

BOOK REVIEW

Mulder, Niels., *Inside Thai Society: an Interpretation of Everyday Life*. Bangkok, Editions Duang Kamol, 1990.

_____, *Individual and Society in Java: a Cultural Analysis*. Yogyakarta, Gadjah Mada University Press. 1989.

Reviewed by:

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As the Philippines draws closer to its Southeast Asian neighbors, the need for mutual knowledge and understanding increases. This is particularly important in the Philippines. Aside from knowing little about our neighbors, we have a problem that is not as important among them, namely that of defining our cultural, or if you will, national identity.

The Philippines is unique in the region because it has undergone a longer exposure to Westernization, and this in the context of colonialism. Lately, Westernization has become the favorite explanation for all the Filipino's conspicuous failures. The squabbles that both enliven and darken the local political scene are often attributed to

"the influence of Western individualism." The true Asian we are told is "communal"; he places the interests of society above his own and so achieves harmony. Hierarchy and social inequality are also attributed to Westernization, because of the supposition that these came in through colonialism. The assumption is that left alone, the Filipino would have continued cherishing the values of equality, concern for the unfortunate, and togetherness.

Such suppositions have to be tested through careful intercultural comparisons, using, for instance, ethnographies of urban and village life that have been made, in increasing number, since the 1940s by both foreign and local anthropologists and

sociologists.

Two books written by Niels Mulder, a Dutch anthropologist, disclose for us the manner in which the educated urban middle class in Northern Thailand and Central Java interpret the relations of the self to society.

Fieldwork was conducted at Chiangmai and at Yoyakarta. The approach used was phenomenological and interpretative, that is, the objective was to understand the world as it is lived and experienced by the informants. Special attention was paid to local categories as expressed through language. In addition therefore to participant observation, open-ended interviews were heavily used. To make sure his interpretations were valid, Mulder showed his manuscript to several informants and asked for their comments.. This opened the inquiry to more data and new hypotheses.

The central insights of Niels Mulder is that there is a contrast in the Thai's relationship with two worlds: his family and the larger society. While he perceives obligations within the first circle as being clear and well determined, he does not think the same of those within the second one. Within the family is goodness and reliability; outside it, power is a reality. And because "power has no moral qualities," it is seen as "often unjust, unreliable or capricious." The larger society is characterized by competition for superior positions which give the victor influence and control over his subordinates.

This dichotomy, for Mulder, explains two aspects of Thai culture: 1) the hidden tension between animism and Buddhism, and 2) the famous Thai penchant for

smiling which is partly an attempt to avoid overt conflict.

The Thais are interpreted as positing two antipodes in their experience: *khuna* (moral goodness) and *decha* (power). The Buddha is the primary symbol of the former, followed by the mother. At the other antipode are death-bringing spirits, followed by less dangerous and more ambiguous spirits. The two spheres interpenetrate in a middle symbol, the "good leader," who is manifest in the father, the teacher, the king. The "good leader" has an ambiguous role; he is supposed to be good and reliable, at the same time he must assert his masculinity. Relations with the Buddha center on the attainment of merit; with the mother, gratitude. On the other hand when dealing with evil spirits, Thais are preoccupied with magic that can defend them; while towards more ambiguous spirits, they show respect. Because the tenuous order of everyday life outside the home is perceived to be amoral and potentially dangerous, people have recourse to *saksit* power which is vested in holy objects, words, water, places. Towards the good leader, Thais seek to show that they are dependable and are reliable group members.

The connection between moral goodness and power is not clearly articulated in Thai society. Much less is the contradiction between the two resolved: "The Thai cosmos lacks a centre that transcends the contradictions of power and goodness, recognizing that in life people have to deal with both." Though the king is ultimately the "good leader," he is not regarded as a "cosmic or supernatural principle" but simply as the head of the nation. Inasmuch as the world outside the

home is unpredictable, more so with the spread of capitalism, Mulder says that the animist reliance on protective rites and objects has, in fact, increased rather than decreased.

Turning to the Thai's preference for avoiding overt conflict, Mulder notes that when Thais meet each other, they spontaneously figure out who has higher status and who a lower one, and act accordingly. Feelings are thus suppressed to conform to a role; strong feelings cannot be expressed in culturally acceptable ways. A Thai psychiatrist, Udomslip Srisaengam, claims that a fourth of the population between 25 and 30 years experiences some form of neurosis. Another scholar, Weerayudh Wichiarajote, notes the "low self-discipline" and "low self-confidence" of the average Thai. Moreover, the murder rates of Thailand are high: 12, 878 murders between October 1, 1975 and September 30, 1976. Niels Mulder cites all these as evidence that the Thais experience strong emotions that explode from time to time because they do not find adequate legitimate channels within the culture. Moreover, the emphasis on hierarchy can make those in lower positions feel that they are being pushed around.

It has been claimed, with chagrin, by some Thai authors that Thais are "individualists." Mulder disagrees by pointing out that instead of expressing their own individual personalities, Thais prefer to conform to the expectations that attend their own particular rank or status. Nonetheless, there is room for individual deviation from norms because Thai society lacks the ability to rigidly enforce standards of moral behavior.

At the same time, while Thais look at the avoidance of conflict with outsiders as wise, they regard the avoidance of conflict with insiders as rewarding. Relationships within the small circle of familiars are enjoyable precisely because conflicts are not allowed to surface. Paradoxically, despite the Thai's inhibitions, when he wants to relax with his family and friends, he is better able to do so than the Westerner. For instance, a Thai male is not at all reproached for having gotten drunk. The Thai attitude is "let it be" when there is nothing he can do about a situation. Thus the famous Thai capacity for enjoying life is summed up in the term, *sanug*.

Mulder sees the tension between exerting power and seeking affiliation from still another angle, that of social class. The desire for affiliation in the form of friendship, love, warmth is a widespread concern among common people. While this too may be the case among the elite, ambition and power are more marked among them. Thus while Thais may not be individualists, they do admire the independent personality, the person who makes it to the top and is able to exert influence upon others. The caveat is: as long as he does not cause anger or frustration in others by being abrasive.

Situating the Thai within his larger society, Mulder wonders if the movement for reform in Thai Buddhism will succeed. He claims that attempts at purifying Buddhism of "superstitious" practices and at criticizing the Sangha, the highest body of Buddhism, for corruption will meet with apathy. Ordinary Thais "are not interested in spiritual depth but in survival." They turn to religion for protection amid life's uncertainties. Nor is there much chance

either for a thorough-going social critique that will transform Thai society and resolve problems like unequal distribution of land, corruption, criminality, the deterioration of the environment. A comprehensive vision of society that sees it as "an organic, interdependent whole that is amenable to social engineering" is absent even in the more socially aware novelists. Society is regarded "as an aggregate of individual statuses." Mulder sees the Thai as one who in the past has borrowed eclectically from different cultures and has pragmatically adapted them to his own way of life. The process continues to this day.

The book is a guide to Thai culture and is useful for outsiders like this reader. The unresolved tension between the claims of the inner circle and the realities of the outer world, between the need for affiliation and the quest for power is well-illustrated and illuminates important aspects of Thai behavior from religion to politics. Concerning the validity of Mulder's construct: only specialists in Thai studies can answer this.

However, given the sensitivity of some of the points raised and the use of a phenomenological method, which more positivist writers criticize for being "subjective" and "intuitionist," it is a pity that at crucial moments Mulders sometimes fails to adduce empirical data for some of his more controversial statements. For instance, when he talks of Thailand's high murder rates, he merely gives figures for the years 1975-1976 without relating them to the overall population and without comparing them to those of other countries.

Having said all these, as a Tagalog, this writer could not help but make mental

comparisons between Tagalogs and the Thais. The similarities are striking. In both, the individual's primary loyalty is to his small circle of relatives and friends; relationships in the outside world are perceived to be full of potential danger because of the competition for power; there is a reluctance to express true feelings before others; and the quest for affiliation and warmth is stronger among ordinary people than among the ambitious elite. It is noteworthy that despite never having been colonized by any Western power, Thai society is quite hierarchic, and that some Thai social scientists characterize the Thai as "individualistic."

It is fashionable to speak of "split-level Christianity" as though the clash between formal religion and indigenous norms were peculiar to the Philippines. The book shows that a similar split is also present in Thailand. The emphasis of Buddhism on meditation, self-control and renunciation seems hardly understood by many ordinary people and the elite. Buddhism has become reduced to magic and the quest for high positions either in this life or in the next rebirth. Is this similarity between the Tagalog and the Thai solely explainable by the fact that they are both "Asian"? The Javanese belong to the same linguistic family as the Tagalog; yet, unlike the Tagalogs and the Thais, the integrative centre of their self seems better developed.

Niels Mulder's interpretation of the Javanese individual and his society interprets both continuities over time and those changes that are taking place in contemporary Yogyakarta.

The Javanese intuit that life has a vague yet pervading, unifying divine

principle. Call it the One, the All-Soul, Life or "God." It is considered important to seek a personal inner experience of the One beyond dogma. The Javanese seeks *kebatinan*, the cultivation of the inner being and deep self. Indeed self-mastery is the basis of Javanese culture.

This sense of oneness is constituted by a sense of order where relationships have a ritual character. Javanese society is hierarchic; indeed the language itself dramatizes the relationships of subordinate to superior by compelling the speaker to change his vocabulary according to whether the person spoken to is a subordinate, an equal or a superior. The Javanese is expected to respect the position of others and to live up to the expectations surrounding his own. He thus avoids confronting others in things that relate to personal interest and presents himself modestly, unobtrusively and with graceful language and gesture.

Children are expected to submit to their parents' wishes, for parents send divine punishment regardless of their personal will. But parents do not cling to their children and are willing to have them adapted by those with more spiritual and material resources. The traditional Javanese is also sensitive about his relations with his neighbors. He throws ritual meals like the *slametan* for the community and participates in the various organized neighborhood activities like preparing for Independence Day, contributing to a death in another house, or participating in the night watch. But proximity does not necessarily lead to intimacy or strong interpersonal bonds. Always there is a concern with maintaining a proper image before others.

Particularly among the hereditary aristocracy, the *priyayi*, there is a price to be paid for self-repression. Javanese psychiatrists interviewed by Mulder opined that the elite "often suffer from an incapacity of communicating with others to the point of remaining strangers to their wives and children at the same time that they are ridden by anxiety about their presentation. Seemingly they can never relax..."

However there is another route that others take. They separate the social from the personal and keep it from disturbing their inner being, their *batin*. They reserve their self for themselves by withdrawing to it and seeking pleasure in inner quietness, day-dreaming (*nglamun*) or the cultivation of their inner potentials. While society may own and control the individual's outward presentation, the self-aware individual knows that deep down he is "the owner of himself." It is noteworthy that in a sample of Javanese novels, the individuals "turn inward, exploring their own course irrespective of others or the society they live in." This second route, according to Mulder's informants, when combined with social purpose and action can transform one into a leader, a shining beacon.

Social changes are taking place which affect the Javanese' traditional interpretation of the self and society. While parents recognize the value of religious education and still expect respect from their children, they believe they can do little more than stimulate children "from behind" in making moral choices. People believe in maintaining good neighborly relations and continue to throw slametan. But communal slametan in one neigh-

borhood has been reduced to one per year; moreover informants say they hardly have time for meeting fellow neighbors. On the other hand, relations between superiors and subordinates have become more relaxed. Common people are now less impressed by the aristocracy. However, a new not-so-refined elite drawn from the army, civil service and managerial class has emerged and these are less personally involved in the lives of their subordinates than were the priyayi.

Ten years earlier, Mulder's informants were interested in organized mysticism. Now they are less so, and like many others in the emerging middle class have become eager for consumer goods. Meanwhile, with the spread of the more egalitarian Indonesian language, the use of Javanese with its rigid, courtly forms has stagnated. Palace-centred rituals and shadow puppet plays, performed in the traditional way, do not attract large crowds anymore. At the same time because Islam has ceased to be associated with a narrow, political party and is more open to new ideas, many more people are attending mosques and openly identifying themselves as Moslem.

A new social order is shaping up in Yogyakarta. But whether Islam can create a new meaningful social order, remains speculative. No Moslem group has advanced either a specific program for social reform or the political strategy to implement it. Society continues to be viewed as a mere aggregate of individuals. Mulders believes that, because of all these factors, the Javanese will still maintain the traditional cleavage between individual self-expression and social life. However,

because of the unpredictability and instability of contemporary society, the cleavage may lead to "social irresponsibility, frustration, or indifference."

The book on Java needs thorough editing. There are many typographical errors and errors of printing. The fault is clearly that of the press and the antiquated manual methods they used. At times the sentences are not aligned properly.

Still this other book by Mulder is likewise a much-needed introduction to a different culture for outsiders like many of us. It is written simply, and uses many illustrative cases. In some ways it is easier to follow than the book on Thailand perhaps because the content itself, namely the Javanese experience of life, has a recurring unity which is less true of the Thai. Thus Mulder is not compelled to construct another version of that complicated but necessary scheme illustrating the antinomy between moral goodness and power among the Thai.

Reading this book from a Tagalog perspective, one is struck by basic similarities as well as differences. The Javanese' traditional emphasis on filial obedience to parental wishes is familiar. So likewise is the emphasis on the observance of social hierarchy outside the home and avoidance of confrontational, intrusive language. But the various, strictly observed levels of politeness that result in different sets of vocabularies, along with the quest for a delicate inner refinement, partly expressed through exquisite arts, will seem remote to the more extroverted Tagalog.

The book compels the Filipino reader to rethink the popular dichotomy of "Western individualism" vs. "Asian communalism." True, the communal activities that take place in some urban Tagalog neighborhoods pale beside the more varied and better institutionalized activities in Javanese cities. This is borne out both by direct observation by this reviewer and my information from Javanese friends. Thus one can say that the Javanese has a more "communal" orientation than the urban Tagalog. Nonetheless, this communalism is ultimately limited, being confined to the neighborhood. The broader community, the nation, "remains a vague entity for many of its citizens." At the same time the Javanese is not that less individual either, for he takes refuge in his inner world and cultivates an inner refinement. This would not be typical of the ordinary middle class Tagalog or even of the upper class Tagalog. In some ways, the Javanese might actually be more self-aware than his Tagalog counterpart would be, for he seems much more introverted.

In the concluding section of the book on Java, Mulder draws a comparison between the Thai and the Javanese. Despite similarities between the two, Thai strategies "tend to focus on indifference, overt defiance, one-upmanship, or status validation by machismo behavior and thus express themselves *in* the social order." In contrast, Javanese self-expression "takes place *next* to their social life." For the Javanese, "the inner self exists in isolation of society."

Two things can be said about this. First, with the above interpretation in mind, it is obvious that the current

discussion in Manila of "Western individualism" versus "Asian communalism" posits either-or choices that are not useful for detailed, cultural analysis. Second, it is significant that though the Tagalog and the Javanese belong to the same language family, the Tagalog is in some significant ways closer to the Thai than to the Javanese. Mulder's description of Thai strategies for self-expression apply equally well to Tagalog strategies.

This raises further questions that hopefully the author will explore in his future research. Niels Mulder is singularly equipped for making cross-cultural comparisons and interpretations of the three peoples because he speaks and reads Javanese, Indonesian, Thai and Tagalog. He has done intensive work in Lucena and has been writing articles and a new book on the individual and society among the Tagalogs. Hopefully, he will take a closer look at the historical development of the state, the city, class differentiation and occupational specialization in the three societies.

One could theorize, following Emile Durkheim and Edward Tylor, that the four acting together affect the individual's definition of itself and its relation to society. It seems that in a tribal, pre-urban, pre-state context, the individual is little differentiated from its milieu: the small group of kin who are politically independent of other such groups. With the development of larger social groupings, the state and the city, and the differentiation of society by class and occupation, the individual becomes considerably more self-aware, for he becomes less dependent upon a small circle of familiars. Moreover, by the fact that he devotes much of his life to

the pursuit of a particular occupation, he becomes more aware of the need to develop his own particular potential. Simultaneously he begins to realize his obligations to persons outside the small circle of kin. While Buddhism and Christianity both emphasize the inner life, it may be that there are social structural conditions that either inhibit or encourage such a pursuit. It would be interesting to know if the late development of the state and urban life in Thailand (13th century) and in Luzon (16th century), as compared to Central Java (7th century or earlier), might account for the differences.

A cursory reading on the three societies suggests that the hold of the state and the impact of urbanism have been weaker in Thailand and Luzon than in Java until recently. This could be partly due to the youthfulness of these institutions in the first two; it could also be the consequence of the looser organization of those institutions in Thailand under its own

monarchs, and in Luzon under foreign rulers. An approach that is both structural and historical combined with phenomenology could shed light on the genesis of the Javanese, Thai and Tagalog selves of today. There are, in fact, hints within the two books of Niels Mulder about the possibilities of such an approach. For instance, in explaining the Javanese aristocracy's quest for inner refinement, he falls back upon both history and structure. He points out that the Dutch were able to transform these former warriors into courtiers by incorporating them into the appointive bureaucracy. (One could not help but think of Louis XIV subduing the rebellious nobility by compelling them to live in Versailles). The reader would like to know how the efforts of the Thai monarch and the colonial rulers of the Philippines compare in the domestication of the local elite, and what the consequences have been for the self's definition of itself and its milieu.