a, Kasetchai Laeheem^{a,*}, Hasbullah Azizskul^b

^a Research Center for Languages, Culture, and Human Development in the Lower Asean, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University, Songkhla 90110, Thailand

^b Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Fathoni University, Pattani 94150, Thailand

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Abstract

This research aimed at investigating the roles of Buddhist monks in strengthening relationships between Muslims and Buddhists in the three southern border provinces by using the qualitative method. Data were collected from the documents and field studies in seven communities by observation. Interviews were conducted with 23 Buddhist monks, 12 governments officials, 31 Buddhists, 35 Muslims. Data triangulation was performed and descriptive analysis was conducted. The results suggested that both Buddhist monks include arrangements of cultural activities in temples in which Muslims participate (provided that the activities are not related to religious ceremonies), educational and religious promotion to Muslims on the monastery property, visitation of followers by inviting Islamic religious leaders to take part in the project with an emphasis on the households having Buddhist and Islamic elders and bedridden patients, and establishment of a rescue unit to help Buddhists and Muslims.

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Introduction

Muslims and Buddhists live together in the three southern border provinces of Thailand. Religious leaders play a key role as the spiritual leaders of their followers. Although the roles of Buddhist monks are not usually related to secular activities, they take a strong part in securing the community in the social and cultural context of the southern border area. A group of Buddhist monks has been attempting to create harmony between Thai Buddhists and Muslims. Buddhist monks have tried to engage Islamic religious leaders to be their partners and build good relationships. Tepsing and Boonprakan (2017) suggested in their research on engagement of the community in cultural conservation that an abbot of a

local temple in Narathiwat province was successful in inviting Islamic religious leaders to participate in community activities in the temple, which led to the possibility that Thai Muslims could work together with Thai Buddhists without prejudicing their religious ideals. Muslims displayed their local arts, and food was exhibited in separate booths. This reflected their desire for engagement since the temple is also part of the community. Buddhist monks in many communities attended Muslims' wedding ceremonies. Imams, in collaboration with Buddhist monks, led the local people to do charitable work or maintain ancient sites of the communities. Changson (2010) pointed out in his study on the change of Buddhists in a community in Yala province that, despite the hardship, this community was fortunate to have strong Buddhist monks and administrative leaders. In other words, the community had strong ties to the family system and patronization. More importantly, Buddhists and Malay Muslims had a very strong bond and relationship, which clearly reflects the roles of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: lkasetchai@yahoo.com (K. Leaheem).

religious leaders in the community, who place importance on peacefulness while embracing cultural diversity. Buddhist monks' opinions were welcomed. Both Buddhist monks and Muslims became ideal persons for society to create harmony between the two cultures.

Badani and Grand (2010) suggested in their research on the Role of Religious Leaders and Religious Communities in Diplomacy that religious leaders played a key role in society regarding peace, humanitarian assistance, provision of assistance to people affected by wars, poverty, illiteracy, human right violations, natural disasters, and religious extremism. They proposed that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have morality as the core of their practice. Religious leaders could assert this fact and exercise their leadership as well as supporting elimination of human violence. This important role of religious leaders was also mentioned in Guterres (2017) plan of action for religious leaders and actors to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocities. The author found that, for prevention of conflicts, the most influential person in the community, especially a strong religious leader, should be identified as he would have the potential to share beliefs and influence the life and behaviors of his followers in the community. However, some groups exercise the power of their position to disseminate hatred and hostility by instigating violence. In other words, religious leaders may exercise their power in either a positive or negative way. All sectors must be responsible for the prevention of violence and instigation by disseminating information about peace, patience, acceptance, and respect for each other to minimize tension between cultures. To solve conflicts in the three southern border provinces in the initial stage, the government usually overlooked the relationships between Buddhist monks and Muslims and considered Muslim leaders as persons who caused problems rather than solved problems. According to Burke et al. (2013) in the Contested Corners of Asia: Subnational Conflict and International Development Assistance the Case of Southern Thailand, it was suggested that some projects to assist the people affected by the unrest in the three southern border provinces carried out by the government were not successful because of the lack of understanding of the locality and too much emphasis on benefits, resulting in a gap between the city and villages. Building relationships with Muslim leaders, as well as building relationships with Islamic religious leaders, would enhance understanding of the locality since the lifestyle of Muslims was influenced by religious leaders.

There have been a number of studies on the roles of Buddhist monks and human and social development. However, most of them focused only on the roles of Buddhist monks and the community of their followers. However, the researcher believes that the development which would lead to strengthening relationships between Buddhists and Muslims should allow Buddhist monks to play their role in regard to both Buddhist and Muslim

followers. Based on the direct experience of the researcher in the three southern border provinces, it was found that many communities lived peacefully. They observed peace and harmony under Buddhist leaders. This raises the question of the roles Buddhist monks have taken in strengthening the social relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in the southern border provinces. Therefore, the aim of this research was to investigate the roles of Buddhist monks in strengthening relationships between Muslims and Buddhists in three southern border provinces.

Literature Review

The concepts of a role in relation with the status and expression of personal behaviour have been determined by social institutions, which can be seen in the works of many scholars. For instance, Lailert (2007) suggested that the roles included the performance of duties in accordance with the rights and obligations attached with the status or positions assigned to a person. Upon assuming the position, the person was supposed to take required responsibility as expected by society. Goffman (1956) argued that the roles of people who express or present their work to other people could be divided into three parts. The first is "frontstage", if compared to the theater, which is the part that is expressed to others. The second is "backstage" which is comprised hidden feelings. The last part is "the rest of the world" or the external world. Frontstage, the performers would play roles that the audience expected to see, in order to impress them. This is congruent to human behaviour in that they would choose the more impressive roles when dealing with other people to ensure that those people would be satisfied. However, the roles they played may conflict with their personal feelings and make them confused. Hughes and Kroehler (2013) argued that status leads to the determination of rights and duties which are identified as "roles" by sociologists. These expectations determine which personal behaviours are appropriate or inappropriate for roles. How individuals with such status or position should act out their assigned roles to ensure their benefit is the essential part of relationship behaviours. Ruengsakul (2008) suggested that roles are similar to the tools that create coherence between people in the society. Rules and regulations would be established to ensure understanding. Attitudes and behaviours of people in society would be shaped, and the social gaps would be minimized. Similarly, Jintapattanakit (2012) suggested that roles mean behavioural patterns repeated by community members, consisting of two aspects, namely, material roles and emotional roles. Biddle (1986) proposed that roles are behavioural characteristics of persons with social positions who have self-expectations and expectations by others. The concepts of roles are very useful within the research framework, especially in the following five dimensions: function, interaction, symbol, structures, and organization. Arpatharo (2013) commented that a monk is a social

position expected to have a role to propagate Buddhism. The Office of the Council of State (2018) specifies six duties; orderliness maintenance, religious studies, educational assistance, spreading Buddhism, public facilities and public works. The last duty is related to helping and support for the public benefit either in organization, individuals or at group level, and plays a mental and social role. When society has conflicts, sometimes monks participated as a mediator to promote unity and to be good people of the nation. Monks can persuade people who have different cultural backgrounds and ideas to join in harmony with many methods. Prommonkalachan (2013) said that there must be a principle of mercy based on love, no hate, no anger, whether thinking, speaking, or acting with kindness. Theppariyattimethi (2010) claimed that there must be no prejudice against each other. People must look at each other optimistically, make goodwill with each other, think of each other's goodness, create unity, and offer the sacrifice.

Society expects that persons holding certain roles have rights and duties. The role may conflict with the person's inner feelings. However, society requires that person to maintain their status by playing a role which focuses on the aggregate well-being of the people by building relationships. The role of the monk according to the Sangha Act includes social work by participating to help society with various benefits. This role of monks in the three southern border provinces is complicated by the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims. Nonetheless, society still expects monks to play a role in reducing these conflicts. Notwithstanding the perception that monks are a weak group that can fall victim during the conflict, some monks are actively creating activities to strengthen relationships between Muslims and Buddhists. The methods include mercy, optimism, sacrifice, and other methods.

Methodology

The research was conducted by using the qualitative method. Only communities having both Buddhist monks and Muslims, especially Islamic religious leaders who have collaboratively worked on strengthening good relationships, were selected in the three southern border provinces. The selected communities for research included two communities in Pattani province, three communities in Yala province, and two communities in Narathiwat province. Yala province had more field studies. This was because there are communities that clearly show the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims. Yala province had the least unrest statistically compared to the other two provinces (Panasnasee, 2014).

The informants consisted of 23 Buddhist monks, 35 Muslims, and 12 officials, who were selected by purposive sampling on the informants who tended to give the most information. In addition, 31 other Buddhists were recruited by snowball sampling. These informants had lived in their

communities for at least five years. Data were collected from documents, including research reports and textbooks concerning the relevant theoretical concepts. In addition, some data were collected from field studies in seven communities by means of observation and in-depth interviews in the form of semi-structured interviews to ensure that complete data were obtained. Data obtained from each interview were verified by data triangulation. In other words, the informants were interviewed with the same questions at different times and places. The persons close to the informants were also interviewed on similar issues. All data were analyzed to ensure validity. The issues were thermalized by assigning codes according to the identified issues. Then, descriptive analytics were performed.

Results

Buddhist monks strengthened relationships between Muslims and Buddhists in three southern border provinces in the following ways:

1. Arrangement of cultural activities in Thai Buddhist temples: These activities generally occurred in festivals at Thai Buddhist temples, where Buddhist monks and people collaboratively held activities. These included the day of pouring water on the hands of the revered Buddhist elders. Some Muslims sat far away to watch or they gave a pencak silat performance, which is part of Malay culture to entertain. During the day of bringing the chedi covering cloth onto the mountain, Muslims performed Malay traditional music in which people could enjoy the beautiful sound of Soprano oboe and Kong throughout the parade along with the long drum procession of Buddhists. At night, a Muslim shadow play was performed in Thai Buddhist temples. Some Muslim collaboration originated from their faith in the abbot as an informant. One participant stated "*I respect monks because of their helping us. When we are troubled, don't look at the yellow robe but the kindness of one person.*" (Personal interview, January 12, 2010). "*If the monk requests, we are ready to offer our help. That is to prevent conflicts*" (Personal interview, January 12, 2010). "*I choose the proper help but don't conduct Buddhist rituals*" (Personal interview, January 13, 2010). The role of Buddhist monks included their attempts to maintain religious arts, which were almost forgotten, while showing the greatness of multicultural activities. Strengthening the relationship between Muslims and Buddhists in this way could be done by using arts as the tool to connect people. This strategy might not yield an effective result because people separated after the end of the festivals. However, it reflected the potential of Buddhist monks or leaders in inviting Muslims to participate the Buddhist activities and creating social space in the Buddhist area. Despite that, some Muslims disagreed with using such activities to strengthen their relationships. One informant stated

that. “*I don’t agree with the Muslims who joined the ceremonies. Muslims are not allowed to take part in any ceremonies of other religions*”. (Personal interview, January 18, 2010).

2. Promotion of education and religion studies to Muslims: This role of the Buddhist monks appeared in an urban community where there was a school located within the Thai Buddhist temple grounds. The number of Muslim students had increased to the extent that all current students were Muslims. Buddhist monks did not object, but supported Islamic studies instead. The school was allowed to provide a complete Islamic curriculum and establish an Islamic prayer room on the temple grounds. Moreover, Buddhist monks provided knowledge of Buddhism at the schools, where listeners were Muslim students. In another rural community, Buddhist monks granted scholarships to all schools in the province using the budget from the scholarship funds collaboratively raised by Buddhist monks, merchants, local people, and government officials. Schools were asked to nominate their students who had good academic results and good behavior to obtain scholarships regardless of their religion. Buddhist monks in different districts contributed their funds as much as they could. In some years, Buddhist students who received the scholarships outnumbered Muslims, but in other years, it was the opposite. This project was conducted irrespective of ethnicity or religion. Schools would take their students to obtain the scholarships by themselves. The scholarships were allocated at three levels: primary schools, secondary schools, and universities. Both Buddhist and Muslim students who were selected by their institutions gathered at the temple to obtain the scholarship on the abbot’s birthday anniversary (January 7th each year). This was to ensure harmony as an informant mentioned “*If there is no clear policy, we won’t do it. Other places may arrange this kind of activity to help the monks to have some roles, but it is disorganized. However, the abbot organized everything well*” (Personal interview, December 26, 2018).

3. Visitation at the followers’ residences involved Buddhist monks who invited Islamic religious leaders to take part. They proposed to visit the houses where the elderly or bedridden patients, both Buddhist and Muslim, were living. Supplies and consumables were given to them upon the visitation. Part of the supplies was donated by the general public and some were obtained from Buddhist people’s offerings to Buddhist monks, these included soap, toothpaste, and slippers. Community leaders, government officials, and volunteers also took part in regular house visitation. The fact that Islamic and Buddhist religious leaders visited houses together strengthened relationships between the two religions, especially for bedridden patients and their relatives who wanted encouragement and spiritual support from religious leaders. This role was also initiated by the

collaborative network of Buddhist monks, local leaders, and community leaders. Buddhist monks attempted to invite other monks to visit the community to carry on this project. Soldiers accompanied house visitation and most people started to believe that this project was initiated by the military. In fact, Buddhist monks initiated it, and soldiers only provided support upon the monks’ request. Soldiers helped coordinate and carry heavy items, but they were not protecting religious leaders. If the project was led by the military, it could be objected to by the community. Muslim soldiers selected supplies for Muslims to ensure compliance with Islamic traditions. They gave advice on which things should be given and which should not be given as stated in one interview. “*We are lucky to have the rangers who supported and coordinated with the leaders for us. When our community received foods on auspicious days, we asked them whether it was appropriate. We didn’t have problems with the things from Buddhist temples since Muslim soldiers would choose which could or couldn’t be consumed*” (Personal interview, June 28, 2019).

4. Establishment of a rescue unit to help affected people: Buddhist monks who initiated the project or activities were trained on disaster prevention prior to ordination. The rescue unit was established to help the local people who were affected by disaster. In the beginning, there were only Buddhist volunteers who participated in the project. After that, Muslims joined the activities to help both Buddhist and Muslim victims. Sometimes, Buddhist monks went to the affected areas to offer help by themselves, such as when Muslims had a car accident or trees in the forest hurt Muslims. Upon each rescue, photos were taken and publicized. With this, Muslims recognized their good deeds and kindness regardless of the religion. This resulted in impressions and recognition of Buddhist monks, contributing to stronger relationships. Rescuers were trained and supported by several parties such as government agencies, the military, private entities, or foundations. Service works covered many areas and the network was expanded to Buddhist monks at other temples. The main players of the rescue unit were Buddhists in the community, who joined the project with dedication under the supervision of Buddhist monks. They intended to help both Buddhist and Muslim victims by prioritizing benefit and safety. At that time, Muslims called for help from the rescue unit in spite of minor problems as mentioned in the following interview: “*Rescuers had to have been trained. Buddhist monk were trained on rescue before they were ordained. The monk is an expert at rescuing and the one who connects us. No matter who you are, you have the right to be rescued and treated under the human rights principles. Rescuers have their own ethics, that is, helping everyone regardless of their religion. Muslims who lost their cats or found snakes intruding their houses called rescuers. We were glad to help them*” (Personal interview, August 19, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusion

Buddhists monks strengthened relationships with Muslims both psychologically and socially. The psychological aspect was moral development and the building of a positive attitude towards people from different religious backgrounds. The social aspects were social organization, collaboration based on different beliefs, dedication, and coordination for harmony and benefit of the overall society. This coincides with the notion of Ruengsakul (2008) suggesting that roles could be considered as tools to connect people in society. Rules are established to ensure understanding. Attitudes, as well as behaviors of society are shaped, and social gaps are minimized. Behaviors of Buddhist monks and Muslims were expressed through several projects or activities, which reflected the needs to stabilize the society with different beliefs despite some reactions of Muslims. The roles of Buddhist monks reflect their determination to create harmony and adjust themselves to the Muslim way of life for the benefit of themselves and Buddhist people who are the minority. Hughes and Kroehler (2013) argued that people generally change their roles in accordance with their positions as expected by society. Positions are related to personal behaviors. In other words, their actions are indicated by the benefits they expect, and positions could only be the factors encouraging people to adjust their behaviors.

The results of this study also reflect the roles of Buddhist monks on strengthening of relationships between Buddhists and Muslims in other aspects. The first aspect is the role of status. It was found that Buddhist monks are classified as priests who have a higher position than laypersons and live a different way of life than laypersons. Muslims such as an imam or *khateeb*, however, are not priests and live the normal way of life as laypersons. For this reason, Buddhist monks could create faith energy quite easily and motivate people more effectively. This is in line with the notion of Guterres (2017), who suggested that strong religious leaders would be more capable of sharing faith and influencing behaviors of people in the community. Therefore, when cultural activities were arranged in Thai Buddhist temples, they were well attended by many admiring Buddhist and Muslims. Buddhist monks would initiate visiting followers because there were many supplies at the temples, which could be donated to those people. Moreover, the temple grounds were so large that schools could be built, and Buddhist monks could have the co-power to make decisions with school management, including promotion of education and religious studies for Muslim students. Different positions lead to unequal behavioral expression according to the roles. This is supported by Biddle (1986), who suggested that the roles were the behavioral appearance of people who are members of society and have positions in society. They have both self-expectations, and expectations by others. There are at

least five variables, including organization, structure, duty, reaction, and symbolism. In Buddhism, monks are classified within one of the organizations. The religious structure is quite flexible, and they are obliged to comply with the religious disciplines and social duties. Buddhist society is open for creating relationships with followers of other religions as can be seen from the fact that Buddhist monks could donate money for construction of a mosque without breaching the religious norms. However, imams could not donate money to build temples. Generally, Muslims are not allowed to give monetary donation for ritual activities of other religions. However, they can donate money for any activities without religious practice.

For this reason, it can be assumed that Buddhist monks have more opportunities to support the proactive roles to strengthen relationships than Muslims. Therefore, most of the roles of building relationships between Buddhists and Muslims are played by Buddhist monks and government officials, which reflect the policy of harmony fostered by Buddhist monks and government agencies.

The second aspect is related to the performance of duties of Buddhist monks. The social duty of Buddhist monks is public service. Most Buddhist monks acknowledge the provisions. However, because of the unrest in the three southern border provinces, the social roles of some Buddhist monks are beyond the provisions. According to the Office of the Council of State, (2018) regarding public service, public service means service provided to the public and society in the form of materials which are not against the religious principles, such as facilitating the public, allowing the temple to be used for charity, arranging a public library within the temple grounds, and assisting with activities for the public benefit. In this area, Buddhists have provided assistance to Muslims for years, resulting in their good relationships. This coincides with the study of Tanod et al. (2018) indicating that despite the unrest in the southern border provinces, relationships between Buddhist monks and Muslims remain good. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to determine the scope of the public service role and indicate the criteria of helping Buddhists to maintain the temple's tradition and social assistance. For example, one Buddhist monk established a rescue unit to help victims, including Muslims, who had car accidents, which was praised by Muslims. However, the same Buddhist monk encouraged Buddhists to oppose Muslim students who wore a hijab to the school located within the temple grounds, which caused a lot of criticism from Muslims. The behavior of monks was discussed publicly. Although Buddhists were satisfied with the monk's behavior as the leader who protected Buddhism during conflicts, Muslims criticized him for performing an inappropriate role. This is supported by Robbin (1996), who argued that a person might face situations that cause him to play several roles at the same time and one role may conflict with another.

The third aspect is social expectations towards Buddhist monks and Muslim, especially religious leaders. Buddhist monks are expected to be moral, and strictly comply with their religious principles, and be a role model for society. However, as Buddhist monks have to live in southern border provinces where conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims exist, Buddhist monks play a key role in solving the problem of maintaining relationships between Buddhists and Muslims. For this reason, Buddhist monks attempt to create socially expected roles though they have to act beyond their duties and are criticized by society. This is supported by Goffman (1956), who suggests that roles are human actions of presentations of oneself to others, which may sometimes conflict with their personal feelings.

Recommendations

1. To maintain relationships between Buddhists and Muslims, it is not only religious leaders who should be relied on, but other mechanisms should also be employed. Specifically, the education system in the southern border provinces should focus on multiculturalism, which would build understanding between people from different religious backgrounds and create protection when distorted information is received.

2. The issue requiring further studies is the assessment of relationships between Buddhists and Muslims under mechanisms created by religious leaders. Research should focus on how participation in the activities initiated by leaders of both religions affects relationships between followers. There should be a comparison of achievements between Buddhists and Muslims when they attend the activities.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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