MUSLIMS, EDUCATION, AND MOBILITY IN THAILAND'S UPPER SOUTH: WHY THEY ARE IMPORTANT

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ABSTRACT

Thailand's Muslims have received increasing attention in recent decades. Much of this work has focused the Malayu-speaking populations of Thailand's so-called "Deep South" (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and southern Songkla provinces), with secondary attention to Thai speaking Muslims of varied ethnicities in Bangkok and Chiangmai. Much less attention has been given to the Thai-speaking Muslims of Thailand's upper south, including the east-coast southern peninsular provinces ranging from Chumpon province in the north to northern Songkla province in the south. In earlier presentations of this paper, the author has discovered that some of that inattention is due to the assumption, especially among some Thai academics, that the Thai-speaking Muslims of Thailand's upper South are analytically less important than the Melayu-speaking Muslims of the Thailand's Far South. One of the purpose of the present article is to use the vitality, geographical mobility, and educational outcomes observable in a particular cluster of Upper South Muslim communities to demonstrate their social and analytical significance. A second informational gap addressed by the present article is that when scholars have studied education in Thailand's Muslim communities, they have focused mostly on explicitly "Islamic" parts of the curricula, and less on the "secular" subjects and streams of study. Yet Muslim parents, community leaders, and former students often consider successful outcomes in these so-called "worldly" streams to be just as important as explicitly "Islamic studies" in laying the groundwork for better individual and community futures. Yet despite local ideological emphasis on the equal importance of the Islamic and secular "streams," or "languages," of education, school enrollment statistics obtained from Thai educational administration offices suggest that Muslim rates of participation in primary and secondary education—in both government and private Islamic schools—tends to drop off much faster than is the case with Buddhist student enrollments. This drop-off is especially observable at the higher grades of secondary education. The two topics are interrelated, because outcomes in the Islamic and secular educational systems affect community social mobility. They also influence the community members' relative economic and social well-being compared to other Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Local Muslim educators and religious leaders suggest that the local communities that are the focus of this article have been educational underachievers, and they have suggested that this underachievement may be feeding into other local social problems such as drug abuse, access to land and capital, and access to good jobs. The two topics are also interrelated in that education tends to be positively related to social mobility. Part of this mobility occurs as people move to other provinces and countries to acquire more advanced education, part of it occurs as they complete their educations and move in search of appropriate jobs, and parts of it occur as educated members of the community return to develop local leadership positions. This latter point can be especially true of those who pursued advanced Islamic education in the Middle East, though even these individuals find themselves drawing on both Islamic and secular bodies of knowledge and experience as they develop their career paths.

Keywords: Thailand, Muslims, Education, Educational Outcomes, Social Change

INTRODUCTION

OPENING SUMMARY

This paper is an initial study of Muslim communities' educational aims and success rates in secular education curricula in a group of heavily Muslim communities in Thailand's Upper South, including education in both government schools and private Islamic schools. The reason for choosing this particular topic and place is because earlier scholarship on the education of Muslims in Thailand has tended to focus on Malay-speaking Muslims in the far southern provinces, where issues of education and choice of schooling have, according to researchers like Joseph Liow (2009), been bound up with issues of ethnic identity. In the Upper South provinces extending from Chumporn south to northern Songkhla, where most Muslims speak Thai and identify as ethnic Thai, the issues associated with choice of education were expected to be different from those encountered in the far southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and southern Songkhla

There a second reason for focusing a study of Muslim communities on the issue of secular education. This reason was rooted in queries posed by one of the first Muslim leaders I interviewed in the province where I have been studying. When I asked him what kinds of research projects he would find most useful, he immediately responded that it would be useful to know (1) what kinds of educational outcomes local Muslim families desired for their children and why, and also (2) to know what kinds of jobs they were finding and how satisfied they were with those careers. From these two sets of questions we can extrapolate a third and fourth question: (3) what kinds of educational outcomes are actually being achieved, and (4) what factors attribute to attainment or non-attainment of the families' educational goals for their children.

The present paper is merely a preliminary report of fieldwork aimed at exploring the answers to these questions. However, its primary findings seem to support the urgency of the questions that Muslim leader was raising. In short, there appears to be a lingering "crisis of under-participation in secondary education" in the most heavily Muslim districts studied. This conclusion is based on an initial evaluation of local government statistics, and it supports overall impressions that were already being given me

by local Muslim leaders in those communities, some of whom also suggested reasons for under-participation, several of which will be reported later in the present paper. At this point in the research project I am merely reporting initial findings. More work needs to be done before specific suggestions could be made for improving educational participation and outcomes. Also, in line with a growing trend in mainstream anthropological practice, it might be wise to discuss those suggestions with local community leaders before publicly publishing them.

In the sections that follow, I will briefly review the available scholarly literature on Muslim communities in Thailand to establish the scholarly value of the present study as "filling a gap in knowledge." I will then describe the general characteristics and history of the communities studied, as those characteristics potentially have some bearing on the educational participation patterns that are encountered in the publicly available statistics. The paper will go on to document the statistics available on Muslim vs. Buddhist educational participation rates in those areas, and then will close by citing some suggestions on the reasons for by Muslims that were offered by some local Muslim interviewees. It should be noted that those suggestions were offered to me *before* I gained access to the educational statistics reported in this paper. Also, it was in those interviews that I first heard suggestions that educational outcomes in those particular subdistricts seemed unusually low, suggestions that seem to be supported by the statistics I have so far been able to obtain. Consequently, the statistics serve as support for the local observations, while the observations may offer potentially valid explanations for the statistical patterns, which further exploration in future research projects in this area.

TOPIC JUSTIFICATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW: FILLING GAPS IN SCHOLARLY KNOWLEDGE ABOUT EDUCATION IN THAI MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

Thailand's Muslim communities have received increasing scholarly attention in recent decades. English-language anthropological studies of communities in southern Thailand that contained Muslims began to appear in the 1960s, with Thomas Fraser's studies of a Malay fishing village in southern Thailand being especially noted (e.g., Fraser 1960, Fraser 1966). As suggested by the book titles, Fraser's early studies are likely to have been mostly descriptive, focusing on the full range of village life and behavior rather than on the villagers' status as representatives of local forms of Islam. Among the earliest publications in English that focused on Thailand's Muslim communities in Thailand in their status as Muslim religionists were the early works of American anthropologist Raymond Scupin, beginning with his Ph.D. dissertation (Scupin 1978) and continuing with early publications on Muslim communities in Bangkok and southern Thailand (e.g., Scupin 1980a, 1980b, 1981, 1982, 1987, 1989). By the early 1990s this English-language literature on Thailand's Muslims was starting to expand, including contributions by Thai Muslim scholars such as Chaiwat Satha-anand (e.g., Chaiwat 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 2005) and Surin Pitsuwan (1985).

In the early 2000s, as increasing local and international attention was being paid to the violence in Thailand's southernmost border provinces, where self-identified Melayu Muslims comprised the majority of the population, literatures exploring ethno-religious dynamics potentially related to this conflict grew exponentially (e.g., Askew 2007; Braam 2013; Jerryson 2011; Liow 2009; McCargo 2007, 2008, 2011).[1] Scholars like Chaiwat had already been studying these issues, but now the literature grew to include political scientists (e.g., McCargo 2007, 2008, 2011) and anthropologists (e.g., Askew 2007, Jerryson 2011). In the midst of this most recent literature, which has tended to focus more on political dynamics than on local Muslim community or religious dynamics, there also began to arise some fieldwork-based literatures that began to explore Muslims' on-the-ground religious practices and discourses in the southernmost provinces. Among the most notable of these were Joll (2012) and Liow (2009) Also, increasing attention was being paid to Muslim systems of religious education, especially in the Far South (e.g., Braam 2013; Liow 2009), especially with regard to what was being called religious reformism or Islamic revivalism.

The Thai-language literature on Muslim groups in Thailand was becoming even richer, and much of this was now being written by Muslims who were citizens of the country. Much of this work is in the form of government-funded research reports and untranslated scholarly journal articles. Yet the fine-grained quality of the research results are often valuable and well-presented, and because this material explores many details about Muslim community life that have not been explored in English, such materials merit more thorough exploration in future English-language works on this community.[2]

However, despite this increased scholarly attention to Muslim communities in Thailand, there remains room for additional exploration, especially in two areas. The first gap in scholarly research is the Muslim communities of what might be called Thailand's Upper South, by which I mean the Thai-speaking areas of the southern provinces from Chumporn southward yet north of Thailand's Malay-majority areas of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and southern Songkhla provinces. Significant Muslim populations exist in many of these Upper South areas. On the peninsula's West Coast, in the Thai-speaking province of Ranong, the national census figures show that the Muslim percentage of the population was as high as 12 percent in 2010. In the west coast province of Trang it was 14 percent, in Phuket it was 16 percent, in Pha Nga it was 22 percent, and in Krabi it was 35

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[1] One is tempted to add to this list Montesano and Jory's edited volume *Thai South and Malay North* (2008). However, several of the papers in that volume had originally been presented at conferences before the 2004 escalation of the southern frontier violence, and only a couple of the chapters deal directly with issues underlying the conflict. The book's intent seems, instead, to be to explore the "plurality" of peoples and cultures and their interactions in the social-cultural continua from southern Thailand through northern Malaysia, a project that seems to me to be well-framed and meriting continued scholarly attention.

[2] The author hopes to begin those explorations in future drafts of this article or in future projects inspired by this article.

percent. On the east coast, the percentages tend to be smaller, but some areas still showed strong concentrations of Muslims, especially along the coasts, and sometimes also in inland communities such as the ones that are the primary focus of this article.[3] The second gap that should be noted is that the literature on the education of Muslims has tended to focus almost exclusively on education in the Islamic religion, while focusing less on Muslims' education in secular subjects. This overconcentration is understandable, as there are some unique things about Thailand's Islamic education infrastructure, particularly the ways that concerns about Islamic education systems cross-cut with concerns about Malay ethnic identity in Thailand's far south (see Braam 2013, Joll 2012, Liow 2009), and also the ways that the content of Islamic education has been absorbing, and sometimes resisting, influences from elsewhere. Nevertheless, despite the importance of the topic of specifically religious Islamic educational instruction, interaction with ethnically and linguistically "Thai" Muslim community leaders in the early stages of the present project suggested that many of them had an equally keen interest in the educational and career outcomes of Muslim children who were working their way through what the Muslim communities tend to call *saai saaman,* or secular educational subjects such as mathematics, science, modern languages, nursing, public administration, educational administration, and more. Many Muslim leaders that I met spoke of the importance of getting a firm grounding in *both* streams of education, both specifically Islamic religious instruction and more general secular subjects studied by students of all religious backgrounds.[4] This represents a break from the practice of several decades earlier, where Muslim students might have studied almost exclusively Islamic subjects in private Islamic schools.[5] Today, private Islamic schools still exist, but they have added secular subjects to their curriculum. In addition, many local mosques make available to those Muslim children who attend government schools extra curricula of evening and weekend instruction in Arabic and Islamic studies that may be offered in the mosque or in the Imam's home. Meanwhile, somewhat confusingly, the Thai word *pau-noh,* derived from the Malay word *pondok,* is often colloquially applied (at least in the area I studied) both to the formalized private Islamic schools that teach both religious and secular subjects and to the smaller traditional-style schools that teach only Islamic subjects.

The present research project, which is still in its early stages, intends to address both gaps by focusing on an interactive group of heavily Muslim communities in the Upper South and by specifically seeking to learn what local Muslim leaders' and families' hopes and observations were in relation to secular education and educational results for Muslim young people from their communities. In the course of researching this subject, I have also been learning a great deal about local Islamic educational institutions, and also learning a great deal about how people and ideas have been flowing across local, provincial, and international borders in the pursuit of educations and careers. The present paper will provide a preliminary report on all these areas.

CHOICE OF COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

The communities in which I chose to focus this research project were centered primarily on two inland subdistricts (*tambon*) that collectively had a population of about 23,000 people, a sizable portion of whose population was said to be Muslim. In April 2017 the subdistrict that I will refer to as Subdistrict A was reported to have a population of 14,261, while Subdistrict B had a population of 8,915 (Statistics 2017). The Muslim proportions of these populations were estimated by local informants to be anywhere from 40 percent to 70 percent for each of these subdistricts. These percentages were disproportionately high for a province where on average, according to government census figures, Muslims accounted for a mere 6.6 percent of the population in the year 2010, making a total of 96,000 Muslims in the province (National Statistical Office 2010).[6] As far as I have been able to determine, the data on religious adherence are available only for the national and provincial level of analysis. Local officials told me that the data on religious adherence was not available for the district and subdistrict levels. This seemed odd, because the religious adherence of specific individuals is probably on file in the district records (ever since the early 1990s the national ID cards have been required to list the owner's religion, and people are supposed to report their change of address to the district offices every time they move to a new place). For whatever reason, the collective religious adherence of the local populations

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[3] The source of the census data cited here is National Statistical Office (2010).

[4] In the course of fieldwork I found that these two streams of education are sometimes also referred to locally as "two languages" (*saaung phaasaa*-สองภาษา), possibly because secular education is conducted in Standard Thai, while Islamic education also provides instruction in Arabic and Arabic-language memorization and recitation, starting at the very earliest levels, in preparation for more advanced Arabic-oriented Islamic studies at later stages of education. Whether called "two streams" (*saaung saai*–สองสาย) or "two languages" (*saaung phaasaa*-สองภาษา), by early 2017, local Muslim religious and educational leaders were emphasizing that both elements were equally important. As one respected teacher from a nearby private Islamic school put it, Muslims needed to be educated both in the "knowledge of the world" (secular subjects) and the "knowledge of the heart" (Islamic education subjects).

[5] See the discussion of "Traditional Pondok" schools in Liow 2009:52–57. In 2017, such schools also existed in the areas I was studying. However, for most Muslims these traditional-style Islamic studies schools, many of which were meeting in mosques or private homes, seemed to be treated as informal supplements to the education being received in more formalized kindergartens and primary and secondary schools run by the government or by private Islamic foundations.

[6] This figure was up from 5.6 percent, or 78,000 individuals, in 1990, and 6.2 percent, or 94,200 individuals, in 2000. It is not known how much of this figure may be due to in-migration, how much of this may be due to conversion and how much may be due to the relatively high birth rates among Muslims, who sometimes prefer relatively high families, due to the teaching adhered to be some that raising relatively large families are an obligation for Muslims. However, the notion of "large families" is relative. Muslim parents who reported their family sizes to me rarely reported having more than 4 or 6 children. What makes this "relatively large" is that in recent decades the birth rates among non-Muslims have dropped precipitously, partly due to government policies promoting birth control, and partly due to economic and social changes that make children an economic burden rather than a economic help.

had not been recently compiled, at least not in this district, so this paper must make do with the local residents' and officials' estimates on the Muslim proportion of local population.

On the other hand, the religious adherence of primary and secondary school students appears to support the local reports of high Muslim concentrations in these two subdistricts. In the case of school enrollments, the religious adherence of students is centrally collected and publicly reported for both government and privately-owned schools. Muslims in this area have at least two options in deciding where to send their children to school: they can send them to government schools, or they can send them to one of the several private Islamic schools that exist in or near these two subdistricts.[7] The proportion of local schoolchildren attending these private Islamic schools was said to be sizable. Yet even *without* counting *any* of the local residents who were attending these private Islamic schools, the local Muslim populations seemed overrepresented in local schools, especially local primary schools. Specifially, in primary schools (Grades 1 through 6) located in Subdistrict A, Muslims accounted for 80.1 percent of the children attending those schools (784 Muslims out of 975 total students attending elementary school in Subdistrict A). Meanwhile, in Subdistrict B, Muslims accounted for nearly 75 percent of the children attending government schools in the district (445 out of 596 elementary school students). In addition, a private Islamic school located in subdistrict B reported a primary school enrollment of 432 students, which when added to the government school figures would mean a total Muslim primary school enrollment of 1,661 out of a total enrollment of 2,003, or 82 percent of primary school enrollment in the two subdistricts.[8]

Figures for secondary schools seem harder to compare than the ones for primary schools, as governance boundaries for primary and secondary schools do not correspond to each other. However, the figures for both government schools and for private Islamic schools suggest a rapid drop-off in school attendance for Muslims who are in Grades 7 through 9 and especially for Muslims who are in Grades 10 through 12. In the entire province, the only government secondary school that has a Muslim majority of students is a relatively small secondary school located in subdistrict A. As of the 2017 school year, this school reported 136 Muslim students and 100 Buddhist students, for a total of 236 students and a Muslim percentage of around 58 percent. This is already lower than the 67 to 80 percent that was seen in primary schools, some of which were larger than this school. Yet the next highest proportion of Muslims, and the highest Muslim enrollment overall for the province, is the 231 Muslim students (11.4 percent of the school's enrollment) at the largest government school in the neighboring subdistrict, which also contains the main district's primary town center.

Indeed, the total Muslim secondary school enrollments for ALL government schools in this province (a province that contains more than 20 subdistricts) was only 1363 students. ***This province-wide figure is only about 145 more than the total Muslim enrollment in government primary schools in just the two subdistricts being studied.*** Furthermore, the official statistics for the two private Islamic schools offering secondary-level education in or adjacent to the two subdistricts suggested that enrollment in these schools also declined as students got older. In private Islamic school A, for example, enrollment in primary school (grades 1-6) was 432 students, while enrollment in secondary school (grades 7-12) was 423. At first glance, it may appear that enrollment numbers remain about the same between grade levels. However, when secondary school enrollment is broken down between "early secondary" (Grades 7-9) and "late secondary" (Grades 10-12), a clear enrollment dropoff is seen: This particular school enrolls 279 students in early secondary courses but only 164 in late secondary courses as of early 2017. The other Islamic secondary school close to these two subdistricts for which statistics could be obtained showed an even sharper drop-off—403 students in Grades 7-9 and only 160 in Grades 10-12. If this pattern is paralleled in other private Islamic schools in the region, then the question will have to be asked as to why the Muslim students seem to be dropping out of school so much faster than the Buddhist students, and what are they doing instead of continuing their studies in local schools. We will return to this possible "crisis of underparticipation in secondary education" in the closing pages of this paper.

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TWO SUBDISTRICTS
As noted above, there is an unusually high concentration of Muslims in the two subdistricts being studied. This is indicated not only by school enrollments but also by the distribution of mosques. A Muslim provincial leader whom I interviewed in 2013 reported that at the time of the interview his province contained approximately 120 mosques, with 84 of them in just two districts. One of those districts was the capital district, with 49 mosques. The district with the second highest number of mosques was the one in which I was centering my work, and this district reportedly had 35 mosques. Of those 35 mosques, as many as 24 may have been in the two subdistricts where I was focusing my study.[9]

I should note at the outset that the group of Muslim communities on which I focused my study were interactive with Muslim communities in neighboring and nearby subdistricts. Some attended private Islamic schools in neighboring districts, and there was also interaction at various public Islamic events both in the local district and in the capital district. There was also interaction with people who had studied abroad, and with people who had married in from other provinces. Therefore, instead of taking the terms "community" or "study site" as a "bounded space," for purposes of this paper the two subdistricts should be taken as a

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[7] Home schooling and other forms of "non-formal" secular education reported also exists in Thailand, but reportedly is not yet in widespread use.

[8] Some of the students in this private Islamic school may have come from outside the two subdistricts; however, there were also two or three more private Islamic schools within a few kilometers of the two subdistricts, so the proportion of primary school students who are Muslim may have been even higher than what I have reported for these two subdistricts.

[9] Local counts of mosques may differ from the official provincial counts, because the official counts are likely to include only those mosques (or "communities") whose official registration had been approved by the central provincial committee, while the local counts sometimes also included mosques who were in the process of being registered, or which were not recognized for various reasons.

collective focal point from which a set of larger relationships can be traced. Therefore, for some purposes I will speak of "the community" as referring to Muslim villages within this specific area, while for other purposes I will speak of the interlinked set of communities including Muslim institutions in nearby areas, and in still other cases, I may speak of the "Muslim community" as a larger whole extending across local and international borders, similar to the way that many contemporary Muslims themselves speak of the *umma* as an international community.[10]

The local Muslim community is a relatively rural one that is reportedly descended from migrants or perhaps prisoners of war that may have been settled in the area for at least two hundred years, supporting itself through much of that time primarily through rice farming, garden farming, and forest products, perhaps along with some seafood from the local rivers.[11] Some informants (see Anonymous 2016a) suggest that as recently as the early 1960s, the communities grew food primarily for subsistence, while seeking to produce just enough extra to be able to trade or sell surpluses in exchange for goods and foodstuffs not producible in the local community (cite Anonymous 2016a again).

With the development of roads (possibly as recently as 1992, though others say the main roads were paved around 1985) and the introduction of municipal electricity systems (possibly as recently as 2002, though other informants say that municipal electricity probably came in 1982 and certainly no later than 1987), the economy became more diverse and more closely linked to surrounding communities. The written sources I obtained from earlier fieldworkers did not specify the authorities on which they were basing the later dates, and based on what I have seen on the ground in 2013–2017 I am inclined to agree with the informants reporting earlier dates. One of the reasons why I prefer the earlier dates is because of the nature of the built environment that can be found in these subdistricts today. The written sources (which appeared to be based on local interviews) suggested that before the roadways were built, houses and land occupation had been oriented to the waterways rather than to the current roadways. If that is so, then the entire community would have to have become reoriented to the current roadway patterns in less than twenty-five years, and that seems an awfully short time for a transformation into the roadway-oriented community that I have seen in the years 2013–2017. However, an additional informant who had done student teaching in one of the area's government schools in the late 1990s suggested a potential third reading of this information, stating that although roads already existed at that time but were in bad condition. Furthermore, other sources I have encountered in the course of reading for other projects suggest that the non-urban areas of southern Thailand have undergone tremendous physical and economic transformations in the past twenty-five years.

Whatever the case, by the time I first encountered the local communities in 2013, there were blacktopped two-lane roadways running through the spines of the subdistricts both north to south and from east to west. In addition, there were numerous blacktopped side roads and back roads, in addition to a residual network of graveled roads that were wide enough for motorized vehicle transport. In addition, by this time motorcycles, pickup trucks, and automobiles seemed common forms of transportation. There was a major fresh market at the junction of the two subdistricts. In addition, some local industries producing for external markets had arisen, including pottery and brick-making, rubber production, and fruit farming. In addition, many young people were reportedly working in nearby towns. The nearby provincial and district centers were also expanding rapidly. The outer edges of the provincial center underwent significant physical transportation in the four years from 2013 to 2017. In addition, the district center, which was located just two to fifteen kilometers away, had apparently been considered a "collection of villages" just fifteen to twenty years earlier, and as late as 2013 it was still often referred to simply as a "market" (*talat,* as in "I'm going to the market"). However, by 2017 I was starting the district center being referred to occasionally as a *mueang* ("town" or "city"), and many parts of this central subdistrict of around 25,000 people were thoroughly built up in the style of a small urban locality. Nevertheless, although some fieldworkers have reported evidence of improved prosperity in the area, in early 2017 there was reportedly still a perception of relative poverty within the two relatively rural subdistricts that were the core of my study. Most of

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[10] The Thai word *chumchon* (ชุมชน) similarly appears to have multiple referents. The most common referents are to local village or neighborhood, to a group of people sharing similar characteristics, such as an ethnicity or a religion. On the other hand it is rarely used to refer to groups of relatively high power or social influence at the regional or national level–for that purpose it seems more common to use the term *sangkhom* (สังคม). The social units referred to with the term *chumchon* normally seem to be assumed to be relatively bounded and enumerable, and may correspond roughly to the government's tendency to enumerate villages and to encourage local social organization in terms of identifiable *chumchon* or villages, even in seemingly urban areas. However, it is important to remember that the term *chumchon* normally refers to relatively rural areas or else to relatively disempowered minority or other indentifiable groups. Ideally, the term refers to a group of people living and interacting together, seemingly incorporating the kinds of "bounded group" assumptions that were common in structural-functional and other kinds of anthropological "community studies" in the 1950s and earlier, only in this case reinforced by local administrative structures that similarly use the term "community" in a way that is often coterminous with the administratively-bordered and administered "village."

[11] The actual origins of these communities are open to dispute, and are probably multiple. One widely repeated story has the core community descended from a Malay warrior from the Kedah-Satun area (then known as Saiburi) who either volunteered his services to local rulers or else was forcibly resettled along with some of his followers in the aftermath of one of the military movements in which the Thai rulers of Nakhon Si Thammarat were ordered to send troop to quell uprisings in the Malay areas know known as Kedah. However, some local informants point out that family names descended from Patani (on the opposite side of the Malay peninsula from Kedah) are also well represented in the area. As is common in societies that practice bilateral kinship (the United States and most of the non-Chinese societies of Southeast Asia are examples of such societies), it is common for memories of family history to lack specificity beyond the most recent decades. Consequently, the questions raised by this footnote are probably unresolvable. Nevertheless, they merit further exploration as a way of adding complexity to our knowledge of the area's possible histories.

the area was considered "rural," despite the existence of shops and markets clustered at significant nodes throughout the area. Most of the central roadways were now fronted by homes (many of them concrete), mosques, Buddhist monasteries, government buildings, and government and private schools. However, even along these roads there were still green spaces, and farther back from these roads there were still areas where the neighborhoods were so sparsely settled that no lights could be seen at night. Parts of these areas were devoted to rice fields and grazing areas and other parts were forested.

I should add, incidentally, that at the time of the study, especially from 2014 to 2017, the southern Thai rural economy was in a depression that hit local agricultural commodity producers especially hard. All types of agricultural commodities were reportedly suffering from low prices, but small-hold rubber producers were hit especially hard, and they were stuck with a physical investment of a type that made it hard to re-purpose the land to other products. While rubber was not the only crop being grown in this area, the problem of the rubber economy, and its potential ripple effects on the rest of the local economy, merits some comment.

Rubber trees are an investment that reportedly requires a ten-year wait before the trees begin to produce. After they begin to produce, the raw rubber can be harvested for twenty years, and then the trees will need to be replaced. Reportedly, the local rubber economy had expanded in recent years. The commodity prices had been relatively high, and during those times the Thai government had reportedly also run a subsidy program encouraging the replanting of rice-producing agricultural lands and fruit orchards into lands with rubber trees. Further subjecting the small-holders' exposure to the fluctuations international commodity prices, the government program had reportedly required mono-cropping in rubber trees in order to receive the subsidy. In other words, landholders using the program to subsidize the planting of rubber trees were be required to plant only rubber trees and no other crops.

Therefore, when rubber prices crashed in 2013-2014, dropping to only about a quarter of their previous value on the world market, the local economies—including the economies of these two subdistricts—were even more vulnerable to the international price fluctuations than they would have been just ten to fifteen years earlier. This crash occurred just as the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra was about to be forced out of power, but it continued into the period of the military government that took power in May 2014. It also happened just as some of the smallholders' rubber tree investments were becoming productive. The new military government that took power in 2014 initially had at least tacit support from significant sectors of southern Thai society, but it was initially tone-deaf on the rubber industry issue and how to fix it. It blamed the drop in prices on excessive rubber planting in neighboring countries, without mentioning the overplanting that had been encouraged by earlier Thai government policies. Government spokespersons were also heard suggesting that rubber producers should engage in multi-cropping, for example by planting pineapples or strawberries between the rubber trees. However, local rubber producers pointed out to me that this suggestion was unrealistic, because the existing rubber trees provided such dense shade that the other crops would not be able to grow, while in many cases the investment in rubber had been so recent that the producers could not afford to re-plant.

In the end, the new government reportedly provided limited subsidies to help support higher rubber prices, and in the end the prices for raw rubber recovered, though they came nowhere close to the levels that had been enjoyed in 2012-2013.

Meanwhile, local economies were devastated, as the crash in the prices of rubber and other agricultural commodities had ripple effects on other sectors. Private schools of all types, for example, reportedly found it harder to retain their teachers, because many rural families that had previously attended found it harder to afford the tuition. I had the impression that some government schools would have been affected as well. Private schools in urban areas, especially those that had developed reputations for academic excellence, continued to thrive, but privately owned schools in rural areas reportedly struggled. The drop in commodity prices also reportedly affected attendance at universities, including government universities. The overall enrollment rates remained unchanged, and in many cases continued to rise, but there was reportedly an increased rate of dropouts for financial reasons.

All of these factors could have affected the relatively rural communities that I was studying in 2013-2017.

A CRISIS OF UNDERPARTICIPATION?

Initial fieldwork in the two subdistricts suggested a variety of educational outcomes. The children of some Muslim families had gone on to university education and obtained positions as government or school administrators, teachers, nurses, and medical technicians. Many families had members who were studying abroad in the Middle East or South Asia. One village headman had a child studying at Aligarh University in Pakistan, where the child had chosen to study foreign languages, especially Arabic and English. Another family had one son who had studied locally for eight years, then studied in Mecca for several years, then became a teacher in another province for several years, and then came back to his home district where he was now an imam while also teaching Islamic studies in one of the local private Islamic schools. Another person had gone to Saudi Arabia to study Islamic studies, and after returning to Thailand had taught in at least two schools outside his home province before returning home to care for his aging mother while working in a salaried job unrelated to his formal training. Other people from the local subdistricts had gone on to university studies in Thailand, sometimes to advanced degrees, and were now employed in a wide variety of fields.

However, the general perception of local Muslim leaders and teachers was that the average educational attainments of Muslims in these two subdistricts was relatively low not only when compared to the Thai population in general but also when compared to other Muslim populations in the nation and possibly in the province. The school enrollment figures reported earlier, while

incomplete, appear to support this observation.[12] As may be remembered, these figures appeared to indicate declining enrollments by Muslim students in secondary school, especially in the last three grades (Grades 10-12). This drop-off in enrollment was apparent both in real numbers (which got smaller) and in comparison to enrollments by non-Muslim students (because the Muslim percentage of enrollment appeared to have gotten smaller).

These figures give extra poignancy to the questions that were raised by the Muslim provincial leader I interviewed in 2013. This leader, who was also director of one of the province's largest private Islamic schools, asked two main questions that he thought merited special research attention: (1) What do local Muslims *really* want to study; that is, both in the "secular education" stream and in the "Islamic education stream, what do they want to study and why? And (2) what occupations do local Muslim people have, and are they happy with those occupations?

Initial interviews with Muslims in the two subdistricts give the impression that these two questions may be interconnected. Some local interviewees, without much prompting, suggested that in these two subdistricts there was a relatively high dropout rate among Muslim young people. Multiple reasons were suggested. One person suggested that some young people were in a hurry to go out and find work. A local imam suggested that high unemployment rates among high school and university graduates may be contributing to these decisions. Observing that many of these graduates were having trouble finding jobs in the fields for which they had trained, many local young people were drawing the conclusion that additional years of schooling were not practically useful. But these were not the only reasons. Another person noted that in this area it was still common for Muslim young people to marry relatively young, and this might contribute to a need to drop out of school to earn incomes and to raise families. Other interactions gave the impression—indeed, some stated this directly—that it could make a great difference whether the local mosque leadership stressed (or failed to emphasize) the importance of education for children and families in their communities.
It should also be observed—and so far this is just a hypothesis—that participation in the broader social and geographical networks that seem associated with higher levels of education seemed to be unevenly distributed. In those families that already had access to these networks, higher levels of education, often in other provinces and even overseas, seemed more likely. In those families who did not have much access to these networks in the past, the current generation may be the first one that had the opportunity to travel far for work or education, and they are doing so at a time when the economic means of poor rural families seem to be falling behind those of the nation as a whole.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS
This paper initially intended to explore the local and global connectivities associated with secular education in two relatively highly Muslim subdistricts in Thailand's Upper South. The initial fieldwork results suggest there are plenty of opportunities to develop this theme further. The previous section has already mentioned several people who studied abroad or who had spent part of their careers working and teaching in other provinces. Many more examples could be cited. One of the local Islamic schools reportedly has a teacher from Libya who has been on the staff for more than 20 years. Another of its teachers studied in the Middle East, and the school was proud of the students (three in that particular year) who were winning scholarships to study at government universities in Saudi Arabia. There was evidence that such cross-border movements were not limited to studies in the Middle East, and there was evidence that such movements had been happening for a long time. One nearby Muslim community leader had spent seven years studying Islamic studies in a school located in one of Thailand's three southern border provinces. He came away speaking fluent Malay and Arabic, while remaining entirely unsympathetic to the separatist aims and violent methods of the southern Melayu Muslim militants. Another person, this one trained in more secular lines of education, had studied elementary school and early secondary school locally, and then gone to an upper secondary school in Thailand's southern three provinces, then obtained a Bachelor's degree in a Teachers College located in the same general area, and then went on to become and educational administrator in government schools in Thailand's upper south. In addition, there are reports of geographical movement due to marriage, work, and other reasons, and these movements have apparently been happening for a long time.[13]

However, the more important initial finding of this project is the apparent crisis of underparticipation in secondary education. The reasons were multiple, and they may be having direct effects on the future incomes and career opportunities of local Muslim youth and families. It is possible that the effects reported in this draft of the paper are overstated, due to incomplete information. It is also possible that the seeming drop-off in upper secondary enrollments are due partly to decisions to study in other parts of the country that are more heavily Muslim. However, so far I have encountered only a few reports of people who have constructed their educational careers in this manner.

Furthermore, it is possible that some of the missing upper secondary students have gone into the "technical school" track, at which point they would drop out of the regular education statistics I am reporting, even if their educational careers eventually went on to include mainstream university programs. This pattern of participation can be found for both Buddhist and Muslim students in this province, where roughly a quarter of the students appear to move from the "academic" track to the "technical" track at some point after 9th grade. Nevertheless, the question remains as to why the Muslim rates of participation in upper

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[12] I must stress the uncertainty of this observation, because, due to a variety of factors, I was not able to collect enrollment figures for all of the private Islamic schools in the areas neighboring the two subdistricts prior to the submission deadline for this paper. I hope to correct this shortcoming before the actual conference.

[13] Movement for work or marriage does not necessarily mean severance of pre-existing relationships. Family and extended family are very important in Thai society, and this is just as true for Thailand's Muslims as it is for Buddhists. National and religious holidays often provide opportunities to bring family together. Even the Thai New Year, which some local Muslims claimed was a "Buddhist holiday" that Muslims should not formally celebrate, could be an opportunity for Muslim families to gather together due the extra-long holiday observed in schools and some businesses.

secondary grades drop off more severely than for Buddhist students. It could also be asked why the Muslim rates of non-participation in upper elementary education appear to drop off gradually from gradually from grade to grade rather than dropping suddenly between grades nine and ten as seems more common for Buddhist students in this process.

Whatever the case, initial evidence from the field suggested that only a small portion of Muslim students were dropping out of local educational institutions in favor of more advanced education elsewhere. Indeed, I had the impression that at the time I was conducting fieldwork it had become most common for Muslim students to complete their secondary school studies near home, normally studying to near the 9th or 12th grade (informants differ as to which grade is the end of compulsory education). After that, suggested some informants, those who continued to university-level study were most likely to seek the cheapest educational opportunities near home (most likely one of the Rajabhat Universities, descended and upgraded from the earlier nationwide system of Teachers Colleges and Teachers Institutes), although some students from the local areas also were able to gain entrance to some of the more prestigious universities in Bangkok or overseas.

It should be emphasized once again that this report is preliminary. It would be useful to know more about local Muslims' participation rates in secondary school. It would be useful for teams of researchers to explore, as suggested by the provincial leader mentioned in this paper's opening, just what educational and career outcomes are desired by local Muslim students and their parents. It would be useful to know more about the jobs and careers that local Muslims actually pursue. And it would be useful to know more about the contents of the secular parts of the curricula taught in both government schools and private Islamic schools, and how those contents have changed over the years.

In the future I hope to play a part in seeking better answers to those questions, and I hope that others will be doing the same.

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