

# THE SACRED BORDERLAND

A BUDDHIST SAINT, THE STATE, AND TRANSNATIONAL  
RELIGION IN SOUTHERN THAILAND



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## Abstract

This thesis is a study of religious charisma, the state, place-making and cultural flows in the southern Thai borderland. Based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Songkhla and Pattani provinces, the thesis provides a historically-grounded account of popular Buddhism and other, particularly Chinese, religious forms and their relationship to state formation and transnational flow.

Southern Thailand provides a provocative site for the exploration of these issues. Located a great distance from Bangkok and inhabited by large populations of Malay Muslims and ethnic Chinese, the region occupies a position of ambiguity in the national Thai imaginary. The thesis considers the production of the South itself as a region within the Thai nation-state and the complex manner in which it is constructed as being both 'Thai' and 'un-Thai' in everyday constructions.

As a mechanism to explore the central themes, the thesis focuses on a semi-mythological monk known as Luang Phò Thuat. Said to have wandered the landscape along the Malay Peninsula during the seventeenth century, he has become the centre of a thriving cult of images and is now one of the most popular Buddhist figures in the South. I argue that this popularity is bound to a certain vision of a unified South and that the narratives of his journeys performatively seek to 'suture' zones belonging historically to Buddhist and Muslim zones of influence. However, rather than assuming that Luang Phò Thuat is solely a figure of colonisation, I argue that, as a 'dhamma ambassador', he also has provides the promise of crossing boundaries as much as maintaining them.

Continuing the theme of boundary crossing, the thesis also deals with transnational religious flows of pilgrimage and tourism, especially religious tourism practised by ethnic Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans. I argue that the sacred geography produced through figures such as Luang Phò Thuat is utilised by local brokers of religious sanctity to generate and direct tourist flows. In the process, novel religious formations and innovations take place as local and transnational actors negotiate relationships of patronage. I consider the impact these flows have on local religious forms and focus in particular on constructions of 'Chineseness' and 'Thainess' and the roles that they play in mediating cross-border interactions. As I demonstrate, far from undermining the dominant symbols of the Thai state, many aspects of transnational religion contribute to the vision of southern Thailand as a Buddhist zone, and thereby support the process of state formation.



This is to certify that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. All work contained within this document is original and my own, unless otherwise acknowledged.

Ethics Committee approval has been obtained for this project (Protocol no.: HE27NOV1998-H02024)

Jovan Maud, 20 December 2007



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## On Language and Transliteration

Southern Thailand is a region of great ethnic and linguistic diversity and a research project of this kind could potentially benefit from proficiency in a number of languages and dialects, particularly in southern Thai (*pak tai*) and a number of Chinese dialects. This research project employs a multi-sited and wide-ranging methodology in a number of social and linguistic contexts, precluding full competence in all languages used. In order to maximise coverage, research for this thesis was primarily conducted in central Thai with Thai-speaking informants, while English was used with Singaporeans and Malaysians. This was generally sufficient as in urban areas in the South central Thai tends to be the primary language used in any case. During periods of research in villages, especially at Wat Chang Hai and surrounds, I made use of research assistants who helped me with the local southern Thai dialect.

The system of transliteration I have used is a simplified version of the Library of Congress system, using only the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet and no indicators of tone or vowel length. My main aim is to transliterate Thai roughly as it is spoken, rather than how it is written.

In two cases I have chosen to use diacriticals instead of vowel clusters to represent Thai vowels. In the case of the vowel <sup>๕</sup> or <sup>๖</sup> I have chosen to use ü, as in *müang* (เมือง), while I have used ó to represent ๑ as in *phó* (พ่อ).

In the case of proper names, including names of well-known Thai places or individuals, I have followed conventional transliterations of these spellings. In the case of multiple variations, I have followed the transliteration used in the specific context in which I encountered it.

Below is a table outlining the points where my transliteration might differ from that of others.

-๓, -๕	a
<sup>๕</sup> , <sup>๖</sup>	ü
<sup>๕</sup> ๓-๑	üa
๑	ò
๓-๓, -๓	ao
<sup>๕</sup> ๓-๑	oe

แ-	ae
-ย, -าย	ai
จ	j

Chinese words, for example of deities or shrine names, unless otherwise noted, have been transliterated from their Thai renderings. For example, I use “Kuan Im” (กวนอิม) rather than “Guan Yin”.

## Preface

In 2001, when I was well into my fieldwork, I paid a visit to the shrine of Luang Phò Thuat at Wat Chang Hai. Accompanied by some Thai friends from the neighbouring village, I made my way to the small building at the side of the monastery grounds housing a series of statues of the seventeenth century Buddhist monk whose name literally means ‘Venerable Father Ancestor’ and who had become both a major object and guiding figure of my research. We made the usual offerings of flowers, candles and incense and affixed some gold leaf to the statues. My friends then encouraged me to cast the divination rods (*siam si*), a practice Chinese in origin but now common in Theravada Buddhist monasteries in Thailand. They said I should meditate on a question while casting the rods and Luang Phò Thuat, whose spirit is considered to be present, active and capable of granting great boons to devotees, would give me the answer. In the middle of the uncertainty of fieldwork, it is not surprising that the first question to spring to mind was whether I would ever complete my thesis. I cast the rods and we consulted the results. The answer was positive; I would indeed complete my thesis. I still remember the flood of relief I experienced at this pronouncement even though I did not strictly ‘believe in’ Luang Phò Thuat or these divinatory practices. However, as I would wryly note in the years that followed, Luang Phò Thuat only assured me I would complete my thesis successfully; he didn’t specify *how long* this process would take.

In his essay on the role of the contemporary novelist in an ever-volatile present, Jonathon Franzen observed: “Panic grows in the gap between the increasing length of the project and the shrinking time increments of cultural change: How to design a craft that can float on history for as long as it takes to build it?” (2003:65). This is an apt metaphor for a thesis which, in large part, deals with the manner in which a figure such as Luang Phò Thuat has

stayed afloat on the currents of history. It also resonates with me because it speaks to my experience of writing this thesis over a period of time in which the nature of my fieldsite, and the assumptions and concerns that informed my fieldwork, have been significantly transformed.

In the Thailand of my fieldwork, despite the economic crisis of 1997, it was a period of long-term affluence and relative peace. The separatist movement and associated violence in the Malay-Muslim dominated 'deep South', too, was increasingly assumed to be a thing of the past, despite continuing low-level incidents such as arson attacks on schools. Similarly the era of military control also appeared to have had its day. In the field of religion at least, the authority of the state and its unitary vision for the Thai nation was in retreat. The proliferation of non-orthodox religious forms and the growing prominence of expressions of Chineseness in religion were both apparent signs of this. Once relatively unpopular with scholars of Thai society and culture compared to the other regions, the South was experiencing a flourishing of academic interest. While studies of the South in the past had tended to focus on the security situation, the Muslim insurgency, or the related topic of Buddhist-Muslim interethnic relations, more recent scholarship was broadening and transforming the sense of what the South could mean beyond the 'beaches and bombs' stereotype of the past. Some commentators argued that the region had been transformed from a zone of danger to a zone of pleasure-seeking behaviour (Askew 2002). There was a new emphasis in scholarly writing on various kinds of hybridity and of cultural forms that defied, or seemed to defy, the categories of state rhetoric and control.

Much of this thesis could be considered an example of this trend. However, part of my energy has been directed at critically reflecting on what I consider to be the prevailing assumptions in the literature on Thai religion and the South. For example, I have questioned the notion, implicit in much

of the writing on contemporary Thai religion, that the widespread proliferation of unorthodox religious forms implies a decline of the state's function as underlying guarantor of the symbolic order. I have sought to demonstrate how the power of the state, its hegemonic domination of the cultural and physical landscape, *underpinned* hybridity, and even the ability to speak in terms of hybridity. This complex point will be elaborated through the thesis, but suffice it to say that I saw my project as arguing for a renewed appreciation of the ongoing role of the state in shaping the possibilities and limitations of even the most diverse religious forms. For me, this involved bringing the state to the foreground of analysis when it generally seemed to be considered something of an anachronism to do so.

But today, much of what was generally considered to be firmly relegated to the past is once again the reality of contemporary Thailand. The ethnic Malay-dominated provinces of the 'deep south' are once again wracked with violence, while in Bangkok the generals are once again in control. And once again the bulk of scholarly writing on the South deals with the problem of the insurgency. One could be forgiven for thinking that nothing has changed since the 1970s. Much of what I sought to draw out from below the surface has now bubbled up of its own accord. It is there for all to see.

It is of course a cliché to say that the attacks of 11 September 2001 changed the world, but I can think of no better event to mark the fundamental shifts that have ramified through so many areas of my research. I was in southern Thailand in the wake of the attacks and watched how global trauma was refracted through local concerns. With amazing speed, T-shirts depicting the attacks and bearing such sentimental slogans as "Sad Day USA" and "Goodbye WTC" appeared in the shopfronts of Hat Yai alongside those bearing portraits of Osama bin Laden and the words "We Will Overcome". The popular mood among the Muslims of Thailand,

especially those of the 'deep South' became increasingly frayed with every major development that followed the 2001 attacks. The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq produced large demonstrations in Pattani, as did suggestions that the US was using airstrips in Thailand for refuelling their long-range bombers.

Some commentators began to see Southern Thailand as one of the many frontiers in the new global war. In late 2002 there were claims that Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) had used Southern Thailand, now described as an "untamed frontier" (*Sydney Morning Herald* 16 November 2002), and as a "pivotal planning area" for the 2002 Bali bombings (*Asian Wall Street Journal* 7 November 2002). Acts of violence in the lower South began to escalate. The frequent killings of police and others were regularly dismissed as the work of 'bandits' and other petty criminal elements by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and others within his administration. In April 2004 a coordinated group of assailants led an attack on a military base in Pattani and stole a large amount of weapons and ammunition. The view that apolitical unlawful elements were behind the violence was increasingly difficult to sustain, although it is still not clear to what extent this could be attributed to separatism or to more global developments.<sup>1</sup>

Attacks on the infrastructure of the Thai state increased and continue to this day. Schools and teachers have been particularly singled out, and monasteries and monks have not been exempt. A bomb was set off at Wat Chang Hai itself, not far from where I had asked Luang Phò Thuat about the future of my thesis. In a neighbouring district two monks were hacked to

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<sup>1</sup> Who exactly is behind the violence in the far South of Thailand, and what their goals are, is a notoriously difficult issue. Askew (2007) has provided a recent study which deals with the various theories, including conspiracy theories, which have been proposed about the nature of the violence and who is behind it. See also Duncan McCargo (McCargo 2006, 2007), who proposes that the 'southern violence' was largely produced by conflict between Thaksin Shinawatra and members of the 'network monarch', particularly Prem Tinsulanonda, and their power structures in the region.



death with machetes. The lines of tour buses visiting Wat Chang Hai quickly dried up, and the abbot has gone on the record warning about the dire consequences this would entail for his monastery and the local community.

The violence has arguably been exacerbated by the hard line responses of the Thai state authorities. Two notorious cases exemplify this. In the first, 78 Muslim protestors arrested in the village of Tak Bai suffocated to death while in the custody of the authorities. In the second, the Thai army used mortars to shell lightly-armed insurgents holed up in the Kru Ze mosque in Pattani, Thailand's most sacred Muslim site. These did not seem to be the acts of a state that was in retreat.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the muscular state would appear to be back in fashion, not just in Thailand but globally. As George W. Bush was showing that the full-blown military invasion of sovereign nations was a card that remained in the foreign policy deck, in Thailand Thaksin was showing that authoritarian government was not the sole preserve of the generals. His so-called 'war on drugs', which led to the death of thousands of suspected dealers and users, all of whom seemed inexplicably prone to 'resisting arrest', showed that the apparatuses of the state could still be motivated to purge 'social ills' ruthlessly from the nation's body. 'Civil society', which had generated so much interest in the preceding years as a potential alternative to the state, was apparently sidelined. Indeed, there was widespread support for these strongarm tactics, just as there was widespread support for the 19 September 2006 coup which ousted Thaksin himself and brought the generals back into control of the country.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A good account of these events can be found in Chaiwat (2007). See also Askew (2007).

<sup>3</sup> I also suspect it was the authoritarian nature of Thaksin's approach to government which made the coup seem less of a radical transformation to the majority of Thais than it might otherwise have done.

The re-emergence of this mode of state power coincided with the increasing realisation that 'globalisation' was no longer an inevitable process but a field of struggle. As Tsing (2005) argues, the attacks of September 11 2001 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq destroyed the illusion that globalisation was an inevitable spread of homogeneous cultural forms, occurring autonomously and without politics. Instead the dimension of struggle and the possibility of multiple futures re-emerged into view, and the "end of history" (Fukuyama 2006) itself came to an end.<sup>4</sup>

The cumulative effect of these changes has transformed the potentialities I perceived during the early stages of my project into actualities. While this has borne out a number of my arguments, it has also meant that the place I write about in this thesis is not the same as it is now. A thesis begun today on this subject would inevitably ask different questions than I have done here. This thesis is primarily a commentary on the period prior to the emergence of 'separatist' violence in the far South, and before the ousting of Thaksin and the return of military rule. It does, however, provide background to these developments, and seeks to put 'the state' and the process of state formation front and centre in the analysis. I am therefore confident my craft still floats and that the issues I deal with here will provide new insights, both into the contemporary character of the South and religious life in Thailand more generally.

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<sup>4</sup> A telling indicator of this change can be seen in recent books which seek to explore the history of neoliberalism (Harvey 2007), and those that point to the dimension of struggle and violence inherent the promotion of a neoliberal world view (Klein 2007).

## Introduction

This thesis is a study of religious charisma, the state, place-making and cultural flows in southern Thailand. Specifically, it is a historically-grounded account of contemporary popular religion in this region which explores the multiple connections between sources of ancestral power, state-building and territorialisation, ethnicity, and cross-border religious interactions. Ethnographically situated in the lower South of Thailand, especially the provinces of Songkhla and Pattani, this study deals with the multiple temporal, spatial and conceptual intersections between popular and elite forms of Theravada Buddhism, Thailand's national religion, and popular religious forms.

Chinese-Thai religious interactions are a central theme. For this reason, this is primarily a study of urban areas. As the centres of commerce and government, the cities of southern Thailand are dominated by ethnic Chinese, or Sino-Thai, who dominate business, and ethnic Thai who predominantly work in the local arms of the bureaucracy and educational institutions. This contrasts with the countryside, which is predominantly inhabited by ethnic Malay Muslims with a smaller number of southern Thai (*thai tai*). The scope of the thesis is, however, by no means confined to urban centres, but considers the multiple linkages which connect city and country through relationships of pilgrimage, patronage and the circulation of sacred objects.

The relationship between urban and rural is further complicated by the significant presence and influence of transnational forces and actors. I explore the role of one group of transnational actors, ethnic Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore, who engage in 'religious tourism' and other forms of patronage of sacred sites and individuals. These activities, and the relationships produced through them, profoundly affect the form and

character of religious practices, sites, and objects in southern Thailand. I therefore treat the South as an interstitial zone, regarding it not just as a national periphery but also a centre of sorts in the sense that it possesses trajectories and transnational linkages that cannot simply be reduced to national variation.

This thesis explores such issues in a particular socio-historical juncture in Thailand, dealing with the effects of the long economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s, punctuated by the economic crisis of 1997. This period saw radical changes in the position and visibility of both popular religion and expressions of Chineseness. It was also a period where the role of the Thai state was apparently being radically redefined. By focussing on the South, I hope to bring a new perspective to these issues and also to challenge the generally Bangkok-centric nature of the discourse to date. However, before proceeding it is necessary to consider the general character of Thai society in the 1990s which provoked me to ask the questions I do.

### *Thailand in the 1990s*

During the 1990s there were a number of developments, both within Thai society and more broadly, which have influenced the formation of this thesis. These include the changing relationship between religion, nation-state and marketplace in Thailand, the growing prominence of the Sino-Thai in economic, political and cultural life, and trends towards increasing political autonomy and power in the provinces. Each of these trends implied, or reflected, a movement away from patterns of domination and control that had prevailed in Thailand during the 'nation-state era', namely the concentration of political control and cultural hegemony within the Bangkok-based military-bureaucratic elites.

The changing fortunes of the Sino-Thai exemplified these transformations. The long economic boom which reached its peak in the 1990s before the crash of 1997 saw the Sino-Thai middle classes elevated to unprecedented positions of political and economic importance. This section of the population was increasingly associated with urbanity, capitalist modernity and international (*in-thoe*) consumption in the popular consciousness. To be Chinese was to be urbane, chic and “thoroughly modern” (Szanton Blanc 1997).

The cultural capital associated with Chineseness was transformed accordingly. Through consumption patterns and ethnicity, the Sino-Thai were a population with multiple connections beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. For many, a rediscovery of their Chineseness was closely connected with, or even motivated by, the re-establishment of business or familial links with mainland China or the Chinese diaspora.

Through these emergent patterns of consumption and connection, the Sino-Thai were a prominent reminder of the increasing difficulty in conceiving of Thai society as a relatively homogeneous and territorially-bound cultural unit. These changes stretched and stressed the dominant imaginary of the Thai nation-state, promoted over many decades of monarchical and military-bureaucratic rule.

Religious developments at this time provide a useful barometer of the impact of these changes. They expressed the hopes, desires and anxieties inherent in this rapidly changing cultural milieu. Corresponding to the apparent fragmenting of a unitary vision of the nation, there was a flourishing of unorthodox religious forms. Many of these derived at least part of their inspiration from non-Theravada Buddhist sources. Cults devoted to Hindu gods, charismatic spirit mediums, Chinese *bodhisattvas*, and a multitude of other figures, came to national prominence.

Reflecting these changes, there was a shift in register in scholarly writing on religion in Thailand. Scholars increasingly focused on the role of the market. Studies which primarily connected religion with the ambitions of the nation-state gave way to those that focused on urban religion, for example spirit medium cults, or the trade in religious objects. At this time the notion that Thai society in general, and religion in particular, had entered a new 'postmodern' era became more widespread in scholarly writing, a notion which persists today. Characteristic of such approaches was the theme of fragmentation and the apparent breakdown of collective structures of meaning. The emphasis was on the use of religion in the process of individual self-fashioning through consumption rather than the production of collective identities centred on shared symbols (a good recent example is Pattana 2005b).

While this line of argument provides important insights about real changes that have occurred in Thai society, my approach breaks with this trend in that I argue for a renewed focus on the nation-state and the continuing presence of collective structures in social life. I also argue that despite the language of fragmentation, individualisation, and deterritorialisation, most studies on transformations in Thai religion have tended to retain an unacknowledged dependence on nationally-prescribed hierarchies of value. For example, studies have remained largely Bangkok-centric and remained firmly within the national boundaries even though they tended to emphasise the increasing prominence of unorthodox forms that challenged Buddhist orthodoxy. Even such an apparently hybridising development as 'the rise of the Sino-Thai' has been treated as a relatively unitary phenomenon, although some writers have challenged this by pointing out the specificities and alternative historical trajectories of Chinese communities in different parts of the country, notably the South (Hamilton 1999, 2004).

In short, the theorisation of both religion and Chineseness in recent Thai history was faced with how to conceptualise their relationship to national space and discourses. This thesis seeks to contribute to an elaboration of this literature and seeks to broaden themes dealt with by other writers by considering the literature from the perspective of one of the nation's peripheries, namely southern Thailand.

### *The South, Chineseness and State Formation*

Southern Thailand provides a provocative site for the exploration of these issues. It allows for the examination of national trends without losing sight of the specificity of the local and regional. Situated a great distance from Bangkok, the South can be thought of as located at a frontier between predominantly Buddhist mainland, and predominantly Muslim maritime, Southeast Asia. In the dominant Thai imaginary, the South occupies a position of some ambiguity. It is this ambiguity which this thesis explores, especially in relation to its construction as both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. It is a region of great cultural diversity and distinctiveness – both in the physical and human geographies. In a country whose political and social imaginaries have been defined through a succession of land-based Buddhist kingdoms, the primarily maritime South has had a unique and often problematic relationship with the nation-as-a-whole. It possesses large and distinctive populations of Muslims and Chinese which have in their own ways had stronger connections and affinities with other parts of the Malay Peninsula than with Bangkok and its predecessors. These, as well as other ethnic groups such as 'sea gypsies' (*chao nam*) and forest-dwelling negrito Sakai (*ngo pa*), testify to histories and orientations and connections beyond the physical boundaries of the nation-state and the imagined boundaries of the nation.

The South is also an ideal location for studying Thai-Chinese religious interactions in both national and transnational contexts. In the South the interactions between 'Thai' and 'Chinese' religious forms – which occur throughout Thailand – are arguably more prominent than anywhere else in the country. Furthermore, the Chinese of the South share cultural histories and trajectories with Chinese groups elsewhere on the Malay Peninsula which distinguish them from Chinese in other parts of Thailand. In addition, the distance from Bangkok and the intensity of cross-border interactions combine to make the transnational dimension of religious interactions highly significant in this region. Ethnicity and economics are also closely related. These two dimensions come together in religion, so a study of Chineseness and Chinese religious forms must also consider the commoditisation of religious forms and then transnational trade in religious sanctity.

It was a deliberate choice to focus this study on a region not naturally connected with Buddhism in the popular (and scholarly) imagination. This strategy is designed to highlight Buddhism as *more*, not less, pertinent to the themes the thesis explores. As a tool closely connected with the project of state building, Buddhism must necessarily be connected with the fortunes of the Chinese in the South. Far from being an ethnic minority that challenged the hegemony of the nation-state, the Chinese were in many cases the agents of state formation in the region. As tax farmers, governors and other state functionaries, the Chinese had a number of goals that coincided with those of the Siamese rulers who claimed sovereignty over much of the Malay Peninsula. This is one reason why a study of the connections between Buddhism, Chineseness and the nation-state is warranted in southern Thailand. In this sense, 'Chineseness' itself is an integral aspect of 'Thainess' as it has been produced in the South. Much of this thesis is devoted to exploring this intriguing idea.



It is also important to note that the South itself is one object of this study. Place and locality are not taken to be mere containers for the action but social products worthy of analysis. Infused with relations of power, they are never purely local but exist within, or occur at the intersection of, a number of scales. The thesis is therefore not simply set in southern Thailand; it is a study of this region as it is produced through a range of discourses and acts which are explored through their articulation in the South. I seek to convey how, for example, the regional intersects with national discourses and objectives, and how these in turn intersect with particular kinds of transnational flows. I see these relationships as complex and mutually constitutive. Smaller scales do not simply nestle within larger ones in Russian doll fashion. They are mutually entangled and in tension with one another. Accordingly, I do not treat wider scales as completely autonomous from the local. Instead, I deal with them ethnographically as “congeries of local/global interaction” (Tsing 2005:3).

As the above suggests, this thesis deals with a range of themes which might not on the surface seem to be closely connected to each other. The primary method I use to bring together the disparate topics of state-building, religion, Chineseness and transnational flows is to focus on a single figure who acts as a point of condensation. Namely, I focus on historical and contemporary development of the semi-mythological seventeenth century monastic figure known as Luang Phò Thuat.

### *Tracking the Venerable Ancestor*

Luang Phò Thuat is a southern Thai Buddhist ‘saint’.<sup>5</sup> His name may be rendered as ‘Venerable Ancestor’ or ‘Venerable Ancestral Spirit’. It is

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<sup>5</sup> This term should be treated as an imprecise gloss. Simply providing an equivalent Thai or Pali term here is also not sufficient as Luang Phò Thuat’s ontological status is complex. This will be explored in detail later in this thesis.

generally believed that he was a Buddhist monk who lived during the seventeenth century, and who wandered the landscape and founded a number of sites along the Malay Peninsula. He is associated with a number of miracles, most famously turning salt water fresh with the touch of his foot, thus earning him the common appellation Luang Phò Thuat Yiap Nam Thale Jüt (Venerable Ancestor who Treads Saltwater Fresh). His presence invests the landscape with potency and his travels, the miracles he is said to have performed, and the sites he founded, are memorialised in a number of stories and monumentalised in a number of forms. His 'career' parallels, and is implicated in, the formation of the South itself, making him in many senses a sort of patron saint for the region. In this thesis I primarily deal with the manner in which the stories and sites associated with Luang Phò Thuat have been adapted to changing social and political circumstances. I explore the apparent unity of this figure and also the manner in which this unity has concealed transformations over time and thereby provided a sense of "iconicity" (Herzfeld 1997) between past and present.

Luang Phò Thuat is connected with the South in a multiplicity of acts and statements and even comes to stand in a metonymic relationship to it in various ways. This raises the question of the imaginaries within which this vision occurs, and who is included in it. In this study I consider what it means for a Theravada Buddhist saint to be accorded such a status in a region characterised by great ethnic diversity and conflict. In addition, I ask how this is connected with the project of state building, and beyond this, how this might be related to Luang Phò Thuat's increasing popularity among the urban Sino-Thai as well as transnational Chinese patrons.

Thereby this thesis deals with the production of Buddhist space in a contested terrain. This is what Thongchai Winichakul (1994) has called "Buddhalogical geography", where the physical presence of the Buddha or other powerful Buddhist figures consecrates the land and "becomes the

ground for political order and power” (Swearer 1981:38). In Thailand, Buddhist monks and in particular wandering ‘forest’ monks (*phra pa*), insofar as they have been appropriated and ‘domesticated’, have a special relationship with the territorial imagination and claims of the nation. They have come to stand for impenetrability, invulnerability, the integrity of boundaries, both at the personal and collective levels. Monks therefore represent the integrity of the state and its categories. As a sometimes peripatetic monk, Luang Phò Thuat is a territorialising figure. Although he was supposed to have lived long before the lineages of wandering monks, Luang Phò Thuat shares much of the ideological function of these monks for the purposes of state building in the second half of the twentieth century.

State-administered Theravada Buddhism has been used in the project of incorporating all of the country’s peripheral regions. However, unlike other regions, the domestication of the South not only involved the incorporation of local Buddhist traditions but had to deal with a non-Buddhist majority population in part of the region. By looking at the career of Luang Phò Thuat, this thesis deals with the qualities and difficulties faced in producing the lower South as ‘Buddhist’ and therefore legitimately part of the nation-state.

When referring to his ‘career’, it is primarily the stories told about the saint, the various forms of hagiography, that are of central importance. Stories connect religious figures with the landscape, and make links between historical eras. Stories can be multiple and contested – and this is certainly the case with Luang Phò Thuat. The multiplicity of narratives surrounding Luang Phò Thuat means that he is a figure of some ontological ambiguity. This too is highly significant for the role he plays in contemporary southern Thailand.

Luang Phò Thuat’s ability to occupy a number of categories simultaneously is of central importance to my argument. I try to convey

Luang Phò Thuat's many mediating functions through the metaphor of the 'Dhamma ambassador'. This notion captures the relationship that he embodies between the *reality* of governments and *ideal* government. Like an ambassador he stands in a metonymic relationship to a wider social entity, namely the nation state, and he allows communication between bodies. He is an agent of the collective imagination, and allows for the traversing of boundaries without dissolving them, thereby bringing unlike entities into relationship with each other. He is a mediator, a translator, a figure who inhabits multiple sites and is attributed with multiple meanings. His wholeness, his integrity, however, does not appear to be lessened by this multiplicity. His role as mediating figure also had a temporal dimension. Luang Phò Thuat is both an idealised representative of an idealised past, and also coeval with the present by being an active force, providing a way of dealing with contemporary changes confronting people. Luang Phò Thuat has not only proved a useful figure for exploring the disparate themes of this thesis but has also provided an anchoring point for me in the field. I characterise him as a node or condensation point through which sameness and difference may be expressed in the one entity, and the one body.

Luang Phò Thuat is thus not the end point of my analysis, but rather a facilitating figure who allows me to explore a number of themes and bring them into relationship with each other. As will become apparent, he was also something more than simply an object of study (if ever there is such a thing). In the text, I try to convey both Luang Phò Thuat's usefulness and my own subjective relationship to him – that is, the extent to which he is an object of fascination for me. Within an objectivist framework, to acknowledge such an affective connection might be considered an admission of weakness of the analysis. Instead, I consider this to be a strength precisely because one of the facilitating roles he played was to connect me with my subject matter.

*Enchanting Economies*

In many ways the issues explored in this thesis are unique and specific to southern Thailand. However, my work is vitally informed by, and seeks to contribute to, to the wider literature on religion, magic and capitalist modernity, both within Thailand and more broadly. The analysis draws on approaches which seek to connect specific ethnographic contexts with global forces. It utilises theories of globalisation which elaborate the interplay of varying scales of activity (e.g. Tsing 2000, 2005), and those which illuminate the moments and mechanisms of closure and flow, which problematise notions of globalisation as a universalising and homogenising force (Geschiere and Meyer 1998). This thesis is also indebted to writing on transnational religious networks held together and energised by sources of religious sanctity or charisma (e.g. Werbner 1996, 2003, Werbner and Basu 1998).

This thesis participates in scholarly discussions about the relationship between magic, religion and the marketplace, especially under the conditions of neoliberalism. A number of studies over recent years have considered the various prosperity-oriented religious forms that have emerged under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism, both in Thailand (especially P. A. Jackson 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, R. C. Morris 2000a, 2000b, 2002a, 2002b, Pattana 2005a) and elsewhere (examples include Geschiere and Meyer 1998, Kendall 2003, Meyer 1998, Meyer and Pels 2003, P. Taylor 2004, Weller 2000). These studies reflect on the fact that capitalist modernity has produced a proliferation of enchantments, and the manner in which neoliberal economies, supposedly characterised by 'economic rationalism', have produced novel forms of 'irrationality'.

On this subject, the work of Jean and John Comaroff on what they have termed "occult economies" and "millennial capitalism" has been influential (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2000). Their approach, which focuses on the

“second coming of capitalism”, i.e. neoliberalism, offers a theoretical framework for understanding the worldwide growth in practices which draw on occult explanations and techniques to manage the unpredictable and increasingly spectral elements of globalised capitalism. In essence, this approach suggests the emergence of an increasingly Hobbesian world, where collective forms of identification such as class and nation are ever less efficacious and where magical means are pursued to further self-interest or to deal with the vagaries and inscrutability of global capitalist forces (Weller 2000:496). Weller notes that this approach has led the Comaroffs to focus on such issues as the violence associated with accusations of witchcraft and killings of individuals suspected of evil occult practices (2000). He contrasts this with ghost worship in Taiwan, which can be attributed to many of the same forces, but is more playful in character. Similarly, in southern Thailand, visitors to sacred sites also often deploy tropes of playfulness and ‘fun’ to characterise their experiences. However, in some situations fun and enjoyment may mask moments of tension that arise during transnational religious encounters. Here Anna Tsing’s use of ‘friction’ as an explanatory trope is helpful for capturing the qualities of contingent and open-ended encounters in interstitial spaces (Tsing 2005). This concept, which challenges the notion that cultural traffic is increasingly characterised by unimpeded flow, also encourages a continuing focus on collective systems of organisation and the manner in which these provide the ‘grip’ for friction-ful encounters to take place.

Thus rather than emphasising only the fragmentation of social life, I draw attention to the manner in which collective forms, such as nation, state and ethnic identifications, and their corresponding discursive regimes and hierarchies of value, impact upon everyday life and serve to structure encounters and flows. Trying to avoid the extremes of celebrating hybridity or making dire predictions about clashes of cultures, I attempt to provide a

more nuanced account of encounters characterised by improvisation and negotiated temporary relationships, of simultaneous accommodation and tension.

A common theme throughout this thesis, therefore, is the interdependence of stasis and flow, or “flux and fix” (Geschiere and Meyer 1998). I approach this at a number of levels and in a number of guises. A similar logic characterises my approach to the simultaneously productive and restrictive effects of the national border, the production of ethnic sameness and difference, or the relationship between movement and stasis by an ancestral figure such as Luang Phò Thuat.

### *Structure of the Thesis*

This thesis is divided into three distinct but complementary parts. Part I provides background to the rest of my argument, developing its thematic, geographical and other underpinnings. Part II deals specifically with Luang Phò Thuat and analyses his historical and geographical genesis. Part III extends the issues raised in previous sections to a discussion of transnational religious dynamics and the production of ‘Chineseness’ in the South.

#### **Part I: The Saint, the State, and the South**

Chapter one continues to introduce the main themes of the thesis. It provides an ‘arrival scene’ of sorts leading into a discussion of social character and importance of Luang Phò Thuat. Chapter two provides background about religion and society in Thailand. As well as a historical overview, it also reviews the literature on contemporary Thai religion and seeks to critique what I argue is its dominant theoretical trajectory. I argue that contemporary writing on Thai religion is closely related to the categories provided by the nation-state, even in critical scholarship which attempts to move beyond these categories. Considering the manner in which several

scholars have used the concept of 'postmodernity' to characterise contemporary religious developments, I suggest an alternative approach which returns the state to a more central focus. Chapter three moves on to the spatial configuration of the fieldsite and deals with the complexities inherent in the region known as 'southern Thailand'. It seeks to address the problems associated with doing a study on 'Buddhism' in the South and to examine the various ingredients that constitute the South as a socio-cultural reality.

## **Part II: Unfolding the Bodhisattva**

Chapters four, five and six present three snapshots of the genesis of Luang Phò Thuat as an important religious figure in southern Thailand. These snapshots follow both a temporal and spatial logic, connecting three different eras and three different locations through the story of Luang Phò Thuat. The first snapshot focuses on the region of Satingphra, where the monk who would become known as Luang Phò Thuat was supposed to have lived in the seventeenth century. This chapter partially focuses on the historical conditions of this era, characterised by unstable relations between peninsula polities and the attempts by the distant kingdom of Ayutthaya to exercise suzerainty in the area. However, this is not so much a historical study of seventeenth century Satingphra, but rather its main focus is the manner in which various historical elements have been retained and remembered in the contemporary construction of Luang Phò Thuat.

The second snapshot focuses on the Muslim-dominated province of Pattani in the 1950s and 1960s, when Luang Phò Thuat emerged as a contemporary figure at the centre of a cult of images. This was a time of instability in that area, while the military bureaucratic elites who controlled state institutions sought an unprecedented level of control over all peripheral areas of the nation's "geo-body" (Thongchai 1994). During this era a new



model of government intent on revitalising 'traditional' forms of power intersected with the ambition of local Sino-Thai elites to produce a new kind of folk hero. This chapter considers the systems of authority and politics of memory that have sutured the Muslim-dominated 'deep South' to the story, and geo-body, of the Thai nation-state.

The third snapshot is of the most recent developments of Luang Phò Thuat's character. He has been increasingly integrated into the national "cult of amulets" (Tambiah 1984), and sacred sites associated with his life have become the sites for both domestic and international religious tourism and pilgrimage. I describe how notions of Luang Phò Thuat as a saviour figure or *bodhisattva*, which reflect how he was remembered as a seventeenth century figure, have been taken up by urban Sino-Thai and foreign Chinese from elsewhere in Southeast Asia and have transformed Luang Phò Thuat into a 'celestial' figure akin to many Mahayana Buddhist figures such as Kuan Im. This chapter therefore considers the manner in which Luang Phò Thuat has come to mediate between constructions of Thainess and Chineseness.

Throughout this part of the thesis I emphasise the connections between Luang Phò Thuat and the production of Buddhist sanctity in the southern borderland region. He is not the only such source of this production, but he is probably the most prominent and the most explicitly connected with a certain vision of the South. He is a complex figure with a multivalent symbolic importance which cannot be restricted to one location, religious tradition or ethnic identification. However, as I will show, the significance of Luang Phò Thuat lies in the manner in which he unifies a number of apparently contradictory elements within a single figure.

### **Part III: The Transnational Sacred**

The crossing of conceptual boundaries by Luang Phò Thuat is expanded in the final chapters, which examine the transnational dimension of religion in the far South. Sources of charisma such as those associated with Luang Phò Thuat, while historically important to the territorialising ambitions of the Thai nation-state and its predecessors, are now increasingly embedded within the transnational networks. The particular constructions of sanctity undertaken since the 1950s and exemplified in the career of Luang Phò Thuat have helped to produce the landscape and conditions for further elaborations with a transnational character. Chapter seven considers the phenomenon of religious tourism from a broad perspective, while chapters eight and nine focus on specific case studies, describing and assessing the influence and impacts of foreign Chinese interest in local religious forms. Chapter eight deals with Chinese religious practices in Hat Yai, southern Thailand's largest urban centre, while chapter nine considers the impact of Chinese patronage on a Theravada Buddhist ceremony at a village monastery not far from Hat Yai.

This section of the thesis illustrates the sorts of adaptations and transformations that are effected through these transnational connections and flows, whereby, for example, Hindu gods have become Buddhas, and many monks have adapted themselves and their temples to the spiritual and aesthetic tastes and demands of their Chinese devotees. In the process they have also been able to establish extensive networks of followers within the Chinese diaspora of East and Southeast Asia and beyond. The examples used demonstrate that the trade in sanctity does not spread outwards from Thailand uniformly but flows through informal webs and interlocking networks of ritual specialists, intermediaries and patrons. Furthermore, I show that the specificities of geography, local history and particular dynamics of tourism and trade in different parts of Thailand all play a role in

shaping the sorts of relationships and networks that develop between Thai-based ritual specialists and their foreign Chinese patrons.

### *On Methodology and Theory*

This project has made me appreciate the fundamentally intertwined nature of theory and methodology. The practical aspects involved in undertaking this research imply and reflect a number of theoretical assumptions. Yet equally, the methodology pursued has led this study in particular theoretical directions. For the most part, in writing this thesis I have been content to allow both methodology and theory to remain implicit, or for them to emerge in the context of dealing with specific problematics in different parts of the text. However, I will now briefly outline the role methodology and theory play in this thesis.

Because the subject matter of this thesis is diverse, both geographically and conceptually, an eclectic range of methods have been used to follow the various trails that presented themselves. In order to produce a study which brings within its scope the South as a whole, I have not located myself in a stable bounded location in the traditional ethnographic sense, nor within a specific group of people. Instead, I spent my fieldwork constantly on the move, retracing the wanderings of Luang Phò Thuat as I found them, making pilgrimages to sacred sites, following pathways ancient and not so ancient, and considering how they intersected with other trajectories. During my fieldwork I interviewed a wide range of actors whose paths I crossed: Buddhist monks and laymen, local government officials, Sino-Thai entrepreneurs, spirit mediums, temple officials, bus drivers, tattoo artists, academics, activists, villagers, tourists and many others. These interviews and encounters were very much dependent on the contingencies of my

highly mobile approach to fieldwork, which was informed by multiple traces of Luang Phò Thuat's journeys as well as contemporary religious trajectories.

In other words, I have adopted a 'multi-sited' approach to fieldwork in order "to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space" (Marcus 1995:96). This approach, argues Marcus, may take "unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity that destabilize the distinction, for example, between lifeworld and system". In order to explore the connections between lifeworld and system, between locality and travel, moments of 'fix' within 'flux', movement has been central to my method.

My choice to perform a multi-sited study did not emerge purely from the theoretical interests but was partially the product of my own personal constraints and considerations. During the main fieldwork period, between February 1999 and March 2000, I was accompanied by my wife and baby son. They stayed with me in Thailand for about eleven months, during which period I was based in the city of Songkhla, the provincial capital. After my family returned to Australia I moved to Hat Yai, the commercial centre of the lower South. This was done to facilitate research in the city and its surrounds, as this area had taken on a more central importance in my research as it progressed.

The fact that I was not alone in the field had several effects on the conditions of possibility of my fieldwork and the conscious methodological choices I made. From the early stages of conceptualising my project, I was inclined to prefer a project centred on an urban locale which would be a relatively pleasant place to live for my family. Songkhla suggested itself because of its proximity to Hat Yai and various temples of significance, but also because it was a reasonably quiet place with a sizeable population of Westerners. I adopted an approach in which I shuttled between home and the various sites at which I conducted my fieldwork 'proper'. My fieldwork

experience was therefore characterised by something of a split between my domestic life and my incursions into the outside world, between relative familiarity and my experiences of otherness.

This constant movement is perhaps one reason why I have found the metaphors of motion, travel, and the intersection of paths to be useful in this project. I also use these metaphors because the material itself suggests them. To use a well-worn anthropologism, they have been 'good to think'. Like Luang Phò Thuat himself, metaphors allow for a condensation of ideas. They allow apparently separate phenomena to be juxtaposed, and the tensions produced by such juxtapositions enable new opportunities for insight.

Similar issues arise in relationship to theory. Just as the methodology has emerged from certain material and personal constraints, my approach to theory has been led by the specificity of the material. Instead of beginning with a particular theoretical framework and applying it to the subject matter, I have treated theory as providing a 'toolbox', allowing the elaboration of particular points and enabling conceptual shifts according to specific circumstances. This approach derives from the conviction that a too-scrupulous adherence to theoretical paradigms originating in Euro-American centres of knowledge production runs the risk of reproducing assumptions inherent in the theories themselves and may obscure, rather than illuminate, the aspects of the subject.

Peter A. Jackson has addressed this issue in his discussions of poststructuralism and critical theory in relationship to area studies (P. A. Jackson 2003a, 2003b, 2003c), and in his critique of Rosalind Morris's (2000a) study of spirit mediumship in northern Thailand (P. A. Jackson 2004b). In both cases he notes the universalising tendencies of poststructuralist theory,

despite its valorisation of difference and indeterminacy.<sup>6</sup> Jackson particularly takes Morris to task for her claim that a poststructuralist approach to translation “is supported and even demanded by the reading of modern northern Thai scripts” (R. C. Morris 2000a:15). This statement implies that an unreconstructed poststructuralism can fully account for forms of cultural difference. By contrast, Jackson argues that:

... if Thai forms of power (and hence local discourses and cultural logics) are indeed fundamentally different from Western forms ... this requires us to rethink aspects of post-structuralism. Only such a rethinking of critical theory in the light of the particularities of Thai cultural history will provide us with interpretative tools that genuinely promote understanding, rather than working to erase Thai cultural difference under the false universals of Western theory (P. A. Jackson 2004b:350)

Jackson therefore argues for a localisation of theory sensitive to context in order to counter the universalising tendencies of Western-produced theory. This need not imply falling back upon naïve empiricism or a belief in the possibility of a direct and unmediated experience of difference. However, by speaking of and from specific contexts, it is possible to burst the bubble of largely self-referential theoretical positions. This is one of the primary values of ethnography, which works from the specific to the general and back again in a constant dialectical weaving (c.f. Kapferer 2007). The inevitable result of this approach is a certain amount of ‘messiness’ as not every ethnographic detail can be submitted to analysis and theorisation. The implication is also that one comes to a knowledge of the subject matter gradually. As Michael Jackson has noted, this dialectical approach is

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<sup>6</sup> Ien Ang makes a similar point when she argues that ‘postmodern’ constructions of identity that emphasise fluidity, instability and nomadic subjectivities can, in end effect, produce an overarching sameness to difference by removing it from specific contexts (Ang 1993:4).

evocative of a journey (M. Jackson 1996:27). This is another reason why a focus on Luang Phò Thuat's journeys has appealed as a method of exploring the subject matter of the thesis.

Peter Jackson's attempts to find a synthesis between Western theory and Thai specificity are productive and praiseworthy. However, I would argue that it is also important to consider the specific terms under which this kind of localisation of theory is produced. A focus on "Thai cultural difference" may certainly talk back to grand theoretical generalisations and allow for a more nuanced understanding of cultural specificity. It may, however, also privilege the categories of the nation-state and therefore potentially obscure other forms of difference. This point will be further developed in this thesis as I focus on the ongoing presence of 'the state' in issues of popular religion and the way it is conceptualised. Now, though, I turn to Luang Phò Thuat and elaborate on his importance for this thesis.





# **PART I**

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THE SAINT, THE STATE, AND THE SOUTH



## Chapter One

### In the Land of Luang Phò Thuat

...memory is not necessarily authentic, but rather useful.

— Edward Said, 'Invention, Memory, Place'.

Buddhism's imprint throughout Asia is as much one of Buddha images and other material signs as monks teaching the Buddha's dhamma.

— Donald Swearer (2004:211).

#### *Crossing Paths with the Venerable Ancestor*

It was several months into my fieldwork that I was invited by a monk to drive him to a remote Buddhist sanctuary (*samnak song*) that he was in the process of developing. His name was Khruba Somboon,<sup>7</sup> a monk in his forties who had completed a Masters degree in finance in the USA before rejecting lay life and returning to Thailand to be ordained in the Thammayut sect of the Thai Sangha, the community of Buddhist monks. I had first met Khruba at a forest monastery just outside the city of Hat Yai, southern Thailand's largest city and commercial centre. Some friends had invited me there to join their meditation retreats and to meet the elderly abbot of the temple, whom they called Ajan Thangjit, or simply Ajan Jit.<sup>8</sup> A member of the lineage of the famed Northeastern master, Ajan Man Phurithat (1871-1949), Ajan Jit emphasised strict asceticism and meditation that appealed to his educated urban followers, mostly young professionals from Hat Yai and Songkhla – engineers, doctors, nurses, teachers, small business owners – who sought to emulate this austerity of practice within the bounds of their lay lives. Knowing that I had come to Thailand to 'learn about Buddhism', as I

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<sup>7</sup> A pseudonym. He did, however, use the title of 'Khruba', with its specific connotations connecting it to Northern and Northeastern forest traditions. I will only refer to him by this title as this is how he preferred that I address him.

<sup>8</sup> The title 'Ajan' (teacher; master), while it can be used as a polite term of address for any monk, emphasises the learned nature of the monk and his role as a teacher.

often glossed my research, my friends were concerned that I should be exposed to what they considered to be the purest – i.e. orthodox – form of Buddhist practice.<sup>9</sup> For them this was to be found in the Thammayut forest monks who, with their close connections to the royal family and reputation for being strict practitioners and exemplary meditation masters, occupy a privileged position within the national hierarchy of religious value. Together with a number of other famous monks in his lineage, Ajan Man is widely accepted as having achieved the status of ‘saint’ or *arahant*: a fully-enlightened being who had completely freed himself from the karmic cycle of birth and rebirth and thus attained the pinnacle of achievement within Theravada Buddhist soteriology.

After having visited the monastery a couple of times, I was quickly claimed by Khruba Somboon as a devotee of sorts and for a time I became his driver,<sup>10</sup> ferrying him in his family’s pickup to and from the forest temple on errands.<sup>11</sup> Mostly this involved bringing building materials up to the retreat in the hills of Nathawi district, in the Muslim-dominated southern part of Songkhla province, not far from the Malaysian border.<sup>12</sup> The retreat itself had only the most tenuous existence as a place in its own right. With no name of its own, it was referred to by the distance marker on the highway closest to the dirt track that led up to its clearing in the hills: *kò mò16* – km 16. It was not yet a place, only a distance from a place, in the early stages of emerging from the non-differentiation of the forest.

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<sup>9</sup> The question of the political significance of orthodox and heterodox forms of Buddhism in contemporary Thailand will be addressed in chapter two.

<sup>10</sup> Buddhist monks are not permitted to drive vehicles.

<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking, when men ordain as monks they are supposed to renounce all ties to their previous lay existence, including family. Nevertheless, in practice many monks still retain close ties with their families, although mediated by the structure of the monastic precepts (*winai*).

<sup>12</sup> A substantial study of this district has been done by Ruth McVey (1984).

The first time Khruba and I travelled there, we drove from Hat Yai to the district capital of Nathawi and then West along the highway. The hills on both sides of the road were dominated by rubber-tree plantations, but in places they were giving way to new structures and the land was being put to new uses.<sup>13</sup> Not far out of Nathawi we passed a clearing containing a recently built shrine devoted to a 'thousand-hand' image of the Chinese Bodhisattva of mercy, Kuan Im,<sup>14</sup> and the residence of a female Sino-Thai medium who channelled the spirit of this goddess. The large, brightly coloured building stood in stark contrast to the modest homes of the predominantly Muslim rubber-tappers that dotted the sides of the highway. The medium had moved her operations from Hat Yai a couple of years earlier, one of the many urban-based mediums who are generating enough patronage to allow themselves to move from tiny residences in cities like Songkhla and Hat Yai into more 'palatial' settings on urban fringes or even out in the countryside. Such trends are evidence of the nationwide rise in interest in 'urban spirit mediumship' that accompanied the economic boom of the 1980s and 1990s and has showed no sign of abating following the crash of 1997.<sup>15</sup> In the South, the mediums making this change are predominantly of Chinese background, and generally channel Chinese deities. They are testimony to a growing interest in Chinese religiosity amongst the urban middle-class in Thailand as well as the increasingly significant influence of Chinese patronage from Malaysia and Singapore.

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<sup>13</sup> One of southern Thailand's most important industries which has been in a long-term crisis due to the steady decline in world rubber prices.

<sup>14</sup> Kuan Im is the Thai rendering of Guan Yin. In Thailand this goddess is usually referred to as Jao Mae (or Phra Mae) Kuan Im. At this shrine she was referred to as Phra Photisat Kuan Im Phan Mü ('The thousand-hand bodhisattva Kuan Im').

<sup>15</sup> On the emergence of urban spirit mediumship in Thailand, see Irvine (1984), Morris (2000a, 2000b), Pattana (1999a, 1999b, 2005b), Tanabe (2002) and White (1999).

During an earlier visit to this shrine, I had attended a ceremony where the participants included not only local Chinese businesspeople but prominent members of the local government bureaucracy, including a senior official in the Department of Religious Affairs. Local schoolchildren and poor Muslim rubber-tappers received parcels of food from the spirit medium and government officials. With the schoolchildren queuing in their uniforms, and Muslim tappers humbly *wai*-ing their government-employed 'superiors' to show their thanks for this act of charity, I was reminded of the multiple ways that the presence of the Thai nation-state created references and structures for this ritual gathering.<sup>16</sup>

As we drove on, other transformations of the landscape became evident. We passed the turn-off to the Piyamitr tunnels, formerly used as a refuge by Malaysian communist insurgents until the conflict ended with the Hat Yai accords of 1989. Once remote and hidden in the southern Thai jungles, these tunnels have now been thoroughly domesticated and incorporated into local channels of commoditisation of the countryside. Now encompassed by the Khao Nam Khang national park, this relic of an earlier political struggle has become Nathawi district's most prominent tourist attraction. Former insurgents, long since granted amnesty by Thai authorities, dwell peacefully in a quiet village near the tunnels and sell medicinal herbs and mushrooms to visiting tourists.

On reaching the turn-off to the retreat, we turned on to the narrow track at km16, driving past a small cluster of rubber-tappers' houses and shady rubber tree plantations. Cobbled at first, the track became deeply rutted and muddy as we progressed. Soon it seemed that it would prove impassable. A

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<sup>16</sup> The *wai* involves placing the hands together and bowing slightly. It is a 'Thai' greeting and act of showing respect, promoted as emblematic of Thai national culture. It is therefore also closely related to Buddhism. The act is similar to, and on a continuum with, acts of reverence towards Buddhist images (*krap*) and thus is problematic from a Muslim point of view as it is suggestive of idolatry.

patch of deep mud on a steep upward slope meant that the pickup could not gain any traction. The wheels spun hopelessly. I suggested turning back but Khruba insisted we persevere, demonstrating his determination by getting out and pushing the pickup. Although it did not seem right for a monk to be pushing while the layman sat high and dry, practically there was no other choice. Khruba would have been breaking the precepts of his discipline if he had taken the wheel of the pickup. Eventually, we succeeded in crossing the bog and a little further up the track we reached a clearing in the dense woods in which the retreat was located.

In the past Khruba, Ajan Jit, and a number of other monks and lay followers had spent time in this sanctuary. But at that time it was uninhabited. There was very little to see. A single wooden monks' dwelling (*kuti*) on stilts stood in the small clearing. Across a small stream, on the edge of the forest, was another pair of smaller wooden structures. The sanctuary merged into the forest; no sharp boundary separated it from the surrounding wilderness.

There was also no shrine-hall of any kind and the only images to be seen were some crumpled and faded photographs of a number of Northeastern forest monks that were attached to the outside of the main *kuti*. A photo of Ajan Man was of course there although it was relatively uncommon to see his image in the South, on shop walls and shrines, on the dashboards of cars or hanging from rear-view mirrors, or people's necks – imagery which Annette Hamilton has called “the iconography of everyday life” (1992:6). Ajan Man's heartland is in the Northeast, where he wandered and dwelt, and although he had become a ‘national saint’ (Taylor 1988), his image was by no means evenly distributed throughout the nation.

Of all the monks included on the walls of the *kuti*, there was only one who did not belong to the lineage of Ajan Man and this was also the only one ‘indigenous’ to the South; a monk called Luang Phò Thuat. That he had a

special significance for this place was illustrated by a second, larger, image of him that shared pride of place with a photograph of Ajan Jit above the *kuti's* door (Figure 1). Both of these images were liberally speckled with gold-leaf, marking them as objects of some veneration.



**Figure 1. Pictures of Luang Pu Thangjit and Luang Phò Thuat at *kò mò* 16.**

This image of Luang Phò Thuat was one that I had come to recognise instantly in the months I had been conducting my fieldwork. Photographic in its realism, the image appeared to be taken from life, though I knew this was impossible as the monk pictured was supposed to have lived during the seventeenth century (CE). This was a dream image, or rather the product of a vision: a photograph of a wax figure based on an artist's sketches made from a description by a monk who had had a vision of Luang Phò Thuat while meditating. Although I knew that the image had been through a number of mediations before it reached my eye, the immediacy of this photographic likeness was undeniable and seemed to be full of the presence of the saint. As my eye met the pictured monk's gaze, I experienced my usual flash of



delight that came with recognition, and the realisation that here, too, he was to be found. It felt like a secret we shared. He was turning up wherever I went and each time I encountered him, even in such a remote location, when I wasn't actively seeking him, seemed like a confirmation of some sort. My experience of fieldwork had been punctuated by a number of such encounters that brought a sense of coherence and stability to what often seemed to be a bewildering process of displacement. Seeing him again, here, suggested that I was somehow on the right track, though I wasn't sure of the nature of this path I was on, nor where it would lead.

In this chapter I provide an overview of Luang Phò Thuat's significance for this thesis and the range of topics he has helped me address. As mentioned in the introduction, Luang Phò Thuat has acted as a node or point of condensation of a number of themes, and in this chapter I provide a more detailed sense of precisely how this has informed my study. I consider here the various modes of impact he has had, his various 'footprints', as well as the ontological ambiguities that have made him such a productive figure for this study.

### *The Footprints of Luang Phò Thuat*

Luang Phò Thuat (หลวงพ่อบุญรอด), whose name may be translated as 'Venerable Great Grandfather' or 'Venerable Ancestor',<sup>17</sup> is well-known and highly respected throughout Thailand, to the extent that he should be regarded as a "national saint" (Taylor 1988). There are many examples of Luang Phò Thuat's popularity in contemporary Thai society, including public pronouncements of faith by movie stars and other prominent Thais (Jory 2004). For example, in November 2002 the Minister of Labour and president of the Lawn Tennis Association of Thailand gave Thai tennis star

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<sup>17</sup> His name has also been rendered as "Venerable Ancestor Spirit" (Gesick 1985, 1995, 2002).

Paradorn Srichaphan a rare Luang Phò Thuat amulet in order to “wipe out his bad luck, including accidents while traveling” (*The Nation* 5 November 2002). Foreign stars have also been honoured in a similar manner. American actor Leonardo Di Caprio came to Phuket during the filming of the movie *The Beach* and on arrival he was presented with none other than a Luang Phò Thuat amulet as part of a welcoming ceremony.<sup>18</sup>

Luang Phò Thuat also has long-standing connections with the armed forces and in particular the army and border guards. Some of the earliest batches (*run*) of amulets, made in the 1950s and '60s, were especially produced for border guards, to protect them against Muslim separatists and communist insurgents in the far South (Peltier 1977). The association with the military has remained strong to the present. In a recent example, Thai soldiers serving in Iraq were presented with Luang Phò Thuat amulets by Lt-General Phisarn Wattanwongsiri, then Thai Army assistant chief of staff, as part of a “morale-boosting ceremony” (*The Nation* 23 November 2003).<sup>19</sup>

This blending of the popular and the official is evident in certain renderings of his name. In contemporary Thailand the title ‘Somdet’ often precedes Luang Phò Thuat’s name. Taken as a whole, this name suggests a paradox: while ‘Luang Phò’ is generally used by laypeople as a familiar, relatively informal title for highly respected monks, ‘Somdet’ is indicative of a royal connection as it is only used for high level members of royalty and

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<sup>18</sup> And possibly as an opportunity for some good publicity – di Caprio being officially welcomed by local monks and the powerful symbol of the South, Luang Phò Thuat, as well – given the amount of controversy over the potential damage the production of the film would do to the local environment. It is also interesting to note that it was Luang Phò Thuat, and not Phuket’s own most famous “magic monk”, Luang Phò Chaem, who was presented to the actor. Chaem and the reasons for his fame are discussed by Keyes (1977).

<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that Lt-General Phisarn has had a long connection with the South as a major figure in the dealing with insurgency in the region. He was replaced by Lt-Gen Pongsak Ekbannasingh as commander of the fourth army division, based in the South, as part of efforts to combat the rise in separatist violence that has taken place since 2004 (*Bangkok Post* 12 March 2004, 30 March 2004a). Pongsak himself was removed from command due to his role in the Tak Bai incident.

monks at the pinnacle of the Sangha's hierarchy. The name therefore suggests a number of things about this monk: that he is an 'ancestral' figure of particular importance for southern Thailand; that he brings together local popular appeal and a sense of familiarity with royal power; and he represents a connection of the extreme periphery with the power of the centre.

Despite this national prominence, Luang Phò Thuat is first and foremost a southern Thai Buddhist saint.<sup>20</sup> Actually, it would perhaps be more accurate to say *the* southern Thai Buddhist saint. This is not only because he is undoubtedly the most popular Buddhist saint in the South, but because in some senses he has come to represent the (Buddhist) South. Luang Phò Thuat, the South and southerners are connected in any number of everyday pronouncements. Southern monks are considered to have a closer connection to Luang Phò Thuat, and are called upon to sacralise most images made in his likeness. Not surprisingly, amulets of Luang Phò Thuat are also the most commonly produced at temples throughout the South, and not only those that make a claim to a historical connection with the life of the saint. A monk from Trang summed up the reason for this when asked why his temple, which had no historical connection to the saint, produced so many Luang Phò Thuat amulets: "in the South the magical power of Luang Phò Thuat can't be beaten" (*thi phak tai khwam saksit khòng luang phò thuat su mai dai*). In another instance, the abbot of a temple in Songkhla province explained that he had agreed to have a six metre high statue of the saint, commissioned by a wealthy Sino-Thai entrepreneur from Bangkok, to be built on a hill near his monastery after the statue had "refused" to travel to its original destination in the North by not allowing the engine of the truck

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<sup>20</sup> The monk is also sometimes referred to as Luang Pu Thuat (Pu meaning paternal grandfather). Informants have told me that he is generally known by this name in other parts of Thailand, but in the South it is most common to call him "Luang Phò".

on which it was to be transported to start. Only when it was decided to move the statue to a location in the South was it possible to start the truck.<sup>21</sup> Luang Phò Thuat preferred the warm climate of the South to the cold of the North, the abbot explained.<sup>22</sup>

Luang Phò Thuat is considered to be first and foremost a protective spirit, and is felt to be particularly efficacious at shielding individuals from untimely or violent deaths (*tai hong*) such as death in traffic accidents, a common occurrence in Thailand.<sup>23</sup> It was almost inevitable to find a small statue, often inside a plastic case or suspended inside a crystal ball<sup>24</sup> on the dashboard of cars and tuk-tuks,<sup>25</sup> or one or more amulets or *bodhi* leaf-shaped images hanging on a string might be hung from the rear-view mirror, or purpose-made stickers carrying arcane designs (*yan*) and the monk's visage which were stuck to the windscreen.

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<sup>21</sup> This story is also reminiscent of others in which the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat has caused vehicles to stop and not allow them to move until he is appropriately honoured. Other stories include the episode when, during the Second World War, his spirit stopped a train filled with Japanese soldiers and refused to allow it to move past the stupa containing his remains. During his life, he is also supposed to have caused a pirate ship to stop moving. These episodes will be discussed below. Suffice it to say here that the story of the truck refusing to budge is not completely novel in its elements but rather draws on a particular narrative tradition.

<sup>22</sup> It is quite common to hear of sacred objects that refuse to move, or alternatively cause vehicles that offend them in some way to lose their ability to move. This refusal to move usually indicates that correct ritual procedures in relationship to the object have not been followed. This might have something to do with the fact that sacred objects and the spirits associated with them have to be "invited" (*choen; anchoen*) to move -- not simply taken or moved. Thus the object or associated spirit must want to move, must be enticed, convinced, etc.

<sup>23</sup> The rate of people killed or injured annually on Thai roads is among the highest in the world at 6.6 per 10,000 registered vehicles, compared to a European rate of 1.8 (*Bangkok Post* 30 March 2004b).

<sup>24</sup> The "crystal ball" is significant because it relates to an episode in Luang Phò Thuat's biography when, while just a baby, it is said that he was bestowed with a magical crystal ball by a snake spirit that had coiled itself around his cradle. This episode will be discussed below.

<sup>25</sup> What were called "tuk-tuks" in Songkhla and Hat Yai did not resemble the three-wheeled vehicles of the same name that are found in Bangkok, but were small covered utilities with two rows of seats in the back, like smaller versions of the *sòngthaeo* that predominantly provided transport between towns and surrounding villages.

It did not take long during my fieldwork to recognise the pervasiveness of Luang Phò Thuat in southern Thailand. It also seemed that every shop in Songkhla or Hat Yai had an image of him somewhere, whether a small statue on a wall-mounted shrine or an elaborate oil-painted portrait. Many Buddhist males in the South I spoke to – from taxi drivers to university lecturers – would, on the mention of Luang Phò Thuat's name, reveal one or more of his amulets hanging on a chain around their neck and offer up a detailed narrative of their history.<sup>26</sup> These stories encompassed the history of the amulet itself – the year and 'batch' of their making, the temples at which the rituals of 'enchantment' (*pluk sek*) were performed, and by which monk(s) – as well as their personal significances. These men would relate how they came to have these amulets, the protection it afforded them, the motoring accidents from which they escaped unharmed, and the sense of security it provided them. With equal enthusiasm they would relate their version of Luang Phò Thuat's biography, the places he lived and the miracles he performed. These conversations often revealed profound emotional attachments, involving a number of narratives, both personal and collective. I was sometimes surprised to see tears welling in the eyes of a stranger as he related what Luang Phò Thuat and his amulets meant to him.<sup>27</sup> These were highly personal 'biographical objects' (Hoskins 1998), holding together details and narratives of anxiety, security and a sense of emplaced belonging.

The intense attachment expressed towards these objects seemed to co-exist uneasily with an awareness of their status as commodities. These conversations would often turn to the subject of the stupendous sums that people were willing to pay for Luang Phò Thuat amulets, sometimes up to

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<sup>26</sup> Although the wearing of amulets is not exclusive to men, it is a highly gendered practice and amulets are associated with prohibitions regarding pollution by contact with females and sexual activity.

<sup>27</sup> I am not the only one who has been impressed by the emotional attachment of southerners to Luang Phò Thuat. For another account, see Stengs (1998).

several million baht.<sup>28</sup> The reciting of such facts would often be accompanied by complaints that most of the older, more expensive amulets could no longer be found in Thailand. Rich Chinese from Singapore and Malaysia who could outbid the relatively poor Thais had taken most of the amulets out of the country.

In this manner, narratives of awe at the miraculous properties of the amulet-as-commodity merged into narratives of *ressentiment* and cultural loss as these national treasures – not afforded the same legal protection against export as Buddha statues – were removed from their rightful place. Though designed to circulate, modes of exchange of amulets are clearly subject to moral sanctions and critiques. Although alienable from individuals, sacred objects of this kind appear to be rightfully ‘inalienable possessions’ (Weiner 1992) of the nation-as-a-whole. The perceived inability to limit the circuits of their exchange is felt as a slight against a sense of Thai sovereignty.

Luang Phò Thuat therefore has a transnational dimension. The fame of Luang Phò Thuat stretches beyond the boundaries of the Thai nation-state and it has been shown that he is a figure of some significance in neighbouring countries, especially amongst the ethnic Chinese of Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>29</sup> For this reason, temples associated with Luang Phò Thuat have become popular tourist/pilgrimage attractions with ethnic Chinese from

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<sup>28</sup> At the time I was conducting research in 1999-2002 there were about 25 baht to the Australian dollar.

<sup>29</sup> There is also evidence of a certain amount of interest in Luang Phò Thuat in other neighbouring countries. Jory relates that interest in Luang Phò Thuat amulets was shown by individuals in Cambodia (Jory 2004:1 [fn.4]). There are also popular accounts of *farang* (Westerners) having faith in the amulets of Luang Phò Thuat after experiencing miracles associated with them, in some cases even returning to Thailand to *kae bon*, or pay thanksgiving, for receiving the miracle. No doubt my own status as a *farang* had something to do with these anecdotes being related to me so often. The account of one Westerner paying obeisance to a Luang Phò Thuat amulet, albeit out of a feeling of nostalgia and loss for his Thai ex-wife rather than due to the experience of a miracle, can be found at: <http://www.thoughtcat.com/allmyownwork/luanpotuad.htm>. Also, I have personally found amulets of Luang Phò Thuat, along with other Thai images, on sale at markets in Sydney’s Chinatown.

these countries. Amulet dealers in Hat Yai cater to a large degree to foreign Chinese customers and Luang Phò Thuat images are always among the most prominent and in demand. But as the narratives of loss and resentment occasioned by these exchanges suggest, these transnational exchanges are by no means smooth and frictionless. The nation-state, as both container and focus of intense sentiment, produces certain blocks and hindrances while simultaneously underpinning the very power, and therefore desirability, of these object of exchange.<sup>30</sup>

Narratives and signs of Luang Phò Thuat's presence are abundant. Though living several centuries earlier, Luang Phò Thuat's presence can be felt in any number of present-day manifestations. He was a giant of a man (it is often said) with dark skin and a black tongue<sup>31</sup> (some claim) who built and restored temples, and who roamed the countryside healing the sick and performing a variety of miracles. His passing left marks, and these traces, his 'footprints' – both literal and figurative – are to be found across southern Thailand and beyond. One text, written about a century after he was supposed to have lived, records that the stamping of his foot split solid rock on one occasion during his time in the then royal capital of Ayutthaya (Gesick 2002). At Wat Pha Kho, a monastery on the Satingphra Peninsula in Songkhla province where he is said to have been abbot, Luang Phò Thuat's gigantic footprint can still be found imprinted in the rock. Other sites mark his life travels: the banyan tree under which his placenta was buried, the rice field in which the miraculous snake spirit wrapped itself around his cradle (*ple*) when he was a baby and presented him with a magical crystal ball, the rubber tree against which he rested his walking stick, the cave near the

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<sup>30</sup> This paradox – that the very factors which produce deep solidarity and connection to place are the ones that generate destabilising flows – will be returned to throughout this thesis.

<sup>31</sup> Denoting a supranormal ability to accurately predict future events; as Luang Phò Thuat spoke, so it would be, I was told by several of his devotees.

present-day border with Malaysia where he engraved his name in the rock wall, the many other caves, waterfalls and so on where he is supposed to have stopped and meditated during his wandering, the stupa in Malaysia's Kedah state which marks the location of his death, and the stupa at Wat Chang Hai in Pattani that marks the final resting place of his remains.

His footsteps also leave an emotional imprint. A popular song, available in record stores and often played during rituals at temples associated with his life, announces that Luang Phò Thuat gently 'treads the heart' (*yiap jai*) of southerners, thus purifying them. This is a notion that simultaneously evokes the emotional attachment many Buddhist southerners feel for this monk as well as his most famous miraculous 'footprint'. This occurred not on land but on the water, when he trod on sea water and made it fresh, thus saving the crew of the boat on which he was travelling from dying of thirst. As a result of this miracle, he is most often distinguished from other 'ancestral monks' as 'Luang Phò Thuat Yiap Nam Thale Jüt' (venerable ancestor who by stepping on seawater made it fresh). Curiously, it is the footprint on water that has allowed the geographically dispersed, competing and complementing, always fluid stories of this mythical saint to coalesce into one authoritative narrative. And it is in this footprint which left no physical trace that the enduring kernel of his identity lies, and that has allowed Luang Phò Thuat to become what he is today: the veritable patron saint of (Buddhist) southern Thailand.

The various footprints and other evidence of Luang Phò Thuat's past presence – visible and invisible, gigantic and insignificant, waxing in repute or undergoing quiet erasure, but always invested with his sacred energy – mark the landscape, give it historical and semantic depth, imbue it with significance, claim it against rivals, and provide a focus for the many sites of power, praxis, and pilgrimage associated with his transcendent abilities.



*Making a Place for Buddhism*

Luang Phò Thuat's presence is not stable but is constantly being (re)discovered in Southern Thailand. The figurative excavation of his travels in the South, usually in the form of dreams/visions or other supernatural means, has the effect of inscribing the landscape of southern Thailand with significance, giving local space a sense of historical depth and continuity. These forms of remembrance and rediscovery are not neutral but also testify to the ongoing presence of Theravada Buddhism in the region, a notion that is politically significant, especially in the Muslim-dominated sections of the South.<sup>32</sup> Such transformations of the landscape can be relatively low-key, as at km 16, or they can be grandiose and imposing. In recent years there has been a trend towards gigantism in the production of images of Luang Phò Thuat.<sup>33</sup> Most of these statues are to be found in the South, while the biggest of them, an enormous 23.5 metre high statue dedicated to the Crown Prince, is located at a temple in Hua Hin, Prachuap Khirikhan province, the 'gateway to the South' (as noted by Jory 2004). Such images not only mark, but may also be designed literally to dominate the landscape by their presence (Figure 2).

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<sup>32</sup> That is especially the lower South. The demographic, political and cultural construction of the South will be discussed in chapter three.

<sup>33</sup> Though perhaps the most prominent example of this trend, Luang Phò Thuat is not the only monk who is being venerated in this way. Other monks of similar stature have also been the subject of gigantic statue building. The most notable of these is Somdet Phutthajan To Phromrangsi (Somdet To) who is the one monk in the Thai 'pantheon' whose status is most like that of Luang Phò Thuat. These two monks are often associated with each other in popular iconography. They are also the two founding spiritual entities in the Hupphasawan cult, now called the Samnak Pu Sawan ('shrine of the heavenly grandfathers'), discussed in chapter six. The relationship between Luang Phò Thuat and Somdet To is discussed by Irene Stengs (2003, esp. chapter four). On the Hupphasawan movement also see discussions by P.A. Jackson (1988), Wijeyewardene (1986), and Keyes, Hardacre and Kendall (1994:9-10).



**Figure 2. ‘Artist’s impression’ of the statue to be built on Khao Takiap. This image has been created by superimposing an image of an amulet or small statue onto the landscape. This picture was found in a brochure distributed by the foundation controlling the construction in order to demonstrate how it would look when finished.**

It is now possible to discern more fully the significance of Luang Phò Thuat’s image being included at the sanctuary at km 16. Although not a member of the lineage of Ajan Man, Luang Phò Thuat’s presence provided an important mechanism for grounding this newly formed Buddhist site in the southern Thai landscape. Establishment of sanctuaries, or *samnak*, is part of the ‘settlement stage’ of monks who have already developed a following of monks and laypeople (Taylor 1993b:97). Donation of land by villagers or elites was one of the main ways that the Thammayut order spread throughout countryside, “linked to a pervasive patronage system with the royalty in the capital” (Taylor 1993b:33). However, what qualified this location as a spiritually suitable site for a Buddhist retreat was the founding monk’s experience of local ancestral power. As one lay follower of Ajan Jit who had often spent time meditating at the retreat explained to me later when I asked her about the images on the *kuti*: one of the reasons that Ajan Jit had decided to found the retreat in this spot was because he himself had sensed the presence of Luang Phò Thuat there. Years earlier, following the

practice of ascetic wandering monks, Ajan Jit had been walking *thudong* in this area and had spent the night meditating under his mosquito net (*klot*).<sup>34</sup> Stories relating the experiences of *thudong* monks commonly feature encounters with ghosts, wild animals, bandits, communists, and other *unheimlich* inhabitants of the wild who are inevitably pacified by the accumulated merit and loving-kindness of the monks (Kamala 1997:14). The monks also often have visions. The clarity brought about by their ascetic practices allows them to see beyond the illusory surface appearance of the world and to access levels of reality inaccessible to lay folk (see Gray 1991). In this case, Ajan Jit was able to sense and, importantly, define the source of certain emanations he encountered there. These belonged to the 'ancestral' figure of Luang Phò Thuat, who as an individual with an exceptional level of accumulated merit and charismatic power (*bun-barami*), was endowed with a powerful and benevolent aura, which radiated from his body into the terrain he had inhabited. Although there was no physical trace of his being there, his presence had nevertheless remained, imbued in the landscape, an invisible inscription waiting to be rediscovered by another who possessed sufficient merit and discipline to recognise it. Recognising the area a 'beneficial site' in the sense that Luang Phò Thuat's residual aura could have a positive effect on the efforts of those who meditated and 'practised Dhamma' (*patibat tham*) there, Ajan Jit decided this would be an appropriate site to found a new sanctuary.

The account which began this chapter represents one of many occasions on which I crossed paths with Luang Phò Thuat while conducting fieldwork. Much of the far South – including parts of Songkhla, Pattani and Yala

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<sup>34</sup> *Thudong*: (Pali: *dhuthanga*). The practice of wandering, meditating and sleeping in the wilderness. A defining practice of the ascetic forest masters, the monks who practice this remain in the wild in order to purify themselves of defilements and attachments, especially the fear aroused through encounters with wild animals and dangerous spirits (for detailed descriptions of this practice, see Kamala 1997, Tambiah 1984, 1987, Taylor 1993b).

provinces, as well as further north, as far as Ayutthaya – are criss-crossed by his earlier travels and signs of his presence have been ‘discovered’ or ‘remembered’ on different occasions in the past, and on each occasion this process of remembering has contributed to the construction of place. The Buddhist sanctuary was just one example of this. The ancestral presence revealed to, and by, Ajan Jit during his meditation showed this area not to be mere wilderness but in fact to be an “intensely gathered landscape” (Casey 1996:25). It held *in place* memories, traces and imprints of the embodied presence of the ancestral saint who, by using the remote environment to aid his ascetic self-cultivation, had simultaneously aided the ‘cultivation’ of his environment. This practice also participated in the tradition that can be traced back to the Buddha Gotama, who marked out places by going into meditative trance in them, thereby preserving them as sites for later enshrinement of relics (Trainor 1997:146).

While sometimes I actively sought him out, I often encountered him by chance in out of the way places, when I was looking for other things. These encounters led to a developing fascination with this saint. It seemed to me that he provided the unifying key to my research into ‘popular religion’ in southern Thailand and a point of stability for my otherwise highly mobile project. I began to explore the reasons for the popularity of Luang Phò Thuat in the South, the ubiquity of his images, the narratives of his life and the miracles he is said to have performed.

The sacred power of Luang Phò Thuat has been put to use in creating a sense of historical depth in certain peripheral zones as well as shoring up the boundaries of the nation-state itself. The commoditisation of his images and sites associated with his life, and the subsequent commerce and tourism produced as a result, constantly problematise the projects of territorialisation to which he has been incorporated. He has been connected to a number of differently competing local “historical sensibilities” (Gesick 1985, 2002) on

the one hand, while he has been implicated in the project of national integration of the Muslim-dominated South (Jory 2004) on the other. These arguments are not mutually exclusive or contradictory. This thesis will endeavour to demonstrate the manner in which the local and regional are constituted within, and contribute to, the territorialising projects associated with state formation.

In this thesis I consider southern Thailand not to be an objectively given region but a place that has been produced through the discourses and practices of nation building. In this case I am interested in the role played by Luang Phò Thuat in constructions of this kind. Thus I am not only interested in how Luang Phò Thuat's presence contributes to the production of individual places, but also how he is linked to an entire region and, importantly, produces this region as a predominantly Theravada Buddhist place. In this context it is highly significant that the contemporary cult of Luang Phò Thuat actually emerged in a part of southern Thailand that is dominated by ethnic Malay Muslims. It is the ambiguity and ambivalence of the construction of the South as Buddhist and yet continuing to be associated with Islam that informs this discussion.

In this context it is important to realise that the regional variations and assertions of a regional identity are not necessarily the expression of autochthonous identities that *challenge* the hegemony of the nation-state. Instead they are evidence of an internalisation of the ordering principles of the nation-state itself. Evoking the South in these contexts, I would argue, tacitly evokes the nation. In the following pages I do not oppose the local to the national, and do not consider 'the local' only as a site of 'resistance' to wider powers, such as the nation-state. Rather it is the collusions and appeals made by representatives of locality to distant sources of power which can be found at all stages of Luang Phò Thuat's career. This view challenges an understanding of state power as simply radiating outward

from the centre, to be either accepted or resisted at the centre (c.f. Sahlins 1989).

In my discussion of place making, I draw on the work of Lorraine Gesick in illuminating the 'historical sensibilities' of southern Thailand, and in particular the complex relationship that exists between these sensibilities, ancestral figures whose mythical journeys are associated with features of the landscape, and the particular texts and narratives which mediate between the two. In her monograph *In the Land of Lady White Blood* (1995) and other writing on the subject (1985, 2002), Gesick deals with the figure of Luang Phò Thuat, among other such ancestral figures, and posits just the sort of relationship to the landscape that I have outlined above.

Gesick primarily presents Luang Phò Thuat as a figure of significance for communities on the Satingphra Peninsula.<sup>35</sup> Thus although I had read about Luang Phò Thuat in Gesick's work before embarking upon fieldwork, I was not prepared for the ubiquity of his presence in southern Thailand more generally and beyond. The presence of his image in cities such as Songkhla and Hat Yai and the associations between Luang Phò Thuat, the South, and the Thai nation, revealed that this was a figure whose significance could not now be understood purely in terms of his relationship to particular local communities. In this thesis, therefore, I consider the social significance of Luang Phò Thuat from a number of perspectives in order to provide a more intricate and encompassing analysis of Luang Phò Thuat's role in contemporary southern Thailand. This includes the production and commoditisation of his images and narratives which circulate far beyond his homeland and mean that his history, as well as the landscape which his footsteps are said to have marked, becomes part of the imaginaries of

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<sup>35</sup> He is also referred to as Somdet Jao Phra Kho (Pha Kho), which is how the monk is most commonly referred to on the Satingphra Peninsula, the area where Gesick conducted her research. I deal with this in more detail in chapter four.

national and even transnational populations, distributing 'local knowledge' beyond those of the communities with which he has been historically associated.

I also attempt to go beyond Gesick's thesis by exploring in detail some of the dynamics associated with the figure of Luang Phò Thuat that are not included in her analysis. For example, Gesick takes great pains to present the historical sensibilities of communities that produce highly localised stories of the 'significant past' which overlap and exchange elements with other stories and local traditions. This particular historical sensibility means that although different histories often deal with the 'same' figures, there is no suggestion that one history is more correct than the next one. This local mode of producing multiple, overlapping and mutually constitutive histories is contrasted with the production of a modern, singular, national history that establishes a hegemonic narrative and excludes all alternative versions as incorrect, or mere myth or stories (*rüang lao*). Gesick thus dichotomises the production of local histories and the production of a national history, the former representing multivalency and 'democratic' inclusion, the latter representing univalency and the imposition of a singular, elite, vision of the past.

By contrast, in this thesis I am interested in exploring the ways in which this dichotomy might be broken down, to consider, for example, the manner in which the state is implicated in the production of the local. Furthermore, I argue that Gesick's portrayal of local histories co-existing in relative harmony with each other perhaps does not emphasise sufficiently the extent to which claims to locality compete with and potentially exclude alternative claims. As I have tried to illustrate in the opening anecdote, the landscape is not Luang Phò Thuat's alone and others have, and do, make claims to the terrain on which he is said to have walked. Much of his 'stamping ground' is claimed by industries and plantations, or has been the scene of political

struggles of different kinds. In each of the examples that I gave above – the communist tunnels and the spirit-medium’s shrine – aspects of the state are implicated in constituting their claim to the landscape. In other cases, however, it is explicitly against the vision promoted by state authorities that alternative claims are made. Importantly, much of the area where Luang Phò Thuat is commonly believed to have dwelt and wandered is dominated by Malay Muslims, some of whom still dream of restoring an independent Islamic kingdom of Patani, despite orthodox opinion up until recently that an active separatist movement was a thing of the past.<sup>36</sup>

Thus while Luang Phò Thuat is a significant figure in the “production of locality” (Appadurai 1996), this production is not exempt from relations of power, nor is it directed at the cultivation of purely ‘unoccupied’ or ‘empty land’. Claims to territory such as those that ensue from the recognition of ancestral presences in the landscape necessarily compete with and exclude alternative claims. The construction of any sense of place is considered to be an act of appropriation, even violence, in an always-contested terrain. As Appadurai states:

All locality building has a moment of colonization, a moment both historical and chronotypic, when there is a formal recognition that the production of a neighborhood requires deliberate, risky, even violent action in respect to the soil, forests, animals, and other human beings. A good deal of the violence associated with foundational ritual ... is a recognition of the force that is required to wrest a locality from previously uncontrolled peoples and places (Appadurai 1996:183).

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<sup>36</sup> This fact has been more than amply brought home by the spate of violence – conducted by both Thai authorities and Muslim separatists – in recent years. This has escalated dramatically since the invasion of a Thai army base by separatists on 4 January, 2004. Since that time there have been almost daily attacks on government officials and infrastructure as well as heavy-handed reprisals from the state, and shadowy dealings such as the disappearance of a Muslim lawyer who was representing a group of southern Muslim defendants accused of terrorist links, who had claimed that his clients had been tortured by police.



The relationship between Luang Phò Thuat and the production of Thai territory in different eras in southern Thailand is a primary concern in this work. I argue that such a notion of territory is bound up with the protective qualities of the saint revealed in historical and contemporary narratives of the miracles he and his amulets have performed for individuals, communities, and even the entire kingdom.

### *Ambiguous Ontologies*

Some commentators who have studied Luang Phò Thuat in an objectivist mode have questioned the authenticity of some of the sites and markers associated with his presence. For example, Peltier (1977), followed by Munier (1998), consider the revered footprint of Luang Phò Thuat at Wat Pha Kho to be inauthentic because it appears to be pressed into concrete. By contrast, the footprint is clearly felt by a great many people to be an authentic indicator of Luang Phò Thuat's presence at that spot. I should emphasise that in this study I am not concerned with establishing the authenticity, historical or otherwise, of the various sites and objects associated with Luang Phò Thuat – nor with authenticity of Luang Phò Thuat himself for that matter – but rather with their *social* reality and the web of effects that they produce. As Michel Foucault states, it is not “the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted”, but rather “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true” which are his object of analysis (Foucault and Gordon 1980:132).

Corresponding to this is a refusal to stabilise Luang Phò Thuat as one particular kind of figure or another. In contrast I attempt to present him as a polyvocal entity. That is, Luang Phò Thuat's ‘meaning’ changes according to different contexts. Thus he may be at the same time a normative Theravada

Buddhist saint, a Mahayana style *bodhisattva*, a spirit of place and so on. These different notions or ways of being do not merely co-exist side by side, however. They also overlap and impact on each other. They are in ‘conversation’ with each other and this may entail conflict as competing interpretations clash with each other, or mutually constructive ‘dialogue’ where elements are borrowed and circulated in a number of different contexts.

Importantly, this instability of meaning also has a temporal element, as Luang Phò Thuat changes over time, but resemblances between past and present conceal these transformations. Deleuze presents a useful way of conceptualising this in his discussion of the simulacrum, which he presents not as a thing but as an *action* in which difference is concealed by resemblance (as discussed by M. Morris 1992:42). Unlike Baudrillard, who associates the simulacrum with hyperreality and an apocalyptic view of the end of history, simulation for Deleuze is an integral aspect of the process of history itself. It is “the *positive* power which negates both original and copy, both model and reproduction” (cited in M. Morris 1992:42, original emphasis).

Polyvocality, I argue, needs to be considered in its relationship to authority. It intersects with authority, which regulates and limits the potentially infinite proliferation of alternative forms and interpretations. Thus, instead of a vertiginous tendency towards infinity suggested by Deleuze’s simulacrum, certain versions of the truth attain more truth value than others. These are attempts to stabilise meaning and identity that succeed because of their performative force rather than because they are ontologically necessary. It is in this context that we can consider the ‘excavation’ of Luang Phò Thuat from the landscape by religious virtuoso such as Ajan Jit. His ability to discern the ancestral presence is a function of his exemplary authority that allows him to tell the difference between truth

and illusion. The construction and maintenance of such places and continuities cannot therefore be divorced from wider structures that produce and maintain truth. Here I make use of Michael Herzfeld's useful concept of 'iconicity', which also theorises the concealment of historical change within apparent resemblance (Herzfeld 1997). This concept also takes into account structures of authority, and authorised performances, that produce and legitimate resemblances and acknowledges that authorised symbols can only be understood in the context of the acts that bring them into being. "Iconicity does not exist; it is called into existence", he argues. It is the process "whereby permanence and thingness are achieved" (Herzfeld 1997:57). As a process, the production of resemblance is never achieved once and for all but must be renewed in performative acts. As a consequence, ontologies are not stable but subject to reinterpretation and change.

Throughout this thesis the ambiguities of Luang Phò Thuat's ontological status are crucial for understanding his ongoing significance. Is he best thought of as an ancestor, saint or cultural hero? From within different Buddhist traditions, is he an *arahant*, or enlightened disciple of the Buddha, or a *bodhisattva*, a Buddha-to-be? And what are the structures of authority which produce the boundaries of possibility for alternative understandings?

In this thesis I often refer to Luang Phò Thuat as an ancestral figure, and to his continuing presence in the landscape as an 'ancestral' trace. As the embodiment of the archetypal ascetic and celibate monk, it is clear that he could not be considered to be a literal 'ancestor' in the sense of being a genetic forebear. The familial relationship to sacred sites does not necessarily have to be related to an actual human ancestor. In the Thai context, a sense of emotional attachment and even descent can be expressed towards sacred sites that apparently have no anthropomorphic qualities. Consider the words of the abbot of Wat Phra That Phanom in the Northeast, regarding the

fall of the That Phanom spire in 1975, when he stated that “We are now orphaned” (Srisakara 2002:3). The statement that southern Thai Buddhists and others in Thailand worship Luang Phò Thuat as an ‘ancestor’ should then not be equated with practices of ancestor worship by the Chinese, for example. To clarify this, it is necessary to distinguish between different categories of socially significant dead.

In their writing on the ‘potent dead’ of Indonesia, Henri Chambert-Loir and Anthony Reid state that the notion of ‘ancestor’ can have two main meanings: to refer to “all genealogical forebears, no matter how distant; the second is the limited category of forebears regarded as more potent than others, whose prominence the living society acknowledges” (2002:xix). They characterise ancestors as

...by definition benevolent: they protect their descendants, they guarantee their prosperity and guide them in all important actions of life, on condition that they are honoured and fed. If the living neglect their duties towards the ancestors, the latter will punish them by inflicting all kinds of calamities: illnesses, bad crops, accidents. This reciprocal relationship is not apparently governed by any moral considerations. Ancestors do not punish offences against any overarching ethical code; they seek retribution for any lack of proper attention to themselves (2002:xxi).

This is a good characterisation, I think, of the way many southerners and other Thai think of Luang Phò Thuat. The only sense that I gained of the consequences of neglecting the propitiation of Luang Phò Thuat would be that he would withdraw his benevolent influence without actually punishing this transgression as such. One might speculate that as a *Buddhist* saint as well as ancestral deity, it would be considered quite inappropriate for Luang Phò Thuat to act in a vengeful manner, which would suggest that he was capable of anger, an emotion that he is supposed to have transcended. For

the southern Thai Buddhists, I would argue, Luang Phò Thuat represents a wholly benevolent and protective influence. He is a compassionate deity who looks down upon the southern Thai with the caring attitude of a loving grandfather. The warm affection that many devotees express when discussing Luang Phò Thuat reveals a sense of familiarity and trust. This was illustrated by certain male devotees – villagers and urban dwellers – referring to Luang Phò Thuat with the pronoun *kae*, which is usually used between close friends and suggests a high level of familiarity and informality.

If Luang Phò Thuat is referred to as a saint, this should not, then, necessarily suggest aloofness and disengagement from everyday concerns. Ancestors and saints should not be thought of as contrasting types but as beings with a very similar relationship to the living. Chambert-Loir and Reid note the continuities between ancestor worship and saint worship and state that in many cases saints have come to replace ancestors as objects of worship (2002:xxii). Heroes, on the other hand, are described as ‘potent dead’ who have been elevated to the status of national ‘fathers’ and ‘mothers’, that is, ancestors of the national community. They are “a collective group of the dead whose potency was called into being by the state as an aspect of its legitimacy” (2002:xxiii).

Taking this typology into account, I would argue that Luang Phò Thuat may be seen as representing all three of these ideal types of potent dead. He certainly belongs to a select group of potent forebears, though he is not a literal genealogical forebear; he is a Buddhist saint, and he has also been raised to the status of national hero.

However, the story does not end there. If we accept that Luang Phò Thuat is a ‘saint’, what does this mean? The resonances of this term vary depending on the tradition in question. As this thesis will demonstrate,

Luang Phò Thuat's ontological status is interpreted from the standpoint of village tradition, both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism and even folk Taoist shrine cults. None of these interpretations are completely isolated from each other and it is the overlappings of these traditions which produce the productive nexus of his social being. Central to this question of ontological ambiguity or multivalency is the intersection of 'Thai' and 'Chinese' religiosity in southern Thailand.

### *'Chineseness' and Transnationality*

One of my original objectives in this study was to consider the various overlappings and interpenetrations of Theravada ('Thai') and Mahayana ('Chinese')<sup>37</sup> Buddhisms in southern Thailand, and the complex interplay of religious traditions and ethnicities that this involves. Luang Phò Thuat in many ways provides a nexus to consider the contested domain of ethnic identity in the contemporary Thai nation-state. Not only does he provide a legitimating discourse for the presence – and domination – by Buddhists in the far South,<sup>38</sup> he also sits at the nexus of Chinese and Thai identities. The genesis of Luang Phò Thuat from a local spirit to a celestial *bodhisattva* akin to Chinese deities and the importance of sites associated with him for tourism and pilgrimage necessitate a discussion of the Chinese religion and Chineseness in southern Thailand. Far from being a mere side issue, I argue

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<sup>37</sup> Mahayana Buddhism is by no means confined to its Chinese manifestations, as its various schools are the predominant traditions of Buddhism in Korea, Japan, Vietnam, as well as China. In Thailand Mahayana Buddhism is almost exclusively associated with the religiosity of the ethnic Chinese and Sino-Thai, or with the Vietnamese. The two officially recognised *nikai* or sects within the Buddhist Sangha are the 'Chinese Sect' (*jin nikai*) and 'Vietnamese Sect' (*annam nikai*). In this thesis, unless otherwise noted, I will use 'Mahayana' to refer specifically to Chinese Buddhism.

<sup>38</sup> As coincidence would have it, a very similar thesis has recently been put forward by Patrick Jory (2004). I will further discuss and expand on Jory's argument in chapter five.

that the position of Chineseness is central to contemporary popular religious dynamics in the South.<sup>39</sup>

This issue is, however, complicated by the inherent complexity of a notion such as 'Chineseness' (see chapter eight and Maud 2005). The notion of Chineseness cannot be stabilised as one particular identity, not only because of different modes of being Chinese within Thailand but also because of the dynamics that exist between nation-states where different populations of 'Chinese' – i.e. those in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore – with long-standing historical connections to each other encounter one another across the ruptures produced by different national contexts. That is to say, different national contexts produce different possibilities for 'being Chinese', for expressing and living Chineseness, and these different possibilities underlie the sorts of relationships and interactions that take place in southern Thailand.

In so far as Luang Phò Thuat is bound up in cross-border flows and exchanges, the transnational dimension of his being must also be taken into account. This necessitates a new approach to thinking about developments in Thai religion. Generally speaking, discussions of popular religion in Thailand have tended to remain within the national frame in that the phenomena in question are explained solely with reference to changes taking place within Thai society itself. Factors stemming from outside the bounds of the nation-state, such as transnational flows, have not yet been given a great deal of attention. The significance of these issues may not be obvious from a Bangkok-centred perspective. During my fieldwork, however, it became obvious that the dynamics of popular religion in the far South could not be explained without reference to transnational elements, and in

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<sup>39</sup> As usual, the focus here is on the relationship between Theravada Buddhism and varieties of Chinese religious forms and other forms of popular religion practised by Buddhists. I do not generally include Islam in this analysis.

particular to patronage of southern Thai religious specialists by Chinese from Singapore and Malaysia. Ethnic Chinese tourism, too, cannot be clearly distinguished from pilgrimage and often involves visits to sacred sites and the 'consumption', in one form or another, of places, individuals or objects considered to be invested with sacred power. The dynamics of this form of tourism will be discussed with reference to Luang Phò Thuat, but also to the activities of the Municipality of Hat Yai, which has undertaken a program of statue building in the city's municipal park in order to attract the 'spiritually hungry' Chinese tourists.

This kind of tourism, which by all indicators is on the rise in southern Thailand, presents certain uneasy dynamics for local Buddhist practice. On the one hand the patronage of wealthy foreigners is welcome and often actively sought, on the other hand the tendency of foreigners to introduce novel forms or to act in ways that are insensitive to local practices has produced underlying feelings of ambivalence and resentment.

Instead of assuming that transnational influences are a recent addition to already constituted local practices, I argue that the dynamics of popular religiosity in the South in their coalescing Thai and Chinese forms must be understood as *inherently* transnational in character. It would be misleading to give primacy to the phenomenon as nationally bound and then to consider its transnational variations/additions, as though popular Buddhism/belief in the South was first and foremost an already existing national characteristic and only subsequently a transnational phenomenon. I argue instead that the relationship between 'Thai' and 'Chinese' is in itself constitutive rather than a merging of pure forms somehow 'after the fact'. This relationship is not nationally bound, but has long involved connections beyond the border. Analysis of these issues is not merely a matter of considering the relationship between the ethnic Thai and ethnic Chinese within the nation's borders, as many studies of ethnic relations in the South have been formulated. The



Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore have had a long-standing impact on popular religiosity in southern Thailand, although these long-standing relationships seem to be intensifying in the contemporary era.

Equally, though, the concept of the transnational needs to be problematised as it would be incorrect to suggest that the nation-state has been superseded in any simple sense. The term *transnational* is a useful one, however, as it emphasises the continuing role of the nation in providing the impetus for many of the cross-border connections that are taking place. In other words, the division between nation-states is not only restrictive but productive. Even in the case where foreign ethnic Chinese participate in transnational religious connections, the salience of nationally-defined differences remains. The border has not been rendered insignificant in mediating these relationships, nor is it merely the case that ethnic Chinese on both sides of the border have simply (re)discovered long-standing similarities and affinities which have inspired their desire to make connections. In other words, there is an interplay of difference and sameness that generates the dynamics of an exchange of various forms of cultural and financial capital across borders. The border should be considered a productive site of disjuncture rather than merely a hindrance that must be overcome. Even practices such as smuggling, which apparently seek to circumvent the power of the border, also rely on that very border for their existence (see, for example, Walker 1999). The dynamics of charisma and the sacred are no different.

#### *Conclusion: Fascination and Fetish*

A goal of this thesis is to demonstrate the connections that exist between the disparate themes outlined above. The approach I have chosen to take considers Luang Phò Thuat as a figure in which these themes

intersect. As I will demonstrate, he brings together a number of apparently opposed categories: local interests and state power; boundary formation and the promotion of their transgression; 'Chinese' and 'Thai' religion; the past and the present.

Simultaneously, I argue that Luang Phò Thuat has some kind of social agency of his own. Writing about the glance I shared with Luang Phò Thuat and the flash of recognition and delight it produced that day at the km 16 sanctuary is intended to be more than a literary conceit. In this I also wish to make explicit my complicity in the animation of the saint through the very process of studying him. Or, in other words, I want to own up to my own 'fetishisation' of Luang Phò Thuat which exists alongside the other 'fetishisations' that I will describe. If 'fetishism' is essentially the existence of an intersubjective relationship between person and thing (M. Jackson 1996:28), as opposed to a relationship between an autonomous subject and 'dead' object, then it is necessary for me to claim my own role in bringing Luang Phò Thuat to life. Eye contact between statue and devotee is the "basic mechanism for intersubjectivity" (Gell 1998:120). It is also the source of reflexivity and self-objectification, in that one sees another seeing oneself. "After all", Michael Taussig asks, "how does one access a fetish? Surely it's as much the other way around? It accesses/looks at you" (1999:224).

Such arguments emphasise that the ethnographer does not study his subject as a detached observer but comes to know it through the experience of multiple affective relationships. I do not see this admission of fascination as invalidating my arguments. Rather, without this fascination I do not think I would have been able to connect the themes of this thesis in the way I have done. Furthermore, by relativising my relationship to this saint, I seek neither to privilege my own viewpoint over others, nor present my own view as more rational and detached than those of the people whose interactions with the saint I studied.

Having provided an outline of this central figure, I will now contextualise this study in relationship to the literature on contemporary religion in Thailand before moving to a discussion of southern Thailand as location and discursive formation. I will then return to Luang Phò Thuat to provide a detailed account of the unfolding of his being.



## Chapter Two

# Wither the State? Theories of Popular Religion in Thailand

Freed from modernist metanarrative and unmoored from structural conditions that infused it with momentous power, history is now associated with processes of uncertain effects. By locating the making of history in contingent situations, human agency is freed from structural determination but it is also rendered less capable of effecting historical transformations.

— Fernando Coronil (1997:26).

A state exists chiefly in the hearts and minds of its people; if they do not believe it is there, no logical exercise will bring it to life.

— Joseph Strayer, (cited in Steinmetz 1999:1).

### *Arriving in a State*

The first task that I had to attend to upon my arrival in Thailand was to contact the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), the main gatekeeper that foreign researchers must deal with in order to gain permission to perform officially sanctioned research within Thailand's boundaries.<sup>40</sup> This contact with the Thai state authorities was required before I moved to my field site proper in the South. I was given a researcher's identity card, which bore the title of my research project and the provinces in which I was authorised to conduct it. The NRCT also provided me with several letters of introduction to academics and government officials in the South. I was also required to pay a deposit, which would be returned to me, after I had submitted three copies of my thesis and the Council deemed that the final product corresponded sufficiently to the précis provided in my original research proposal.

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<sup>40</sup> One of the officials at the NRCT did complain that only a small percentage of foreign researchers actually proceed through the channels of the NRCT. Thus it would appear that the majority of academic research being conducted in Thailand confounds the regulatory ambitions of the Thai state.

That there were some bureaucratic hurdles to negotiate prior to conducting research proper was to be expected.<sup>41</sup> I describe my meeting with the official at the NRCT not so much to emphasise the official bureaucratic procedures faced by foreign researchers in Thailand, but rather to draw attention to some of the parenthetical comments made during this first interview. These comments point to complex entanglements, of the personal and the official, and the individual and the state, which inform the subject of this chapter.

The meeting with the NRCT official was conducted in a friendly manner. Once the business of exchanging deposits, ID cards and letters of introduction had been dealt with we spent some time chatting about the nature of my research. The official was familiar with my research proposal and knew that I was interested in exploring popular Buddhism, as well as the connections between Theravada Buddhism – the dominant, state-sanctioned and administered form of Buddhism in Thailand – and various Chinese (Mahayana) Buddhist and other Chinese ritual forms in the far South of the country. My proposal was to study religious hybridity in the urban centres of the South, particularly Songkhla and Hat Yai, with their large Chinese populations.

I was aware that some people in Thailand might regard the subject matter of a study of this kind to be sensitive, considering the historical importance of Theravada Buddhism as one of the ‘three pillars’ of the Thai nation, developed in official nationalism since the reign of King Vajirawudh (Rama VI) (see Vella 1978). However, my research proposal had been accepted by the NRCT without the expression of any official reservations or

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<sup>41</sup> I do not want to suggest that my interaction with the NRCT was the only bureaucratic ‘constraint’ on the research. A study of this kind must pass through many such matrices, such as funding application regimes, ethics committees, progress reports and so on in my own government-funded university in Australia.

the requirement for any amendments. It seemed that the authorities were satisfied that my research would not be too controversial. Nevertheless, the official with whom I was amiably chatting produced a sudden, unexpected, and *unofficial*, warning: "Please, only write about the good side of Buddhism, not about the bad side.... There are two things you cannot touch in Thailand; they are the monarchy and the religion."

In a sense this warning should not have been a great surprise. It is well known that both the monarchy and Buddhism have long been 'untouchable' in the Thai context, although public criticisms of the former have become much more common in recent years. Criticism of the monarchy is still legally proscribed, with *lèse-majesté* laws still enforced (see Streckfuss 1995, 1998). Criticising Buddhism is also circumscribed, though more ideologically rather than legally. The inviolability of Buddhism in Thailand has been such that any criticism renders the speaker immediately suspect. Christine Gray observes that criticisms of this kind are held to be a violation of the Buddhist injunction to practice Right Speech. She states that "[S]uch 'poison words' automatically delegitimize the speaker and impugn the credibility of present and future utterances; they are grounds for the Buddhist equivalent of going to hell" (Gray 1991:49).

It is important to state here that the Theravada Buddhist hierarchy has also been so closely bound to conceptions of national identity that criticism of one is easily interpreted as an attack on the other. Andrew Turton has noted this bundling together of religion and the monarchy with nationalist discourses in such a way that disjunctions in Thai history can be passed over by stressing the continuity of Thai culture or tradition. One consequence of this is that criticism of the monarchy or the institution of the Sangha "whether from conservative or progressive, from villager or academic, is open to authoritative charges of being anti-Thai, anti-monarchy or anti-religion as such" (Turton 1984:26).

Recent writing on the subject of religion suggests that the ideological terrain of public life in Thailand is shifting in a way that diminishes the centrality of Buddhism as a legitimating force intimately tied to the workings of the state.<sup>42</sup> During the era coinciding with the long economic boom which stretched from the 1980s to 1997 and the decline of communism as a political force and threat to national security, public criticism of the actions of particular Buddhist monks or certain aspects of the monastic hierarchy became more common. The exposure of monastic scandals became something of a sport for the country's tabloid newspapers, and public discussions of the relevance of the current monastic order, while still a highly contentious subject, attracted relatively little censure. It seemed that there was a diminishing concern on the part of the Thai state to maintain the orthodoxy of the Buddhist monkhood as an element of the process of maintaining a unified national identity (see P. A. Jackson 1997).

The time of an apparently "withering centre" and "flourishing margins" (P. A. Jackson 1997) produced a range of scholarly work focused upon 'unorthodox' elements of Thai religious life. These unorthodox elements ranged from the emergence of 'protestant' and 'middle-class' Theravada cults, to the growing popularity of quasi-Buddhist cults that were situated outside, or only partially integrated with, mainstream Theravada Buddhism. Other studies focused on non-Theravadan popular cults, such as the Chinese Mahayana *bodhisattva* Kuan Im (Hamilton 1999), or of various cultural heroes and heroines, most prominently that of the king Chulalongkorn (see Stengs 1999a, 1999b, 2003).<sup>43</sup> This was also a time of growing interest in particularistic cults surrounding an apparently ever-

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<sup>42</sup> More recent developments, especially since the 2006 coup, suggest otherwise. I note these developments here, though this argument was formulated prior to these events. It is of course this very sort of overtaking of my argument by events that I referred to in the preface.

<sup>43</sup> Reigned 1868-1910 C.E.



increasing number of charismatic Buddhist monks, the most popular example during the economic boom being the cult of Luang Phò Khun (see P. A. Jackson 1997, 1999a, 1999b). There was a corresponding interest in urban spirit mediumship (Irvine 1982, 1984, R. C. Morris 2000a, 2000b, 2002b, Pattana 1999a, 1999b, White 1999) as well as the proliferation and circulation of a multitude of images – amulets, statues, portraits, posters – depicting this panoply of religious figures (Tambiah 1984). In these studies, the logic of the marketplace, rather than that of the state, seemed to be becoming a more dominant principle in contemporary Thai religious life.

This literature informed my understandings of Thai religion at the outset of my fieldwork. I was therefore struck by the fact that the NRCT official felt the need to warn me about the inviolability of Buddhism in Thailand. This was an earnestly intoned, personal admonition – a helpful warning to keep me on the right path. It also revealed a disjuncture between the official face of the state – which showed an openness to my research, to my pursuit of hybridity and unorthodoxy in religious life – and the ‘true’ but unofficial view that I should censor my research to adhere to the official (unofficial) discourse. It revealed to me the fact that, even today, “institutional religion remains a taboo; it does not invite debate” (Mulder 1997:315), and suggested the need to rethink my understanding of the relationship between religion and the state.

### *Contemporary Religion in Thailand*

This chapter focuses on the literature on contemporary religion in Thailand, and especially that which deals with transformations that have occurred since the 1970s. The brief democratic period from 1973-6, the bloody coup that ended it and restored military rule, the long economic

boom beginning in the 1980s, to the economic crash of 1997 and its aftermath frame the discourses to be discussed.

Historically, the organisation of the Buddhist community of monks (Sangha) has been closely identified with the state and the project of nation-building in Thailand. The Sangha has “immense social and political significance as it symbolises the stability and collective unity of the nation” (Taylor 1999:182). This relationship between Theravada Buddhism and the nation has been reflected in scholarship on religion. As Pattana Kitiarsa states: “In Thailand, the study of religion is by and large synonymous with the study of the dominant Theravada Buddhist tradition, and most scholarship over the past four decades has naturally been devoted to the state-sponsored religion” (Pattana 2005a:462). Indeed, historical studies of Thai Buddhism tend to follow a trajectory in which developments in the structure of the Thai state and corresponding attitudes to governance are mirrored in the development, administration and structure of the Sangha. However, by the late 1980s this literature has changed its focus from the ‘centre’ to the ‘margins’. Rather than considering Buddhism primarily as a “socially integrating and stabilizing force” (Girling 1981:35), an increasing number of scholars have begun to consider the fragmentation of the centralised Buddhist order and the heterodoxies and hybridities of an increasingly diverse, market-driven religious scene. This period has seen an apparent shift in interest from elite to popular religious forms. This chapter seeks to account for this change of scholarly focus and to critique aspects of its dominant trajectories.

The contemporary era has witnessed intense and far-reaching social change in Thailand. This era has been characterised by an apparent decentralisation and fragmentation of Thai religious forms, whereby the centrality of state-administered Theravada Buddhism has been challenged by the growing social importance of a number of alternative Buddhist or quasi-

Buddhist movements. Movements that eschew material wealth and promote asceticism compete with those that promise worldly prosperity, those that emphasise personal spiritual development or those that promise the intervention of miraculous powers. Spirit cults are devoted to a variety of living and dead figures, such as monks reputed to possess extraordinary spiritual powers, folk heroes and heroines such as former kings and legendary princesses, Chinese and Hindu deities, and the spirit mediums that channel this diverse range of spiritual forces. A thriving marketplace for religious commodities has developed. Both the written teachings of scholar monks, and sacred objects said to provide protection and material prosperity, now circulate in any number of commercial contexts.

This diversification has been theorised in both positive and negative terms. It has been portrayed as a reflection of wider social fragmentation and crisis (Hardacre, Keyes, and Kendall 1994), or as representing the thoroughgoing commoditisation of Thai religious forms (Kasian 2002). Conversely, it has been characterised as giving voice to marginalised or subaltern discourses which evade the regulatory controls of the state (Pattana 1999b), or as representing the emergence of a burgeoning civil society in which a multiplicity of viewpoints and interests are represented against the singular vision of the state (Hewison 1993).

Regardless of the conclusions reached, scholarship in recent decades has tended to emphasise, in one way or another, the diminishing role of the state in controlling and managing religious forms and practices. This process has been variously attributed to the decreasing concern on the part of state authorities with maintaining religious uniformity, particularly since the end of the Cold War (P. A. Jackson 1997); the inability of the state to control or provide socially relevant religious and other representations of Thainess (Kasian 2002); the increasing political clout and individualism of the urban middle-classes which emerged during the economic boom (Taylor 1990); or,

ironically, the extent to which Buddhism has been manipulated by the state for its own purposes (Keyes 1999, Swearer 1999). Whatever the case, scholars have been primarily concerned with the elements that *challenge*, rather than uphold, a unitary model of religion.

In order to address these issues and contextualise the arguments advanced in this thesis, this chapter addresses two central concepts of 'postmodernity' and 'the state'. I use quotation marks here to emphasise that these are both contentious theoretical concepts rather than objective phenomena, although they are often treated as such. With regard to postmodernity, I am not asking whether Thai society is truly 'postmodern' or not, but rather I am interested in how the concept of postmodernity has been deployed to theorise contemporary developments in religious life. Rather than questioning the accuracy of the term, I am interested in the bundle of assumptions that underlie its usage.<sup>44</sup>

For example, I contend that the usage of the term generally tends to oppose 'the market' (characterised by flow, hybridity, fragmentation, transgression) to 'the state' (representing stasis, regulation, homogeneity and territory). Heterogeneous social forces, new technologies, and cultural flows are seen to traverse its boundaries and elude its disciplinary apparatuses. I argue that this notion is tied to the teleological schema in which it is assumed that Thailand has proceeded in a linear fashion from 'tradition' to 'modernity' and thence to 'postmodernity'. These three terms parallel a periodisation in which a 'traditional' polity becomes a 'modern' nation-state

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<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting that 'postmodernity' is a famously slippery concept which I will not try to pin down too thoroughly in this thesis. There do, however, seem to be two main thrusts in the way the term is used. On the one hand, following Jameson (1991), it refers to a particular development within capitalism in which there is a literal proliferation in the production and consumption of signs. On the other, in work more influenced by Derrida (1976, 1978) and deconstruction, 'postmodern' signals an appreciation of the proliferating nature of signs themselves. This distinction between a social theory of 'late capitalism' and an epistemological theory of the sign is not always clear.

characterised by rationalisation, bureaucratisation and secularisation, before opening to a 'postmodern', post-national, globalised society in which the nation-state is superseded, or at least marginalised in its role as the producer of meaning and identity.

In the case of Thai religion such a periodisation assumes that 'postmodernisation' corresponds to the end of the 'modern era', characterised by a decline or 'withering' of the ideological function of Buddhism as a legitimating framework for the hegemonic Thai state (see P. A. Jackson 1997). Corresponding to this is the apparent replacement of a singular, centralised Buddhist order with a proliferation of multiple Buddhisms and quasi-Buddhist movements, just as a once stable and apparently solid sense of Thainess has become a postmodern floating signifier, a superficial simulacrum without depth or substance to be deployed in any number of (commercialised) settings (Kasian 2002).

Before moving to a fuller discussion of this literature it is necessary to look briefly at the historical relationship between Buddhist Sangha and state in Theravada Buddhist polities. This is an issue that has been dealt with extensively in the literature and it is only possible here to provide the barest of sketches.

#### *The Modernising of State and Sangha in Siam/Thailand*

Scholars of Theravada Buddhism have long given central significance to the interdependence of the monkhood and secular political rulers. Yoneo Ishii argues that this interdependence between the monastic order and the laity, and particularly the Buddhist king, is the *sine qua non* of Theravada Buddhism, the underlying essence that unifies the religion regardless of the contingencies of particular epochs and social environments:

Although the basis of the nonproductive monastic Order thus varies from country to country and from age to age, underlying these apparent differences there can be thought to exist a framework within which a balance obtains between the Order and the laity, the laity being induced to support the Order, and the Order surviving by virtue of that support while retaining its essential conservatism. If we can elucidate this framework, it should be possible to explain coherently the various aspects of the phenomenologically diverse Theravadin tradition (Ishii 1986:xvi).<sup>45</sup>

The historical ideology of the righteous Buddhist king (P.: *dhammaraja*) portrays the ruler as a *bodhisattva* (Thai: *phra phothisat*), or Buddha-to-be. Possessing the highest levels of merit in the kingdom, the ruler legitimates himself as the ideal layman, offering support, patronage and protection for the order of monks. The ruler demonstrates this patronage through the building and renovation of monasteries, reliquaries and other structures, the bestowal of monastic titles and, importantly the periodical ‘purification’ of the Sangha to purge it of accretions and re-establish it as a viable “field of merit” (Ishii 1986:65). A common strategy of new political regimes has been to restructure the Sangha in order to bring it into line with prevailing political and social realities.

This politico-religious system can be traced back to the thirteenth century, when the Theravada (‘teachings of the elders’) school of Buddhism began to gain the upper hand over Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu forms in a far-reaching ‘religious revolution’ (Keyes 1987:33) that swept the region.

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<sup>45</sup> If the relationship between a materially dependent but spiritually fertile Sangha and a materially rich but spiritually dependent laity is so very central to Theravada Buddhism, one must wonder about the significance of the current trend towards ‘commercial Buddhism’ (*phutta phanit*), which has seen certain monastic figures and temples associated with them becoming significant material producers in their own right. If monks lose their need for direct support from the laity and are instead able to support themselves through, for example, the sale of sacred objects and ritual services, is the resulting religious complex or system in fact ‘Theravada Buddhism’ anymore?

Vital to Theravada Buddhism's success in the region was its adoption by various 'states', as rulers styled themselves as patrons and protectors of the Sangha. Thenceforth, political legitimacy became increasingly linked to the ability of a ruler to portray himself as successfully protecting the purity of the Sangha.

Prior to the beginning of the Bangkok period in 1782, however, the ability of rulers to maintain control over ordination lineages within their sphere of control was tenuous and purificatory reforms were sporadic at best. Local lineages retained a large amount of autonomy and there was no singular monkhood as such at that time (Kamala 1997).<sup>46</sup> The various lineages "were not a unitary national body but consisted of disaggregated groups organized around localized teachers" (Taylor 1993b:113). There was therefore a vast diversity of ritual practices throughout this network of lineages. This is not to suggest that local traditions were completely isolated from the interventions of ruling elites, as Kamala's approach in particular implies. Indeed, local lineages and their patrons sometimes strategically made use of the patronage of powerful, if distant, kingdoms.<sup>47</sup>

With the beginning of the Bangkok Era, the new Chakri Dynasty began a process of bureaucratisation of the Buddhist chapters within its sphere of

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<sup>46</sup> An example of this diversity is that the premodern *müang* of Chiang Mai alone boasted eighteen different lineages or *nikai* (Kamala 1997:5). Historically, *nikai* has had a number of connotations and is difficult to define. It can refer to a strict ordination lineage or 'family' of monks, tracing back to a common preceptor, or a lineage of practice based around the figure of an extraordinary teacher (as is the case with the lineage of Ajan Man, who, as Taylor (1993b) notes, was not allowed to ordain monks himself). Alternatively, the word can imply an ethnic component, or merely groups of monks who are willing to conduct ordination ceremonies together (see discussion of this issue by Taylor 1993b:38, n.6). In the modern Thai Sangha, however, *nikai* are rigid and mutually exclusive bureaucratised structures. Monks ordain as Thammayut or Mahanikai monks and changing sects requires re-ordination.

<sup>47</sup> Examples of this from southern Thailand are discussed in detail in Gesick (1995). These issues will be discussed further in chapter four when considering how ordination lineages and their retinues of 'temple slaves' in southern Thailand made use of patronage by Ayutthayan kings in order to maintain a certain level of autonomy from local elites.

influence. Rama I introduced a number of decrees that increased the level of surveillance and control over the Sangha, such as requiring monks to carry certificates when travelling from their monasteries outside the rains retreat (*phansa*) (Taylor 1993b:24). This process has continued with the modernisation of Siam and its transformation into a nation-state, and has been the result of the perennial mirroring of secular and monastic orders. As Jackson states:

This ongoing reappraisal of Thai Buddhism is most clearly demonstrated by the fact that each new political regime in the past century has attempted to restructure the organisation of the order of Buddhist monks in its political image in order to maintain a legitimacy parallelism between the symbolic religious domain and the secular power structure (P. A. Jackson 1989:2).

The modernisation of Siam is generally considered to have begun in the mid-nineteenth century, largely as a reaction to the growing influence of European powers in the region and the desire by the ruling Chakri dynasty to maintain its power and avoid formal colonisation. The defining moment was the signing of the Bowring Treaty with Britain in 1855 which saw the Siamese monarch's monopoly on trade broken and the increasing incorporation of the kingdom into the world economy (Anderson 1978, Girling 1981:45-6). Though never formally colonised, the growing influence of European powers in the area provoked the widespread restructuring of Siamese society to resemble that of their colonised neighbours. Defining features of the modernising process were the rationalisation and centralisation of the state structure, the development of a modern professional military, a functionally differentiated bureaucracy, centralised education, and the establishment of fixed boundaries in order to constitute a defined "geo-body" (Thongchai 1994). Corresponding to the establishment of external boundaries, the 'silent revolution' of 1892 saw the restructuring of



the territory claimed by Siam into discrete territorial entities (*monthon*) where centrally appointed commissioners replaced the semi-hereditary governors of the *müang*. Thus instead of a patchwork of largely autonomous, overlapping polities representing a range of ethnic identities and traditions, the territory of Siam was rearticulated as an orderly array of nominally equivalent defined territories governed by a central authority. In turn, ethnic identifications were discouraged by agents of the Siamese state and were replaced by 'neutral' geographical designations (e.g. Girling 1981:54).<sup>48</sup>

The far-ranging changes that were taking place in Siam's consolidation of its sphere of influence were paralleled in the Buddhist monkhood. The seeds of these changes lay in monastic reforms begun in the 1830s by Mongkut, who was a monk for 27 years before he was crowned Rama IV in 1851. His desire for reform was in large part inspired by a desire to portray Buddhism – and by extension Siamese society – as scientific and rational to his Western interlocutors (C. J. Reynolds 1972).<sup>49</sup> King Mongkut essentially achieved this by adopting the practices of a Mon ordination lineage whose strictness of practice, it is said, particularly impressed him. This lineage was dubbed the Thammayut order (in Thai *Thammayutnikai*: 'adherents of the Dhamma'). The order emphasised knowledge of the Pali scriptures and close observance of the monastic discipline, or *vinaya*.<sup>50</sup> This was an elite order, in which the majority of monks came from the middle and upper classes (Kamala 1997:6). The various other lineages were grouped by Mongkut under the umbrella term 'Mahanikai' ('great order'), a term used first by him to disparage monastic orders he saw as blindly following flawed traditions (Kamala 1997:6, Keyes 1987:42). Since that time the numerically smaller

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<sup>48</sup> See discussion on how these reforms impacted on the South in next chapter.

<sup>49</sup> See also discussions of Mongkut and 'rationality' by Cook (1992) and Johnson (1997).

<sup>50</sup> Note that the order was not formally recognised as a separate sect (*nikai*) from the Greater Thai Sangha until 1894 (Taylor 1993b:34).

Thammayut order has enjoyed a close association with the monarchy and held a disproportionate level of influence in the Sangha hierarchy.

The Thammayut order also became an important tool for the establishment of a national religion, or what Kamala refers to as “modern state Buddhism”.<sup>51</sup> A key figure in this process was Prince Wachirayan, one of Mongkut’s sons and a monk who became the head of the Thammayut order. He oversaw the institution of a standard system of education for monks at the end of the nineteenth century (Keyes 1987:58). In 1902 the first Sangha Act created the structure for a nationwide monastic hierarchy which paralleled the new government bureaucracy and was ruled by a Supreme Patriarch (*sankharat*). In order to curtail the reproduction of regional traditions and to give Bangkok control over who could become a monk, local abbots were denied the right to ordain monks unless approved by the Supreme Patriarch (Kamala 1997:41). The ethnic character of local lineages was de-emphasised or denied, with Lao, Yuan, Khmer, Mon, Shan and other traditions being integrated as ‘Siamese’ within a unified national structure. It must be emphasised that this was not a matter of the rationalisation of a singular Sangha but the welding together of diverse traditions *for the very first time*. This process was not without conflict and resistance at the regional level. However, the domination by Siamese of state-sponsored Buddhism was inevitable. During the twentieth century regional traditions continued to exist but were viewed with suspicion by central authorities (Keyes 1987:59).

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<sup>51</sup> This naming seeks to challenge the assumption that state-controlled Buddhism represents true ‘Thai Buddhism’. Kamala is attempting in her writing to bring to the fore the role of the state in creating orthodox Buddhism while at the same time relativising it – showing it to be only one of many possible Buddhisms contained within the geo-body of Thailand, and comparing it rather unfavourably to the various local traditions that it attempted to supplant.

During the reign of King Wachirawut (1910-25), Buddhism became one of the foundations of modern Thai nationalism, officially instituted as one of the 'three pillars' of Siamese society – nation, religion and king. Loyalty to the Thai nation was equated with loyalty to (state-sanctioned) Buddhism. Following the coup that ended the absolute monarchy in 1932 and eventually saw the military-bureaucratic complex become the dominant force in Siamese/Thai society, the three pillars remained at the ideological core of national identity and, as Reynolds states, "every Thai regime since 1932 has grounded its claim to legitimacy in an appeal to these basic symbols" (1978b:137).

Throughout the mid-twentieth century the parallelism between secular and religious affairs continued. In 1941, a new Sangha Act was promulgated by Phibun Songkhram, a staunch anti-royalist. This act democratised the Sangha's structure, essentially reducing the influence of the royal-sponsored Thammayut order and giving power to the numerically superior Mahanikai. The move reflected the decline of influence of the monarchy after the abdication of King Prajadhipok in 1935. However, with the rehabilitation of the monarchy in the late 1950s by the military strongman Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, a new Sangha Act was passed. Designed to reduce "political instability created by dissent in the sangha" (Taylor 1999:178), the 1962 Act essentially reinstated the 1902 Sangha structure, centralised power in the hands of the Supreme Patriarch once more, and reinstated the Thammayut order as the monastic elite.<sup>52</sup> The 1962 Act prevails to this time, despite the radical changes that have taken place in Thai society since then.

During the years of authoritarianism under Sarit and his successors, a period marked by the struggle with communism, and the consequent desire to fully control peripheral areas, Buddhism took on unprecedented roles in

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<sup>52</sup> The role of Sarit will be discussed further in chapter five in the discussion of the emergence of the Luang Phò Thuat cult in the early 1960s.

political legitimation. Not only did Sarit clamp down on unorthodox or independently popular figures within the Sangha, most infamously in the case of Phra Phimalotham,<sup>53</sup> but the Sangha was used ever more overtly for the purposes of national integration and consolidation of peripheral areas. To these ends the *thammathut* or Dhamma Ambassador program was established in 1962 for the purposes of community development and national integration, while in 1965 the *thammajarik* ('wandering Dhamma') program was intended to convert non-Buddhist hill-tribes (often suspected of communist sympathies) to Theravada Buddhism.<sup>54</sup> In other cases, the supranormal powers of famous monks were tapped, with batches of amulets produced, blessed and distributed to the armed forces (Bowie 1997).<sup>55</sup>

Until the 1970s the military-bureaucratic elites maintained the appearance of homogeneity in both public life and religion through paternalistic governance and an intolerance of dissent. As late as 1984, on what might be called the eve of the economic boom in Thailand, Andrew Turton described the state of the Thai polity in the following terms:

For fifty years the military has, for nearly all periods, been the controlling factor in national politics; and political parties are weakly developed nationally. These factors have led to a weak institutional development of 'civil society' and a close identification of bureaucracy, (military led) government, state, nation, monarchy, and religion. This

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<sup>53</sup> See Tambiah (1976:258-60).

<sup>54</sup> On the *thammathut* program, see Tambiah (1976, chapter 18). On the *thammajarik* program, see Keyes (1971).

<sup>55</sup> The significance of this trend in the South, and in particular in connection with Luang Phò Thuat, will be discussed in chapter five.

gives the state, and associated institutions, a monopoly of legitimacy rarely found to such a degree (Turton 1984:21).<sup>56</sup>

Although this appearance of uniformity was accepted as reality by many foreign commentators, Jackson (1989) argues that this was a façade that hid underlying conflicts among elite groups within the military-bureaucracy itself. Furthermore, these elites were increasingly challenged by the nascent middle-classes who had been growing in size and influence since the 1960s as a result of the transformation of Thailand's largely subsistence economy to that of market-oriented rice exporter (van Esterik 2000:9). Underlying divisions in religion reflected these social and political conflicts.

The crucial historical break came with the popular revolt of 1973 that led to the overthrow of Sarit's successor, Thanom Kittikachorn, wherein "the façade of Thai Buddhism's unity was shattered and has not been successfully reconstructed" (P. A. Jackson 1989:8). Although this flourishing of dissent was short-lived, with the iron rule of the military re-established in 1976, the divisions revealed in the Sangha could not be denied any longer (P. A. Jackson 1989). According to his characterisation, the struggle over the control of religion since this time has been a more or less open one between different elite factions: the old guard of the military bureaucracy against the more democratically oriented middle class.<sup>57</sup>

For this reason it becomes more difficult to talk about state and religion as singular entities which are in relationship to each other in the post-1976 period. Instead, I argue, it is necessary to consider a range of other factors,

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<sup>56</sup> He, however, also goes on to note that forms of domination cannot be reduced to the 'repressive' or 'ideological' activities of state institutions and that local manifestations of power and political violence often operate outside the purview of the state through illegal and extra-judicial channels (Turton 1984:22). In this way he makes a very important point about the manner in which 'state' power operates outside its official, formal apparatuses.

<sup>57</sup> An oversimplification to be sure, and one that Jackson acknowledges, but one that nevertheless has heuristic value.

including the rise of 'civil society', changing class structure and the rise of the Sino-Thai as a political and economic force.

### *The Post-1976 Era*

The reassertion of military power in 1976 was not countered with a popular revolution. Nonetheless the subsequent period has been characterised by a gradual re-establishment of parliamentary democracy, with a period of quasi-democracy under Prem Tinsulanond (1980-88) followed by the election of Chatichai Choonhavan in 1988, the first elected premier since 1976. This process itself both reflects and promotes the increasing influence of the urban middle-class and also provincial elites, both of whom benefit from the new system at the expense of the military-bureaucracy complex.

In the 1980s, parliament increased in importance as a site of struggle between different factions and political parties. Power shifted towards the National Assembly (legislature) at the expense of the civil service and the 1980s and 1990s saw a rise in the number of business leaders, particularly those from the provinces, entering parliament (Ockey 1996:349). This growing importance of parliament at the expense of the military cliques revealed that the capacity of "state elites to exclude business from political participation has declined in recent years" (MacIntyre 1990:1).

As Pasuk and Baker argue, the rise of modern urban business in Thailand can be traced to the development policies of the 1960s. "Guided by the World Bank and helped by US aid, Thai governments build modern infrastructure, incentivised investment, and controlled labour." (Pasuk and Baker 2004:9). This led to an average 7% growth per year in GDP over the next four decades. In the early 1980s industry overtook agriculture as the main contributor to GDP. There was a decade-long boom which began in

1985-6 which led to the economy growing at double-digit rates for four years. Many new entrepreneurs became rich very quickly. During this decade the urban middle-class more than tripled in size, its dominant sector no longer government officials but business employees.

The growing power of business in parliamentary politics was paralleled by the rising importance of the provinces vis-à-vis Bangkok. As Anderson states, "in a territorially based electoral system, provinciality is no special handicap, and may even be an advantage" (Anderson 1990:41). This system has had the effect of reducing the power differential between the metropolis and the provinces. It has increased the likelihood of prime ministers from the provinces being elected, since provincial seats outnumber Bangkok seats by ten to one (Ockey 1996:359). However, this process of decentralisation has not necessarily translated into greater power for all in rural areas. While the provincial urban middle-class and elites have gained influence, rural civil-society movements continue to be marginalised. Although much of the impetus towards decentralisation stems from a generalised "deep distrust of the central government" resulting from decades of allegations of corruption and other abuses of power, the rise of the regions has often concentrated power in more paternalistic institutions (R. C. Morris 1997:57).<sup>58</sup>

This period has also seen the rise of movements and organisations that may be included under the umbrella term of 'civil society'. Examples include the growth of influence of the NGO movement during the decade leading up to 1997 and the efforts to empower villagers through promoting 'local wisdom', and 'community culture' (as discussed by Attachak 2003:2-3).<sup>59</sup> Naruemon also notes that the so-called 'people's constitution',

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<sup>58</sup> However, more recently there has been an increasing centralisation under the Thaksin government, including attacks on regional power holders (Pasuk & Baker 2004).

<sup>59</sup> Closely related to this has been the interest in 'local history' that gained interest since the 1980s, as discussed in the previous chapter.

promulgated in 1997 in the wake of the economic crisis, promoted the strength of the National Assembly (legislature), independent courts, and other institutions of civil society as never before.<sup>60</sup> Civil groups also moved away from anti-state agendas to calls for self-government (Naruemon 2002:10), in an apparent move towards decentralisation. This process involved the creation of a variety of forums at the provincial, district and sub-district levels (Naruemon 2002:11).<sup>61</sup>

The theme that the domain of civil society is opposed to the state is commonly found in popular and academic writing in Thailand. For example, Chatthip Nartsupha, one of the foremost proponents of the 'community culture school of thought' states that civil society represents "a freedom, part won, part conceded, for what we might term civil rhetoric as against 'state poetics'" (Chatthip 1991:13). Civil society is thus presented as an enabling field of possibility, a domain of freedom, opposed to the restrictiveness of the state and its apparatuses. In this discourse the state features primarily in its repressive mode, as a negative force of regulation and control. The elements of civil society which are assumed to stand against this control are therefore considered to be potentially capable of escaping the regulatory power of the state.

However, a simple opposition of state and civil society may be seen to hide the social rifts within the 'civil society' movement itself, and therefore to obscure the class interests of those who dominate the debate. The debate over so-called 'good governance' (*thammarat*), based on Buddhist principles and defined as "transparency, accountability and citizens' participation" (Naruemon 2002:12) is an apt example of this. The emphasis on governance,

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<sup>60</sup> Whether these challenges have fulfilled their promise is entirely another matter.

<sup>61</sup> Again, the Thaksin government introduced a new variation to this process. In its moves towards populist 'decentralisation', there was a direct relationship established between a highly centralised political party and 'the people' which bypassed provincial power-holders and the state bureaucracy itself to a certain degree (Pasuk 2004).



not government, reflects a desire to move away from centralised government towards what Jessop has called the “destatization of politics” (Jessop 1999:389). However, as some commentators have noted, the desire for transparency has a class character as it is primarily supported by the “middle-classes, businessmen and capitalist leaders” (Naruemon 2002:12).<sup>62</sup> Thus although this notion of good governance has been interpreted in different ways in the Thai context, a central issue of the debate is not so much a critique of state power as such, but rather the role the state should take with regard to liberalisation (Naruemon 2002:9).

Marxist approaches have tended to characterise the era following the return of military rule in October 1976 as a period of transformation from bureaucratic to bourgeois hegemony, with an intervening transitional stage (Girling 1984-5:450). Benedict Anderson has described this transformation of the class structure of Thai society, namely the “struggle of the bourgeoisie to develop and sustain its new political power ... against threats from both left and right, the popular sector and the state apparatus” (1990:40), as the fundamental dynamic at work during this period.

In this view, movements that appear to ‘oppose’ the state are better regarded as attempts to restructure its regulatory capacities. Agreeing with the general thrust of this argument, Hewison suggests that the emergence of a plurality of movements, including environmental, organised labour, intellectuals, business, and Buddhist sects, challenged the *particular amalgam* of the state that existed in the early 1990s. He suggests that a new amalgam of social forces has emerged to restructure the state to be more closely aligned with capitalist interests (Hewison 1993:181-2).

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<sup>62</sup> In a similar vein, Jai Ungpakorn (2002) notes the political priorities of what he describes as the bourgeois middle class, which places an emphasis on good governance characterised by transparency, stability, and effective government. This class has increasingly pushed for reform since 1992 but is generally at odds with the popular NGO, peasant ‘people’s faction’ of contemporary politics.

This process has not been entirely smooth. A military coup in February 1991 led to the establishment of the National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC) and fears that there would be a regression to military rule. This coup is described by Hewison as an ultimately vain “last ditch effort” by state officials, and the military in particular, “to conserve their state against the capitalist class’s movement to make the state more bourgeois”(Hewison 1993:180). However, popular street protests in 1992, dubbed by some a ‘middle class-’ or ‘mobile phone revolution’, although violently repressed by the military, were ultimately effective in forcing the reintroduction of parliamentary rule. Since 1992 another military coup appeared unlikely and the prevailing orthodoxy assumed that military rule was a thing of the past. As Pasuk and Baker state, “in the 1990s Thailand seem to be moving away from the centralisation and repressive controls of the old security state towards more participation, debate, and respect for rights and freedoms” (Pasuk and Baker 2004:134). They note that as Thaksin Shinawatra took power in 2001, it appeared he would continue this trend. This has of course proved to be wrong, with the reassertion of military rule late in 2006 following the ousting of Thaksin Shinawatra. Nevertheless, the assumption that parliamentary democracy would carry on as the dominant political system has informed assumptions about the nature of developments in popular religion.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> The reassertion of military rule in Thailand has occurred too recently to be incorporated into this discussion. It should be noted that the current military rulers of Thailand have made moves towards using Buddhism as an explicit ideological tool in ways that are reminiscent of the 1950s and 1960s. There was even debate about raising Buddhism to the status of official state religion. Although Buddhism is indeed in many senses a de facto national religion, there is an official policy of religious freedom and tolerance.

*The Rise of the Sino-Thai*

Closely connected with the changing class character of Thai society has been the changing position of Thai of Chinese descent and expressions of Chineseness. Many of the urban middle-class in Thailand have a Chinese background and are referred to as *luk jin* ('Chinese children'), usually translated as 'Sino-Thai' in English.

The emergence of what Anderson calls the "new bourgeoisie" since the 1960s has been characterised by the entry of a new generation of assimilated Sino-Thai into an expanding tertiary education system at the time of the economic boom. A new class of businessmen not sharply distinguished from the bureaucracy, as were previous Sino-Thai merchants, has emerged. At the same time, this period has seen the "meteoric rise of the Sino-Thai banking system", moving out into the provinces and overshadowing the edifices of the previous dominant power-holders, the governors (Anderson 1990:38-9). During this period the Sino-Thai have also come to dominate the parliamentary system; between 1983-6 more than three times as many businessmen as bureaucrats were elected to parliament (Anek 1988:453). The growing independence from the military-bureaucracy of both business and the legislative assembly, has given rise to an increasing discursive space for expressions of a distinctive Sino-Thai identity in public life.

Correspondingly, the general value of 'Chineseness' has changed in Thai society. The expression of Chinese cultural forms has become more acceptable than it was during the period of military-bureaucratic domination. As Ockey (1996) notes, there has been a resurgence of Chineseness which has led to Sino-Thai notions of leadership and legitimacy becoming more important, particularly in urban areas. Chai-Anand (1993) also connects the increasing importance of Chineseness with the more prominent role of entrepreneurs in the political system.

Pasuk and Baker sum up this process, writing that:

... the growing wealth and social competence of urban business and middle class resulted in a repositioning of those of Chinese origin within the culture. In the 1970s, intellectuals still complained that the Chinese were written out of the nation's history, and excluded from an ethnically rigid definition of the nation against the background of the urban boom.... [However,] China was reopening to the world in the 1980s, and its emergence as an economic power in the 1990s, legitimised pride in Chinese origins (Pasuk and Baker 2004:11-12).

Earlier theories of Chineseness in Thai society, largely influenced by William Skinner's (1957) seminal work, assumed that the relatively successful incorporation of the Chinese into Thai society in comparison with other Southeast Asian nations would eventually lead to the complete assimilation of people of Chinese background. However, this has not come to pass and the Sino-Thai have been increasingly able to perform aspects of both their Chinese and Thai heritages, often situationally, or in the form of novel hybrid cultural expressions.<sup>64</sup> It is the manner in which such hybrid religious forms play out in the southern Thai periphery that concerns the latter part of this thesis.

Some authors have cautioned against assuming that Sino-Thai ascendancy is complete. Indeed the standard constructions of Thainess still carry a certain amount of discursive weight. As Rosalind Morris has argued:

Although Chinese economic power has since become a force for social transformation and a more legitimate locus of political influence in Thailand, the residual claims of un-Thainess remain to be directed at any group that constitutes itself in opposition to the Thai state, either for reasons of political difference or by virtue of alliance with transnational organizations (R. C. Morris 1997:58).

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<sup>64</sup> I discuss the development of notions of Chineseness in Thai society elsewhere (Maud 2002, 2005). A good recent collection on the subject is Tong and Chan (2001).

Of course, a statement such as this leaves open the question of the precise nature of the Thai state. Certainly, Chinese economic power is not opposed to 'the state' per se but may easily be constructed as such by those wishing to play upon nationalist sentiments. Furthermore, I would argue that the construction of identity is not simply voluntary but occurs in a domain of discursive possibility and constraint (see Butler 1990). Elite groups cannot therefore simply change identities according to their interests. Sino-Thai business interests may well be the most powerful force in Thai political and economic life, but they are obviously not the sole determinants of what it means to be Thai.

#### *Characteristics of Contemporary Religious Life*

One of the characteristics of the post-1976 period has been a growing disjuncture between the Sangha hierarchy and the bourgeoisie. The latter has increasingly seen the forces controlling the Sangha as anachronistic, reflecting the social realities of an earlier age when the military formed the predominant power bloc. As noted, the 1962 restructuring of the Sangha centralised the organisation of the monkhood and gave control back to the Supreme Patriarch, superceding the relatively democratic model put in place in 1941.<sup>65</sup> Since that time, according to Thai philosopher Suwanna Satha-Anand, the Sangha hierarchy "has not been conducive to certain democratic developments in civil society" (Suwanna 1993:2-3). Thus the Sangha has generally remained conservative and highly centralised in its administrative structure. This has led to "an enormous communication gap existing between the traditionalist monks who are supposed to speak to a modern audience" and that audience (Suwanna 1993:10). Despite – or because of –

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<sup>65</sup> Note that a new Sangha Act, presumably more democratic, was prepared in 1975, during the democratic period, but was never instituted due to the coup of 1976 (P. A. Jackson 1989).

the Sangha's rigidity and totalising logic, it has been largely incapable of stemming the emergence of unorthodox religious practices during this period.

It has been argued that the increased social visibility and influence of the capitalist classes has led to a profound disjuncture between middle-class self perceptions and standard representations of Thainess. Kasian argues that dominant constructions of Thai identity, which represent Thainess in terms of a combination of royal and rural elements, misrepresent the reality of life for the urban middle-classes, who very much exist within the "global ecumene",<sup>66</sup> living urban lifestyles, consuming fast-food and buying international (*inthoe*) consumer goods (Kasian 2002). Furthermore, he emphasises the Chineseness of these middle classes, which is again left out of standard representations of Thainess (Kasian 1997, see also commentary by Pasuk and Baker 1998:180). Kasian thus portrays the Thai state as presenting an homogenised and old-fashioned image of Thainess that is out of step with an ever-increasing (and ever more vocal and politically powerful) segment of the Thai population.

In other words, what appears to have occurred is a fragmenting of the relationship between social change, religion, and political legitimation that has historically characterised Siam/Thailand. Instead of the Sangha being restructured in accordance with new political and social realities as has apparently 'always' happened in the past, there increasingly seems to be a disjuncture between the official structure and ideology of the monkhood and the social realities of twenty-first century Thai society. It is noteworthy that although Thai society has developed well past the point at which the military-bureaucracy could be seen to be the dominant elite force, there has

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<sup>66</sup> The term was coined by Ulf Hannerz (1996).

been no corresponding restructuring of the Sangha, despite repeated calls for reform from social critics.

Filling the gap between middle-class aspirations and the structure of the state-controlled Sangha have been a number of developments 'on the margins' of Thai religious life (P. A. Jackson 1997). The two most prominent of these, and those most widely discussed, are the Santi Asok and Thammakai religious movements.<sup>67</sup> Both founded in the 1970s, these movements rose to national prominence in the 1980s and have been characterised as representing differing aspects of an emergent middle-class religious life. Both movements arose within the mainstream Sangha, but have at different times come into open conflict with its hierarchy, leading in the case of Santi Asok to its founder being expelled from the Sangha. While Thammakai has more successfully operated within the Sangha, it too has been the subject of lawsuits concerning its business deals and controversy over some of its more unorthodox teachings.

Besides these parallels, the two movements appear to be sharply opposed in many ways. Santi Asok has been described as a "utopian commune" and Thammakai as an "empire of crystal" (Apinya 1993). Santi Asok emphasises a retreat from the excesses of modernity: simple, communal living, vegetarianism, and an adherence to a strict asceticism even among its lay devotees. Thammakai, by contrast, has been aggressively marketed and emphasises fundraising, mass organised ritual occasions, gigantism, and the mystical experiences of its adherents through the

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<sup>67</sup> The characterisation as 'middle class' is more problematic in the case of Santi Asok than Thammakai. The former also has considerable membership from rural peasants (see Heikkilä-Horn 1997). Discussions of both movements can be found in the following: (Apinya 1993, P. A. Jackson 1989, Suwanna 1990, Taylor 1989, 1990, 1993a). For the most comprehensive discussion of Santi Asok, see Heikkilä-Horn (1997) and also (Candland 2000, Zehner 1990a). Discussions of Thammakai include: (Rungrawee 1999, Taylor 1999, 2003, Zehner 1990b).

promotion of an unorthodox meditation technique. Further, Thammakai is explicitly elitist, requiring its adherents to have at least a bachelor degree.

Despite these differences, both movements have been characterised as representing the concerns of middle-class Thais who feel that their religious needs are no longer being met by the mainstream Sangha. According to Taylor, such movements attempt to maintain the relevance of cosmology and practice for middle-class individuals (Taylor 1999). Developments of this kind, however, are not only an affirmation of a middle-class world view but a challenge to the traditional powers that controlled the apparatuses of the state. Hewison, for example, regards Santi Asok and Thammakai movements as representing challenges to the military-bureaucratic state, their emergence being broadly aligned with the emergence of the bourgeoisie along with their growing power. These movements, he states, “challenge the establishment and one element<sup>68</sup> of the triumvirate of state ideology” (Hewison 1993:181).

One important dimension of this developing dynamic has been the position of the media, and particularly that of the press. This is so for two reasons. Firstly, the press has largely been aligned with the emergent middle-classes and therefore has been an important factor in the socio-political developments I have been discussing. Secondly, the mass production of images and narratives has been of central significance for creating the sorts of religious dynamics that are under discussion.

Anderson has characterised the press as being largely allied with the bourgeoisie and antagonistic towards the military-bureaucracy “Correspondingly, the role of the press in this period can be viewed as that of an ally of the new bourgeois political ascendancy” (Anderson 1990:41).

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<sup>68</sup> I.e. ‘religion’ (*satsana*).



The regular exposés and critiques of monastic scandals that appear in these publications should be viewed in this light. In the Chatichai period, a number of scandals involving the monkhood received public attention (Hewison 1993:181). For example, monks were accused of selling artefacts, falsifying temple records, having relations with women, bribing and even drugging other senior monks. Hewison notes that press calls for the cleansing of Buddhism represent a desire to maintain Buddhism as a symbol of the nation (Hewison 1993:181).

Although focussing on the wrong-doing of individual monks, these criticisms are in effect directed against the Buddhist Sangha and its apparent inability to regulate the behaviour of monks and to ensure that they adhere to the *vinaya*. The Sangha is often criticised for appearing to be unwilling to act against powerful or popular monks who have blatantly flaunted the monastic code. A prominent example of this during the 1990s was the case of Phra Yantra, an extremely popular and charismatic monk who had been implicated in a number of cases of sexual misconduct but was not immediately disciplined by the Sangha hierarchy.<sup>69</sup> As Nataya na Songkhla has observed, such intense media interest in the wrongdoings of monks is not necessarily a sign of a declining interest in religion. Rather, it remains a topic of intense public concern and engagement (cited in Taylor 1999:180).

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<sup>69</sup> While I was conducting fieldwork there was a great deal of press devoted to the scandal surrounding the highly prominent leader of the Thammakai movement, one of the largest 'new Buddhist movements' in Thailand. Although he had been controversial for a long time because of the 'capitalistic' approach taken by his movement, its great size, and his potentially heretical teachings – for example the notion that *nibbana* is *atta* rather than *anatta*, i.e. that it has an enduring existence – he was finally put on trial for financial wrong-doing. The result of this controversy is still pending. In other cases which achieved public attention during the period of my PhD, a highly respected monk was caught on video attempting to seduce one of his female devotees, while another scandal developed around monks who were found to have disguised themselves in military uniforms in order to spend time drinking and womanising. In a less publicised but particularly sordid case close to my fieldsite, in the far South, the formerly highly respected abbot of a temple in Nathawi, a district of Songkhla province, was arrested and charged in 2001 with arranging the murder of his lover's husband.

Just as the press has publicised the wrongdoing of some monks, it has created new possibilities for others. The circulation of images and narratives on a mass scale has helped to launch the careers of a number of charismatic and exemplary monks as nationally recognised figures and has aided in changing the patterns of patronage. Large numbers of people now consume Buddhist teachings of a small number of celebrity monks, while many local temples that lack such focal figures go into decline.<sup>70</sup>

Some commentators have divided these monks into opposing camps – the ‘rationalist’ teaching monks versus the more ‘magically’ oriented or supernaturalist exemplars whose popularity derives from their perceived ability to convey auspicious power to their devotees or to objectify it in the form of amulets and other sacred devices. This division represents the fault lines along which the ‘culture wars’ of Thailand are fought between competing traditionalist and progressive factions of the urban elite (P. A. Jackson 1999c). Despite this apparent division between different ‘styles’ of monks, they are similar insofar as they owe their popular support to the media.

The mass mediatization of religion has corresponded to it being increasingly treated as a commodity. For example, in response to what is perceived as an overall decline of interest in religion, especially among young urban Thais, some monks and Buddhist activists have adopted novel methods of conveying the Dhamma, such as setting up websites in an effort to reach young urban Thai (Kurlantzick 2000, Taylor 2003). The success of such web-based Buddhist sites is dependent on their appeal to particular

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<sup>70</sup> Of course, such a process may not necessarily be new, but rather part of an ongoing process embedded within Thai Buddhism. Arguably, however, the accessibility of mass-mediated images and the increased mobility of both monks and their patrons, have made individual monks and monasteries more independent of their local communities. These communities remain vitally important for the life of the monasteries, though, and have not been completely superseded. This theme will be returned to in the discussion of the career of Luang Phò Thuat in chapters four to six. See also chapter nine.

individuals, and on the manner in which Buddhism is 'sold' to them. Indeed, Buddhist monks endeavouring to maintain the relevance of Buddhism for young urban Thais advocate treating religion as a commodity in the language of the marketplace.

You have to market Buddhism, approach it like a commodity, like a diamond. It's not enough to just say here is the religion. It should mean something to you ... If you do that, if you market, younger people will still gravitate toward the religion – they just won't gravitate toward a belief system that doesn't change (cited in Kurlantzick 2000:161).

Other authors also make these links with the condition of postmodernity in Thailand, assumed to be the commoditisation of proliferating signs with a rise in supernaturalism and animistic tendencies, including the increasing production and use of amulets, holy water, and other blessing and protective devices (Kasian 2002, Kritsadarat 1999). Again, strategies of consumption are emphasised. This is often understood in psychological terms as representing attempts to control an increasingly uncontrollable world:

...in postmodernity religion may still be a significant dimension in the construction project of the self. Although Buddhism advocates the concept of 'no-self', [Thammakai follower] teenagers still aspire to create, maintain and express their religious selves in order to sustain their existence in this unruly world. Instead of trying to detach themselves from selfness, they paradoxically fall into attachment to particular symbolic consumption in an attempt to become what they believe a good Buddhist should be (Kritsadarat and Elliot 1999:155).

This kind of characterisation, which emphasises identity creation through consumption, strikes a particular chord for some theorists of postmodernity. Such notions seem exactly to reflect the apparently postmodern character of Thai religion, where adherence becomes a matter of

personal choice in a wider project of lifestyle negotiation (e.g. Bauman 1997:165-85, Giddens 1991). Identity creation becomes a personal project, not a social given, and is effected through the “everyday consumption of products, services, and media” (Kritsadarat 1999:2) in a fragmented social field with virtually unlimited possibilities for symbolic self-construction. The postmodern subject is split from the social field, which in effect becomes a *resource* to be utilised in the symbolic project of self-creation (see discussion by Kritsadarat 1999:3).

The concept of postmodernity has in fact been widely influential in scholarly discussions of Thai religion. I will now move to a more detailed discussion of how theories of postmodernity have been deployed to account for religious and other social transformations that have taken place over recent decades. Rather than accepting these as authoritative in defining Thai religious practice, my aim is to trace these arguments and examine their assumptional effects.

### *Postmodernity and Thai Religion*

In this discussion I am not so much interested in the concept of postmodernity in general so much as the specific way in which it has been deployed to understand recent developments in Thai religion. On the whole these studies have tended to highlight the following features: (1) the rise of individualistic religious forms at the expense of those that affirm collective identities; (2) the flourishing of the religious periphery or margins of Thai religious life against the centralised monkhood and centrally authorised modes of religious observance to those heterodox religious forms; (3) the pervasive commoditisation and materialism of religious forms, i.e. ‘economic Buddhism’ (*phuttha phanit*) and ‘prosperity religion’ (P. A. Jackson 1999b, 1999c); (4) cultural flows which cross traditionally maintained boundaries.

Such studies also tend to move away from focussing on traditional models of power to more semiotic understandings that construct Buddhism, and Thai society in general, as a system of signs. They reveal a tendency to associate modernity with categorical stability, while postmodernity is characterised by flux, indeterminacy and ambiguity. Further they tend to link the post-modern with the pre-modern; the post-modern represents a continuity with, or perhaps return to, various aspects of pre-modern religiosity. In this discussion of the literature on 'postmodern' religion I will focus on a series of more prominent arguments in order to highlight their shared characteristics.

Kasian Tejapira's essay "The Postmodernization of Thainess" (2002) does not focus on religion specifically but on what he perceives to be a radical new era in the production of Thainess (*khvam pen thai*). Importantly, for Kasian, Thai identity has entered an era of increasing commodification and fragmentation, where a once relatively stable symbolic order has given way to the bewildering circulation of competing signs. "[W]hy 'postmodernization of Thainess'" he asks, "instead of simply liberalisation or pluralisation?"

Because I regard this transformation of Thainess as going in a postmodern direction. This is not a modernist process in which one essence, one truth, one reality, one history, one subject, one order and one language of Thainess are replaced by another set of the same kind of identity entities, but rather a decentring of these entities, an unanchoring of referential poles, a decline of cultural authority, a de-essentialisation of national identity, a clearing of ethno-ideological space, a liberation of national identity signifiers, a collapse of linguistic boundaries, an influx of commodities-as-signification units, and a resultant semiotic chaos (Kasian 2002:220-1).

In other words, according to Kasian, modernist tendencies would entail a centralisation of authority, not only political but symbolic. It is the order of

signification itself – that which guarantees a coherent and authorised meaning – which has been rent asunder in contemporary Thai society, now understood to be decentred and subject to a proliferation of signs which can be consumed.

The implication of Kasian's argument is that the state itself, as the final guarantor of meaning, has been displaced from its central role in nation-building, that is, producing national identity. Instead, production of Thainess and Thai identity have been 'privatised' as Thai capitalist corporations produce commoditised representations of Thainess for consumption by erstwhile citizens, now constructed as consumers. Kasian notes the propensity for Thai companies to take on the prerogative of reproducing images of Thainess in their advertising.<sup>71</sup> Pasuk and Baker also refer to this tendency for Thai companies to take up the role of defining and defending "Thai culture", particularly Siam Cement, "the most aristocratic of all Thai companies"(1998:178), with its strong connections to the royal family.<sup>72</sup>

This is not to say that state authorities have withdrawn entirely from the project of producing Thai national identity. The year 1994 was designated as the Year for the Promotion of Thai Culture, with grants offered to provinces to promote aspects of 'Thai culture' and a national advertising and public relations campaign. However, not only did the campaign run into the difficulty of finding some determinate element to be defined as essentially Thai, it also provoked a backlash from urban intellectuals who accused government officials of reducing Thailand's heritage to a

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<sup>71</sup> See also Hataya (2002) on the role of advertising in the production of Thainess.

<sup>72</sup> Already by the early 1980s Thai corporations, especially large Sino-Thai banks, were taking over many of the ritual prerogatives of the Thai kings, including royal symbols (such as the Garuda) and the sponsorship of Kathina robe-offering ceremonies (Gray 1986). As a result, some individuals were even under the impression that they were saving money with the king's bank!

“commodity for consumption” (Sujit Wongthes) or “a product that doesn’t sell” (Nidhi Aeusriwongse).

Thai identity in these analyses therefore becomes just one more floating signifier in the overall chaotic profusion of uprooted signification that is considered to be a characteristic of this version of postmodernity.

Peter Jackson, a prominent theorist of Thai religion, has also made use of the concept of postmodernity, writing:

...since the early 1990s the state has effectively withdrawn from its historical role of guiding the modernization of Thai religion, leaving expressions of religiosity to individual monks, interested lay people, and business people who produce, market, and profit from the burgeoning trade in religious products. Religiosity in Thailand is no longer ‘modern’ in the sense of following a path of doctrinal rationalization accompanied by organizational centralization and bureaucratization. In the 1990s Thai religion has become increasingly post-modern, characterized by a resurgence of supernaturalism and an efflorescence of religious expression at the margins of state control, involving the decentralization and localization of religious authority (1999a:49).

Jackson links contemporary changes to premodern forms. He sees religious hybridity as a re-emergence of religious pluralism which predominated before the centralising reforms of the modern Thai state and its control over religiosity. For Jackson, the postmodernisation of Thai religion is intimately connected to the withdrawal of the state from involvement in religious affairs; it is conceived in terms of a failure of a Weberian-inflected model of modernisation as ever-increasing rationalisation and bureaucratisation of society. In this formulation, the rationalising and disenchanting project of the state is juxtaposed to the re-enchantment of the capitalist marketplace itself. The capitalist growth of the 1990s is linked with an explosion of the ‘irrational’ – and therefore unpredictable and disorderly –

aspects of religion. Jackson describes a boom in supernaturalism and the belief in the charismatic power of individual monks and other individuals who are able to make claims to being individuated sources of charisma, rather than the routinised, institutional charisma obtained from access to bureaucratic sources of power.

In a sense what Jackson proposes is the reversal of the process of 'domestication' of forest monks by the nation-state that Tambiah (1984) and Taylor (1993b) describe. Instead of the routinisation of individuated 'free-floating' sources of charisma and its subordination to the process of creating bureaucratic 'charisma of office', Jackson posits the opposite.<sup>73</sup> Formerly-routinised sources of charisma (Buddhist monks who were put to the service of legitimating the state) have been relatively untethered from bureaucratic control and have once again become individuated sources of charisma, drawing their authority from traditional notions of charisma and sacred power (*bun-barami*) derived from their accumulated merit. Similarly, individuals access this charisma in order to achieve personal goals, using it in the accumulation of capital and individual prestige.

Thus Jackson identifies a profound shift. Instead of a monolithic state maintaining a monopoly over all sources of charisma, 'individual agents of the state', such as politicians, civilian bureaucrats, police and military officers, and even members of the royal family, seek to legitimise themselves by accessing a range of charismatic sources (1999a:49). As he goes on to note, "this religiosity is increasingly an individual phenomenon and the cults these influential players attach themselves to are popular, personality-based phenomena not expressions of state ritual" (1999a:50). In other words, instead of the state claiming all authority to itself in a typically nationalist manner, individual beneficiaries of the state now compete for prestigious

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<sup>73</sup> Charisma of office: charisma that emanates from the structure itself (see Keyes 1999:5).



sources of charisma 'on the open market' as it were. In this analysis the state has become one of the players in civil society rather than that which stands in opposition to it.

Jackson emphasises that these transformations in Thai religiosity have occurred without any institutional changes to the administration and structure of the state-controlled Sangha (P. A. Jackson 1999b:12). To account for change, therefore, he argues that analysis must turn to popular culture, to consider the multiplicity of forms, produced by the actions of the market and other zones of cultural production. State and market are implicitly opposed in this schema; one turns *from* the state to the market to consider what is new about Thai religion. As I will argue in this thesis, while Jackson's illumination of the role of the market is vital, it is important to avoid representing the market and the state as essentially discrete, opposed entities.

Another theorist of contemporary Thai religion, Pattana Kitiarsa, has focused on the growing phenomenon of urban spirit mediumship. Like Jackson, Pattana's work on these increasingly visible cults links the rise of postmodern religiosity with a challenge to the authority of the state:

The rise of the modern nation-state, centralized government, the diffusion of scientific rationality through formal education, and the influence of modern mass media represent important hallmarks of modernity. However, postmodernity presents itself as an antagonized successor to these modern agencies. It is argued that the process of postmodernity has challenged, intensified and diversified homogenizing efforts, especially by the modern state (Pattana 1999b:40-1).

The "postmodern condition" (Lyotard 1984) therefore provides a number of challenges and reactions from the state. It appears, however, that the state's attempts to monopolise the field of cultural production are increasingly thwarted. Pattana makes clear that "The postmodern era seems to be a

crucial time when ‘heterogeneous cultural formations’ are rising and flourishing, while the state’s control and domination are increasingly questioned and contested” (Pattana 1999b:41).<sup>74</sup>

For Pattana, the concept of postmodernity is closely bound to theories of resistance to the state. In his formulation, spirit medium cults that have come to national prominence since the 1970s and 1980s represent a challenge to the dominant rationality of the state. The state’s voice is no longer as “dominant or forceful” as it once was while “popular voices are bolder and louder” (Pattana 1999b:41). He thus directly contrasts a “multivocal” popular religion with a dominant and authoritative state-sponsored Buddhism (Pattana 1999b:2). As with Jackson, the former represents “the continuity of religious tradition from the premodern past” (Pattana 1999b:5) as spirit mediums attempt to reconnect with the past while simultaneously reconstructing and reinterpreting it. These multivocal expressions are also potentially subversive, representing a critique from the margins, allowing participation in the production of knowledge and identity in ways that challenge and evade the ‘rational gaze’ of the Thai state. Postmodernity in this case is connected with a potential democratisation of the religious sphere, where social critiques can be articulated, subaltern voices may express themselves and Bakhtinian heteroglossia prevails. The multivocality of urban spirit medium cults is contrasted with the apparent univocality of the state. The sharpening of distinctions by authority – e.g.

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<sup>74</sup> Similar arguments have also found their expression in a Thai-language collection by Suriya et al. (1996) on urban spirit mediumship. Jackson sums up their argument that “spirit mediumship has become more prominent because of multiple incitements deriving from uncertainties generated by an array of factors, including: an intensification and spread of the market economy; bureaucratic corruption; prostitution; HIV/AIDS; economically driven internal migration by rural labourers; and a widespread loss of confidence in the Thai Buddhist monkhood due to a stream of much-publicised clerical scandals. They relate these diverse crises of Thai modernity and the rise of spirit mediumship to *the decreasing ability of the Thai state to control the economy, culture, information flows and religious adherence*” (P. A. Jackson 2004b:357, emphasis added).

between official and unofficial forms, between royal and common, and orthodox and unorthodox religion – gives way to a pervasive postmodern ‘de-differentiation’.

Postmodernity is also presented in temporal terms as an era, as the temporal “antagonized successor” to the state-led project of modernity. Spirit medium cults are presented in functionalist and psychological terms as being based on a search for meaning and relevance in uncertain times (Pattana 1999b:3). They are a response to the “crises of modernity” set in motion, ironically, due to the very efforts of the Thai state to centralise and rationalise the Thai Buddhist Sangha. The result of this overt politicisation is the undermining of the authority of the Sangha, particularly by educated members of the Thai middle class.

Finally, Jim Taylor makes a similar set of arguments in his work on the spatial qualities of postmodern religion (Taylor 1999, 2003, [forthcoming]). For Taylor, the new religious movements that have emerged since the 1970s and the restructuring of spatial relations due to the dominance of capitalism have undermined the regulatory powers of the state, including its very integrity as a spatially-bound entity.

In the new milieu of the ‘network society’, dominated by an aggressive form of capitalism, and where new kinds of international networks undermine traditional social (or territorial) formulations, it is more difficult for the state to control and regulate place. In the turbulence of post-modernism, the conventional social structures or boundaries are not as clear anymore. In the context of the impingement and social reconstitution of the dominant space of flows on everyday lives, individuals may attempt to re-establish identities and cultural meaning in terms of territorialised or place-based interests (Taylor 1999:166).

Again, the theme of heterogeneity and proliferation that exceeds the regulatory capacity of the state is emphasised. In this analysis any claims to

a singular origin, fixed location or other notions of stability are made 'against the flow'. It is worth pointing out though that while Taylor argues that the state's ability to define itself territorially has diminished, he consistently refers to religious development 'in Thailand'; that is, he takes the national space as a natural frame and fixed point of reference for his analysis.

Paradoxes of this kind are at the centre of my critique of approaches toward Thai religion that have made use of the concept of postmodernity. The emphasis on the market, fluidity, hybridity and resistance offer new and more sophisticated ways of understanding Thai religion than previous more monolithic models that assumed the centrality of the Theravada Buddhist Sangha. However, this very emphasis tends to assume a very monolithic model of state power, which in turn promotes the view that alternative religious forms somehow escape or at least challenge the disciplinary regime of state power. What is lost is the manner in which these new forms continue to depend on an underlying unity which is largely provided by 'the state'. A good example of this can be found in Pattana's argument about hybridity in Thai religion. On the one hand he argues that:

The hybridization of Thai religious beliefs and practices has strong foundations in the cults which have been flourishing in cities and towns throughout the country. It takes place among the broader population *beyond the authoritarian gaze and control of the state and the Sangha* (Pattana 2005a:485, emphasis added).

On the other hand, when discussing the ordering principles of spirit medium shrines across the country he notes that:

The statue of Buddha is *always* positioned at the top, since he is regarded as the supreme deity in Thai religious cosmology and since Buddhism is the country's state-sponsored religion and has traditionally formed its sociocultural foundation (Pattana 2005a:484, emphasis added).

Thus, although hybrid forms might challenge a unitary vision of religion, they also participate in, and reproduce, uniform hierarchies of value. I am not advocating a return to more traditional models which tended to reproduce uncritically the categories of the state by assuming that state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism was the most representatively 'Thai' form of religion. However, I argue that what needs to be retained is the sense in which 'the state' continues to inform religious life in Thailand. This involves taking a more diffuse and decentred approach to the state itself.

All of the above studies have illuminated the profound changes that have taken place in Thai society during recent decades. A general tendency in these studies is both to temporalise the current era as representing a break with the past and also to set up a dichotomy between the power of an apparently monolithic state and the 'new' proliferation of decentralised and disparate religious forms. I now turn to two writers who, although they make a similar set of arguments, make some crucial points about the ongoing role of the state in producing contemporary religious diversity.

### *Retaining the Whole*

Richard O'Connor (1993) explores the interconnection between the centralising reforms promoted by the Thai state since the late nineteenth century and the development of the contemporary 'religious marketplace' with a slightly different emphasis from those already covered. Like many of the above studies, O'Connor argues that there has been a movement from the "well-controlled *wat*" to an "uncontrolled religious market" with a new middle-class clientele backing reform movements. He argues that elites who once patronised religious figures in order to achieve status have become consumers who seek more individualised, direct and personal results (O'Connor 1993).

However, he also argues that it is the very *underlying homogeneity* of the current system that has freed up both religious clients and entrepreneurs to innovate. Thus the unintended consequence of central Thai officials gaining control of the Sangha is that they have produced an environment that has favoured religious entrepreneurs.

The ... centralizing Sangha reforms ... countered the *wat's* localism but failed to win control of religion. What it did was turn the laity out of the *wat*, breaking them out of communities and making them into religious free agents. That created a clientele for today's religious entrepreneurs, lay and monastic alike (O'Connor 1993:335).

O'Connor argues that the decline of the centrality of the *wat* as an essentially local institution has meant that individual monks have increasingly become centres of personalised power. Rather than images or sacred relics being the focal point of communities, as unifying symbols for localities, monks have become the (mobile) centres themselves. "What leaves the *wat* goes to a monk, who, as a leader, is a centre. Amulets epitomise this shift.... In effect sanctity shifts from a societal container to an entourage" (O'Connor 1993:336).

Official control of the Sangha has effectively narrowed the range of approved activities open to monks. For example, active involvement by monks in a wider social domain, outside the realm of ritual specialist, has largely been circumscribed by the Thai authorities, except where this involvement has been in alignment with national policies and goals.<sup>75</sup> From having multiple roles within the community, monks have been encouraged

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<sup>75</sup> Girling notes this when he states that although purportedly free to pursue their own salvation, "[d]eviant monks who pay too much attention to the protection of their flock ... are subject to discipline and punishment" (Girling 1984:393).

to become mere functionaries of rituals and sources of sacred power.<sup>76</sup> The ability of monks to pursue a broader social role in the local community or beyond often depends on their ability to accrue patronage and funding, and this in turn depends on their ability to portray themselves as sources of charisma.

O'Connor argues that current religious changes are assumed by observers to be diverging from "traditional Buddhism", even though this Buddhism is in fact "an imagined religion, a past already 'corrected' by Sangha reforms" (O'Connor 1993:335). The consequences of this are that:

... by denying the past's actual diversity it magnifies the present's apparent disintegration. Second, the historical source of change, Sangha reforms, turns into an agent of continuity and thus something else must explain the quite obvious fact of change (O'Connor 1993:335).

The apparent fragmentation of Thai religion thus obscures an underlying unity and the creation of a national identity actually frees individual laypeople from the burden of locality, allowing them to see the entire nation as a domain of choice.

Centralizing brought the countryside under the capital, and now the country's ways come into Bangkok and onto a mass market. Localism's religious practices, evolved over centuries, are now free from place and available to any Thai. So is every new concoction. Such choice is new. Once every religious form belonged to a social or physical niche, to an ethnic or occupational group. Today, however, anyone can try anything – and a lot do. Ritual practices still define identity, *but the person remains*

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<sup>76</sup> Kamala (1997) makes a similar point when she argues that 'modern state Buddhism' has promoted the notion that a monk's primary role is to provide a 'field of merit' for the laity. Other community-oriented practices which monks have performed have been denigrated as unorthodox historical accretions. The narrowing of the role of monks served the purpose of neutralising the possible ability of some monks to challenge the authority of the state and Sangha or to become the foci of localist millennial movements by delegitimizing any political actions on their part.

*Thai amid the shifts. That lets people choose as never before* (O'Connor 1993:336-7, emphasis added).

O'Connor's point is that the very concern over religious diversity, often interpreted in Thailand as disintegration, is in itself a sign that there is widespread agreement on the basic terrain of the debate – for example in the shared assumption about the nature of 'traditional Buddhism'. In other words, debate over religious change is a truly *national* debate; it is constrained by parameters that are invisible to most and thus takes place in a much narrower terrain than most assume. What others see as fragmentation O'Connor sees as unification – evidence that "people of differing pasts are becoming one" (O'Connor 1993:338) as they are acquiring a common, national past, which determines how they will think about the current climate of religious change.

Another writer who has emphasised unity within diversity in relationship to contemporary religious change is Charles Keyes. As an early theorist of religious fragmentation in Thailand, Keyes' argument has been influential on subsequent readings of the phenomenon. According to Keyes, the rise of what he calls "militant Buddhism" in Thailand is "a direct consequence of a political crisis in which the moral basis for political authority became problematic" (1978:148). In a more recent paper, Keyes reiterates this argument, pointing to widespread public disillusionment in the Sangha following its complicity in the violent overthrowing of democratic government in 1976 (Keyes 1999). This he suggests is also to be found in the collusion of the monkhood in the war against communism, most infamously exemplified by the announcement by one well-known monk, Phra Kittiwuttho, that the killing of communists resulted in more merit (*bun*)



than demerit (*bap*).<sup>77</sup> This collusion, according to Keyes, has been central to a widespread critique of the monkhood, especially among the urban middle-class, and led to the search for other, less tainted forms of religious expression or sources of charisma.

Keyes also considers the metaphor of the religious marketplace to be apt, and emphasises that the established Sangha is no longer considered to be the only legitimate source of charisma. However, he also emphasises points of unity, for example the fact that “most Thai still hold, probably unconsciously, to the assumption that moral authority is manifested in those having ‘merit and virtue’” (Keyes 1999:37). This fact means that:

The proliferation of religious movements that have successfully challenged on the basis of competing charismatic authority the hegemonic domination of a state-controlled established religion does not indicate ... that there is no longer a consensus in Thai society about the religious basis of authority. When Thai today point to *satsana* as a pillar of the Thai nation, they often use this term in much the same way *God* is evoked in the United States....

Keyes thus suggests that *satsana* or religion remains one of the pillars of Thai society although it has been, to a certain degree, untethered from the concrete structure of the Sangha. He conceptualises this in terms of Robert Bellah’s notion of civil religion, and links the pluralisation of religious forms in Thailand to the growth of civil society movements, such as the proliferation of NGOs, since the 1970s. The proliferation of different religious forms is, for Keyes, an example of the increasingly civil character of Thai society.

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<sup>77</sup> Kittiwuttho used the analogy of killing a fish and offering it to a monk. The small amount of demerit caused by killing the fish is far outweighed by the merit generated by the act of alms-giving.

Keyes seems to be suggesting that the notion of *satsana* in Thailand has itself taken on something of a 'transcendental' form. It has become, in Keyes' words, "a referent ... to an ultimate reality on which the moral order of society depends" (Keyes 1999:37). In contrast to the arguments that take recourse to the concept of postmodernity as indicative of proliferation and fragmentation, Keyes argues that there is a more fundamental unity that exists 'beyond' plurality of everyday competing forms – that is, beyond the realm of politics – and holds them together within some sort of coherent entity. The concept of *satsana* thus becomes part of the unquestioned and unquestionable terrain upon which political life takes place. Keyes' argument would also appear to suggest that the notion of the Thai nation itself – of which *satsana* is one of its 'pillars' – has, in a similar way, been rendered somehow transcendental. This is indicative of the 'success' of the nation-building process, where the nation no longer exists as the object of political struggle but has rather become the unquestioned container within which it takes place.<sup>78</sup>

Reference to this transcendental dimension allows a better understanding of the central paradox inherent in the diversification of religious forms in contemporary Thailand. The kernel of this paradox involves the fact that orthodox Theravada Buddhism continues to remain a central factor in notions of Thai identity. While popular religious life is experiencing a profusion of heterodox forms and practices that seem to destabilise the very centrality of orthodox Buddhism, these do not replace it as the symbolic core of Thai society. The very fact that many people in Thailand experience the current era as one of 'cultural crisis' is in part produced by the notion of a unified and disciplined Buddhist Sangha at the

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<sup>78</sup> I.e. during the Cold War the struggle was *for* Thailand (Kerdphol 1986) between the forces of capitalism and communism. Conflict now takes place *within* a taken-for-granted Thailand.

heart of popular conceptions of authentic Thainess. There is a constant dissonance between the transcendental *idea* of a 'true' Buddhism and the worldly character of really-existing Buddhism. The fact that this dissonance is felt to have produced a cultural crisis is actually evidence of the ongoing centrality of Buddhism as a unifying symbol. A more profound fragmentation would surely involve the decline of the idea of Buddhism as a defining quality of Thainess, and this, I suggest, has not yet occurred.

A number of the studies discussed have tended to overemphasise the unity of the 'modern' period, while simultaneously exaggerating the disunity of the present, designated as a 'postmodern' one. Correspondingly, the unity of the Sangha during the modern period has also been overemphasised, contributing to the sense of fragmentation in the present. However, Katherine Bowie argues that this perspective gives too much attention to the production of state hegemony solely by means of state-controlled institutions, such as schools, media, religion, and the arts. She notes that under centralised state control, Buddhism has been more diverse in its forms than many scholars assume, and has therefore been an "uncertain instrument for the consolidation of the state, having nurtured as many revolts against the state as it has discouraged" (Bowie 1997:285).

While the institution of religion may have been an uncertain object of state control, the *idea* and *ideal* of religion have been very successfully bound up with the reflexivity of Thai subjects. That is, it is in the realm of formation of Thai subjectivity, and not the actual institutions themselves, that we find 'the state' continuing to exist. This is not to imply that the formal institutional mechanisms of the state *have* in fact diminished, merely that we need to go beyond them to more fully appreciate the continuing life of the state and the "intimacy of the political" (Herzfeld 1997). O'Connor evokes a comparable notion when he states that it is the *very unity of national identity* that allows for the mobility and apparent heterogeneity of the current

religious scene. Similarly, Keyes points to the existence of the notion of *satsana* as an ideal connected to a sense of national belonging and which transcends all particular religious forms.

The ongoing importance of nationally-based discourses despite apparent fragmentation is illustrated in a number of ways. For example, notions of what is more, or less, typically 'Thai' continue to exist. The traditional symbols of royal and village culture and the pillars of nation-religion-king have not disappeared from the national psyche; they continue to inform Thai world views – including those that stand opposed to these symbols. Similarly, participation in unorthodox religious traditions or events is often justified by recourse to the universally repeated notion that “all religions are essentially the same because they all teach one to do good”. For instance, a highly ranked official whom I 'caught' paying his respects at the residence of a spirit medium of the Chinese bodhisattva Kuan Im explained his presence in precisely these terms, telling me that it didn't matter what sort of religious practice one followed as the central message of all religions is essentially ethical.<sup>79</sup> This message of religion as an ethical set of teachings aimed at social integration and harmony is constantly reinforced throughout the school years of all Thai children (Mulder 1997). I argue that it is precisely this inclusiveness that opens the way for later participation in a wide variety of religious forms without fundamentally challenging the centrality of Theravada Buddhism at the core of dominant conceptions of Thainess.

This way of refiguring an underlying stability of identity, or of a shared reflexivity, challenges the assumptions that are inherent in much of the theorising of the postmodernity of Thainess and Thai religion. I would argue

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<sup>79</sup> This sort of attitude is certainly opened up in a Buddhist society in a way that religions such as Christianity or Islam would not allow. However, more subtle processes of inclusion and exclusion are also at work, especially in relationship to Islam in southern Thailand. Tropes which de-emphasise difference are often deployed to justify cross-over between Thai and Chinese religious forms, while Islam is more often constructed as radically other.

that such arguments reproduce neo-liberal assumptions when they propose that the corrosive effects of late modernity have reduced religion to nothing more than the private, individualised and consumerist pursuit of religious sanctity at the expense of collective identity and shared meaning (Mulder 1993:192). These studies seem to imply that there is no society but merely a co-existence of individuals pursuing their own private goals.<sup>80</sup> They overlook the manner in which collective identity, or a national imaginary, can and does underpin this apparent profusion of individualistic and unorthodox forms. Postmodern theories tend to 'naturalise' heterogeneity and the pursuit of individual choices by characterising them in terms of the *absence* of 'external' or 'artificial' institutional control, always represented negatively as repressive. Thus the profusion of unorthodox religious forms is associated with the 'withering' of the state's ideological function, its 'withdrawal' of control over religious matters, its 'inability' to regulate the production of religious forms, or 'resistance' to its control. Language of this sort parallels neo-liberal ideology, which tends to naturalise the 'free' market as characterised by the absence of state interventions and constraint, ignoring the manner in which it is a particular constellation of state control that

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<sup>80</sup> It is possible to argue that this is not unique to neoliberalism but is inherent to Theravada Buddhism itself, with its emphasis on the individual pursuit of *kammic* consequences. This would, I think, ignore the extent to which Buddhism has historically underpinned group imaginings, especially in the various ways collective *kammic* destinies have been produced, what Walters calls "communal karma" (Walters 2003). Of course, the critique of manifestations of such communal karma, such as belief in the transferability of merit, have been very central to the influential critique of traditional Thai Buddhism by 'rationalist' Buddhist thinkers such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. This is one reason I do not see Buddhadasa as opposed to more market-oriented 'prosperity cults' (c.f. P. A. Jackson 1999c). Both trends share a focus on the individual and the breaking down of 'useless' ritual forms which only continue for the dubious purpose of maintaining social groups. Buddhadasa and the prosperity cults are both 'modern' in the sense that they share the desire to get beyond 'empty ritual' and to what is truly efficacious for the individual. In the former case it is the end of suffering, in the latter the accumulation of prosperity. Radically different goals, but they both share a similar utilitarianism and focus on the individual.

actually creates a space for the market and *supports* its 'freedom' (Coronil 1997).

As Michel Foucault (1978) constantly emphasised, it is necessary to consider power not only as repressive but also productive. There is no 'natural' social environment 'outside' of power. Power does not intervene in the social field 'after the fact', but is constitutive; it is always-already present. For Foucault, power does not confront the modern subject as a set of external prohibitions but rather as a system of internalised disciplines. What needs to be added to this, however, is that the idea of power as a negative, of repressive constraint, infiltrates almost every representation of power. If this is not the true nature of power, why does the notion remain so pervasive, and persuasive? Part of the reason for this is that power actually works through the creation of the sense of its own outside, the notion that the workings of power can be evaded. Power operates not only through internalised and productive micro-practices; its internalisation and productivity are facilitated by the misrepresentation of power as primarily repressive and constraining.

It is this combined action which means that the distinction between state and society should be problematised. This is especially the case when the former is considered to be the locus of control and repression, and the latter is considered to be a realm of relative autonomy and freedom. The very notion of this split is something that exists within the operation of power itself.

This point brings me back to my conversation with the official at the NRCT and his warning that I should be careful what I write about Buddhism. This statement did not come from the state apparatus itself as an official prohibition but in the form of a friendly aside, made unofficially and 'off the record'. The advice employed a sort of 'good cop-bad cop' dynamic, where the creation of apparent solidarity is actually an aspect of the

workings of power itself. The state had apparently withdrawn its ideological function and was happy for me to explore the unorthodoxy and hybridity of Buddhism in the South. However, the message of unity, the true state effect, continued to be reproduced in the unofficial domain of the taken-for-granted.<sup>81</sup> The prohibition issued from a dispersed space which could not be localised within any formal rule; it just *was* so. This is the apotheosis of the state, where its injunctions no longer require policing but become an unquestioned feature of the terrain of common sense. And this is why we should be cautious to announce the withering of the state's ideological function when in fact its Idea has transcended the brute awkwardness of its practical reality.

#### *Towards Theorising the State*

Based on these points, the approach I take in this thesis is to bring 'the state' into my analysis of popular religion in Thailand, and in particular to take an approach that avoids opposing state and society. I view the state as at once disaggregated and unified; while the 'real' state itself might be a disunity of practices and internal conflict, the message it presents and the dominant image of itself that it conveys is one of unity. This is the notion put forward in Abram's influential essay in which he posits a disjuncture between what he calls the (fragmentary, internally contradictory) "state system" and the ideological message of unity, or "state idea" (Abrams 1988). However, other scholars have criticised Abrams for his positivistic assumption that the ideological 'illusion' or 'mask' of the state idea can be

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<sup>81</sup> I am not trying to suggest though that the official was simply reproducing state policy by other means. The relationship of bureaucrats to state objectives is far from simple (Herzfeld 2005) and state officials should not be seen as mechanically enacting policy. I am arguing that it is precisely because 'the state' cannot be separated from everyday intimacies that it should not be viewed in purely mechanistic, and monolithic, terms.

removed to reveal the 'true' underlying disunity of the state system (Coronil 1997, Taussig 1997, 1999), or that one can successfully make a clear distinction between the abstract idea of the state from its material reality (Mitchell 1999). As Mitchell writes:

The appearance that state and society or economy are separate from things is part of the way a given financial and economic order is maintained. This is equally true of the wider social and political order. The power to regulate and control is not simply a capacity stored within the state, from where it extends out into society. The apparent boundary of the state does not mark the limit of the processes of regulation. It is itself a product of those processes (1999:84).

Bourdieu makes a similar point when he states that the effectiveness of state power is because it "incarcerates itself simultaneously in objectivity, in the form of specific organisational structures and mechanisms and in subjectivity in the form of mental structures and categories of perception and thought" (1999:55).

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2001) has suggested that the state cannot be studied as an empirical *a priori*, and therefore 'it' is to be found only in situational manifestations. An ethnography of the state must therefore study the state's effects, rather than 'the thing' itself.<sup>82</sup> He therefore suggests a strategy for studying 'the state' that:

... goes beyond governmental or national institutions to focus on the multiple sites in which state processes and practices are recognizable through their effects. These effects include (1) an isolation effect, that is, the production of atomized individualized subjects moulded and modeled for governance as part of an undifferentiated but specific

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<sup>82</sup> For other prominent examples of ethnographic studies that investigate 'the state' include Herzfeld (1992) and Kapferer (1998). A recent collection of ethnographic studies can be found in Krohn-Hansen and Nustad (2005).



“public”; (2) an identification effect, that is, a realignment of the atomized subjectivities along collective lines within which individuals recognize themselves as the same; (3) a legibility effect, that is, the production of both a language and a knowledge for governance and of theoretical and empirical tools that classify and regulate collectivities; and (4) a spatialization effect, that is, the production of boundaries and jurisdiction (Trouillot 2001:126).<sup>83</sup>

Historian Tony Day (2002) has also provided a specific theorisation of the state in Southeast Asia which provides a useful framework for a disaggregated understanding of the state. Instead of thinking of the state as a thing, Day instead emphasises state formation as an open-ended process involving the participation of a diverse range of networks and actors. Importantly for this thesis, he draws on Anna Tsing’s (1993:96) characterisation of Southeast Asian states as “protection rackets”, and he focuses on the ‘talismanic’ qualities at the heart of state formation, where local knowledge and invulnerability are evoked. “In this way, the acquisition and activation of knowledge at all levels of society, rather than counteracting the state, contribute instead to its continuous reformation / re-formation” (Day 2002:92). Influenced by Bruno Latour, he also disaggregates states by analysing not reified structures but the concrete networks and cultural repertoires in which political struggle and production take place. He locates state-forming tendencies in everyday interactions, such as the “little scenarios of etiquette” (Day 2002:105) involving appropriate use of “time and space” (*kaletsa*) which, he argues, “reenact cosmological repertoires of state authority that have a very long history” (Day 2002:106). As this suggests,

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<sup>83</sup> I would argue that there are additional effects that might be added to Trouillot’s list, including a ‘hierarchy effect’ which promotes a sense of internal differentiation within unity, where certain categories, values, locations are considered to be more or less typical of the whole. This will be elaborated further in the following chapter.

Day's approach seeks to find continuity rather than rupture between past and present, and to bring culture into the analysis of state formation. Further, he does not seek to oppose categories such as modern and traditional, reason and ritual but instead looks for continuities in the process of state formation over time.

These arguments about the nature of the state and its relationship to religion will be elaborated further throughout this thesis. Like Day, I am interested the role played by invulnerability and local knowledge in the process of state formation in southern Thailand, a process in which Luang Phò Thuat is central. And like Trouillot, I explore the presence and influence of the state through its effects rather than through a direct analysis of its institutions. I draw attention to the presence of the state in everyday life and to the dimension of participation which reproduces 'it' in specific contexts open to ethnographic analysis.

As mentioned, one of the state effects posited by Trouillot is the "spatialisation effect". In the next chapter, I consider the construction of southern Thailand. I analyse the manner in which the region has been produced within the Thai nation-state, and the role that Buddhism and Luang Phò Thuat have played in this process.

## Chapter Three

### Southern Thailand and the Metonymics of Place

The North of Thailand is by far more interesting than the South. The Islands are geared more for tourists so unlike North Thailand experiencing the real Thai culture is difficult.

— From an online discussion forum on travel in Thailand

Distrust of essentialism in social theory should not blur our awareness of its equally pervasive presence in social life.

— Michael Herzfeld (1997:26).

*Namō phōtisathō ākhantimāya itthiphakḥavā*

*Namō phōtisathō ākhantimāya itthiphakḥavā*

*Namō phōtisathō ākhantimāya itthiphakḥavā*

The words of the mantra (*khatha*) dedicated to Luang Phò Thuat float across the compound of Wat Chang Hai. Melodically chanted, unaccompanied by music, the words evoke the recitations of the Pali scriptures by Buddhist monks. However, it is not monks, but the southern Thai performer Rom Srithammarat, who is chanting this. The mantra forms the introduction to his song, *Luang Pu Thuat Yiap Jai* (Luang Pu Thuat Treads Upon Our Hearts), which is being broadcast over the monastery's PA system. Following the three repeated lines of the mantra, an orchestral flourish leads into a slow, folksy beat. Rom Srithammarat's voice modulates from his resonant devotional chanting to pop-style crooning as he sings *khon tai rak jing* – “the southern people love sincerely”. He is singing to a woman he is attempting to woo, professing his love and promising that he'll be true to her. He declares that he and all southern Thai have hearts as bright and pure as crystal because *Luang Phò Thuat yiap jai* – they have been touched by the purifying footstep of Luang Phò Thuat. The song ends with the assurance

that, should he break his promise and cheat with other women, “may Luang Pu Thuat of Wat Chang Hai immediately punish me” (*hai Luang Pu Thuat Wat Chang Hai long thot dai thanthi*). After a brief silence the mantra rings out again over the temple compound. The song is on a continuous loop, playing almost constantly, during the three days of the temple festival dedicated to paying respects to Luang Phò Thuat and his most famous disciple and former abbot of Wat Chang Hai, Ajan Thim.

As Rom Srithammarat’s song testifies, there is a special connection between the southern Thai and this ancestral saint. Southerners (*khon tai*) are presented as honest, devout, and *Buddhist*, with Luang Phò Thuat acting as the interventionist spirit who guarantees these qualities. With the strains of this pop-cum-devotional song ringing out over the compound of a Buddhist monastery in the Malay Muslim majority province of Pattani, I am compelled to consider the inherent tensions within the categories of ‘the South’ (*phak tai*) and ‘southerners’ (*khon tai*). Who are the real *khon tai*? And what is the South?

This chapter deals with the location of my research and the impact this location had on my study. I seek here to interrogate the inherent tensions in the category of ‘the South’ as a region. I take this approach both because of the close connections between Luang Phò Thuat and a certain version of southernness as evidenced by the song which opened this chapter, and also because of the generalised sentiment I encountered during my fieldwork that there was something odd about doing a study about Buddhism in the lower South. I ask what it means to do a study of Buddhism, the institutional and ideological structure so closely connected with the Thai state, in a region where non-Buddhists make up the majority of the population in certain areas. Unlike in other parts of the country, this has not merely been a matter

of imposing a dominant form of Buddhism over local traditions but literally constructing the region and its landscape *as* Buddhist.

Much of this discussion involves the manner in which the South is imagined relative to the dominant narratives of the Thai nation-state in both scholarly and everyday representations. Consider this excerpt from my fieldnotes about an interview with Rawit, a Buddhist man from Saba Yoi district of Songkhla province,<sup>84</sup> whom I was interviewing about stories of Luang Phò Thuat having passed through that region centuries before:

During our interview Rawit said something about southern Thailand that I found quite interesting. He differentiated the South from the Centre and the North, where the people trace their history back to southern China. In the South it's different, he said, everyone here is much more "mixed" (*phasom kan*) – Chinese, Thai, "Brahmin" (*phram*). He didn't mention Muslims. He gave me a sense that southern Thailand has no real pure lineage – a syncretic, hybrid space without claim to a true heritage. This makes me think about *history* – the story of the people or a nation, unified in their movement through time by means of a singular narrative. What happens if people don't think of themselves as taking part in a unified historical movement but who consider *themselves* to be "mixed", lacking a unitary connection with the past, at a certain remove even from the grand story of the nation to which they belong. Perhaps the reason for this is that the national story – the migration from the North through successive kingdoms – doesn't include them, the people of the South.

This chapter began its life with these musings on the relationship between geography and history, nation and region. It has emerged out of the problematics of studying one of the fundamental institutions of the Thai nation-state – Buddhism – in a region that, as I will show, is routinely distanced from the national norm in a variety of ways. The question of location has therefore directly impacted upon this study, and this chapter is not only a description of a fieldsite, but an analysis of the manner in which

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<sup>84</sup> This is a Muslim-dominated part of the province, not far from Wat Chang Hai in the neighbouring province of Pattani.

this location has intersected with the project I have undertaken. In this task I am responding in part to George Marcus' admonition to ask "why am I studying this locale and not another?" (Marcus 1986:172). Moreover, it is a response to Gupta and Ferguson's critique of the myth that fieldsites are chosen for disinterested scholarly reasons (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:18) and the recognition that fieldsites are always shaped by contemporary geopolitical realities (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:10).

An important factor influencing this discussion is the relationship between 'the South' and Buddhism as I encountered them during my fieldwork. As stated in the previous chapter, one of the reasons I had chosen to study Buddhism in Southern Thailand was due to my desire to do research in a part of Thailand which had been 'under-researched' compared to other parts of Thailand. Studies that did focus on religion in the South almost invariably dealt with position of the ethnic Malay Muslim majority in the far southern provinces, particularly their resistance to the project of national integration, or the relations between southern Thai Muslims and Buddhists, or their relationship to the Buddhist State.<sup>85</sup> I had found very little indeed had been written specifically about Buddhism in the South.

Corresponding to this was a generalised sentiment I encountered when I tried to explain my work to people. It amounted to the sense that the South is not the place to go to encounter truly *representative* Buddhism. Although not often expressed explicitly, the sentiment was clear. Why was I bothering to do my study *there* and not in some other part of Thailand in which a 'purer', more representative form of religious practice could be found? Some people hinted that the monks in the South did not adhere to the *vinaya*, the monastic disciplinary code, as scrupulously as in other regions. The laity

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<sup>85</sup> Some examples include (Albritton 1998, Burr 1972, 1984, Che Man 1995, Cornish 1997, Hofstede 1994, Knodel et al. 1999, Nishii 1999, 2002b, Prapartchob 1993, Snitwongse 1985, Surin 1985).

there, it was suggested, were more casual, less devout, in their dealings with monks. In short, if I wanted to study Thai Buddhism I should go to the North or Northeast. The expression of such views, both among the Bangkokians and the southern Thai with whom I interacted over the course of my fieldwork, was pervasive. This was the reason, I believe, that my middle-class friends from Hat Yai were so concerned that I be exposed to the elite Thammayut forest monks whose tradition derives from the Northeast of the country.<sup>86</sup>

Such attitudes are reminiscent of what Gupta and Ferguson have referred to as the “hierarchy of purity of fieldsites” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:13). Although Gupta and Ferguson are referring to the valuation of different fieldsites within the discipline of anthropology itself, this hierarchisation of sites is something that I constantly encountered in Thai citizens who had a sense of proprietary about the sorts of research that should or should not be conducted in their country. This hierarchy of purity as it relates to Buddhism in Thailand places rural above urban, and North above South. Furthermore, I would also argue that this everyday sentiment has impacted upon the scholarly “hierarchy of purity” and influenced the sorts of studies conducted in the South.

My encounters with this sentiment alerted me to the fact that national space is not homogeneous, as is so often assumed, but characterised by a particular kind of “spatialisation of difference” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:32). There exist internal distinctions according to which some *regions*, rather than others, are considered to be more or less proximate to the core of dominant constructions of national identity. Equally, such a spatialised

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<sup>86</sup> It is worth mentioning that this point of view was *not* shared by the Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese whom I met during my fieldwork, and who came to southern Thailand specifically in search of sacred objects, sites and ‘powerful’ monks. As I argue in this thesis, it is the identification of the monks with the national category of ‘Thai’ which has much to do with their attractiveness to foreign devotees. Thus for these foreigners, the South *can* stand for the whole in a way that it usually does not within the national imaginary.

production of difference and the creation of regional identities should not necessarily be seen as standing against or opposing homogeneous national identity. Instead, the nation-state can be understood as being constructed on the basis of nominal homogeneity *and* internal spatial differentiation.

### *The Metonymics of Place*

In order to address this complex and contradictory relationship between part and whole, I discuss the metonymic relationships between specific places and the whole of which they are a part. Certain toponyms can stand in a relationship to the whole (nation) to be regarded – or equally *fail* to be regarded – as representative of that whole. I use this concept to approach the connotations of the South in two senses. Firstly, it helps me to identify the manner in which the South stands in relationship to the nation-state as a whole, and importantly how it often fails to be regarded as typically Thai. Secondly, it can help to understand how certain elements, such as ‘Muslim violence’, themselves come to be seen as representative of the southern *region* as a whole.

This notion of metonymics leads me to ask, for example, how is it that a region such as Northern Thailand so often stands for the whole in representations of the national culture, while a region such as the South generally does not? What is the logic that dictates that the South does *not* as a rule come to stand for the essence of Thai culture? And what is it, precisely, that comes to stand in metonymically for the whole of the South? What is considered to be, or *not* considered to be, typical of the South itself? Thinking in these terms helps me to consider the complexity of inclusion in a national whole where a region such as southern Thailand is simultaneously constructed as an integral part of the Thai nation-state and yet very rarely features as culturally typical of Thailand in general. The notion of



metonymics acknowledges that a particular entity, such as a nation-state or region, may 'contain' a wealth of diverse content, but a limited amount of content will come to stand for it in the collective imagination. Precisely which content achieves this feat is political, and reflects relationships of power.

This conception of a metonymic relationship between particular people, places or cultural elements and wider totalities to which they belong is similar to the points made by Slavoj Žižek regarding the reliance of any ideology on particular concrete forms that stand for the whole as 'typical' instances. He states that "each universal ideological notion is always hegemonised by some particular content which colours its very universality and accounts for its efficiency" (Žižek 1997:28). It is "[t]his specific twist, a particular content which is promulgated as 'typical' of the universal notion, [which] is the element of fantasy, of the phantasmagoric background/support of the universal ideological notion" (Žižek 1997:29). In this case, different elements might come to stand for the whole as typical while other elements, though not excluded, are seen to be less typical and therefore do not take on a hegemonic character.

Several authors have noted tendency in some anthropological writing to create "metonymic prisons", to use "places as metonyms in which one locale stands, inappropriately, for a whole area" (Rodman 1992:640-1). Arjun Appadurai, for instance, has drawn attention to the metonymic relationship between place and idea within anthropological discourses in which certain concepts become associated with particular locations – hierarchy with India, exchange with Melanesia, and so on (Appadurai 1988). In this mode of conceptualising space "geographical regions are not so much physically distinct entities as discursively constructed settings that signal particular social modalities" (Feld and Basso 1996:5). While these writers are specifically referring to the construction of location in *ethnographic* writing in

order to argue that the assumption of a metonymy between place and culture obscures as much as it reveals, Rodman makes the elementary observation that place is not only constructed in ethnographies. Similar habits of thought, which associate certain locations with particular qualities, also colour everyday conceptions of place (Rodman 1992:644). This chapter is therefore about these pervasive associations or stereotypes, 'common sense' notions and the manner in which these habits of thought reflect hegemonic structuring principles. This focus on stereotypes is not trivial. As Herzfeld argues, the use of stereotypes (and their subversion) is one of the most common forms of what he calls "social poetics", whereby narrative strategies give being to linguistic distinctions and "entify" social life (Herzfeld 1997). Stereotypes, whether concepts or overdetermined modes of behaviour, are structures of thought and action; they imply an underlying regularity or structure to social life because of their predictability.<sup>87</sup>

### *The Production of the South*

Administratively, southern Thailand is a unified location. Referred to as the 'Southern Region' (*phak tai*), it is one of the four geographical designations which makes up the Thai nation, along with the Central, the North, and Northeast (Isan) regions. The contemporary South is made up of fourteen provinces, from the northernmost province of Chumpon down to the provinces which border Malaysia – Satun, Songkhla, Yala and Narathiwat (Figure 3).

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<sup>87</sup> Herzfeld also emphasises the ability of certain skilled actors to deform or warp the everyday production of stereotypes to produce novel realities. He sees this as central to the process of producing social poetics. In other words, we should not assume that the use of stereotypes represents a stable underlying structure of thought but rather a framework which may be manipulated in everyday acts of various kinds. Here, however, I am primarily concerned with the structuring functions of stereotypes and do not deal with more subversive performances.



Figure 3. The fourteen provinces of Southern Thailand, showing provincial boundaries and capitals.

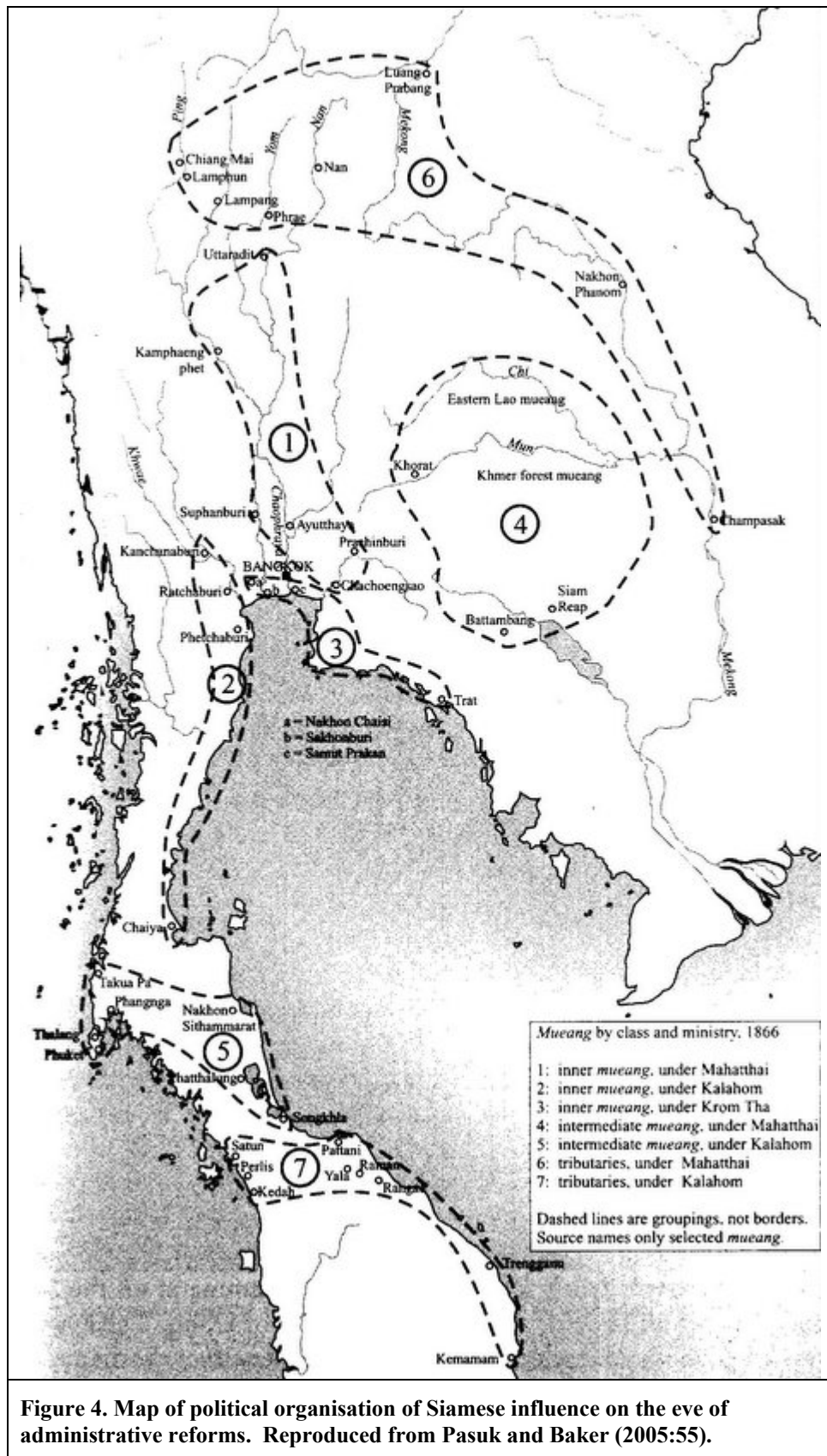
While the South is an administratively designated region, it does not necessarily follow that there exists a longstanding southern *identity* or cultural history to which it corresponds. In fact, it would appear that from a political point of view, the notion of the South as a single entity is a relatively recent phenomenon. Donner considers this to be largely a result of the South's geographical distinctiveness:

The geographical shape of the South, its north-south mountainous barriers, its impenetrable tropical forest, the lack of navigable streams, etc. resulted in the development of physically separated political units, run by *rajās*, until the end of the nineteenth century and prevented the region from becoming an economical and political unit (Donner 1978: 404).

Prior to the late nineteenth century, 'southern Thailand' did not exist as an entity. In premodern Siam there was a notion of 'South' which was quite different to the modern sense of the term. The premodern polity was built along a North-South axis, reflected in the division of the Sangha and also in the division of government departments between 'North' and 'South' – Kalahom and Mahathai – which were also functionally differentiated (see Figure 4). During the Ayutthaya period, the division between South/right and North/left implied the superiority of Kalahom (see Taylor 1993b). This construction of 'the South', however, does not correspond to the modern South (see Vickery 1970). To assume so would be to project the categories of the nation-state into the premodern past.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Something that has arguably been done by some writing on the South (e.g. McCargo 2004).



The emergence of the modern South can be traced back to the *thesaphiban* administrative reforms instituted during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. Occurring as the result of pressure to formalise territorial boundaries by colonial powers in the region, the spread of the Siamese state at that time involved the formalisation of its sphere of influence over subsidiary polities into a spatially-bounded entity administered by a single functionally-differentiated bureaucracy. Local rulers were replaced by governors appointed by the central government in Bangkok. Former administrative designations that acknowledged the ethnic composition of different areas of the kingdom, as 'Khmer' or 'Lao' for example, were replaced by the 'objective' geographical designations of 'East', 'North' and so on (see also Grabowsky 1995:56). These structural changes increasingly reinforced the notion that Thailand was made up of four relatively culturally homogenous regions. Cultural difference within the nation, to the extent it was acknowledged at all, was done so in regional terms, thus obscuring the ethnic character of the different parts of the Kingdom (Jory 1999a:338). To simplify this process, Yuan areas became 'North', Lao and Khmer regions became 'Northeast' and 'East', and Malay and southern Siamese zones became 'South'.

More than just administrative conveniences, regional entities in contemporary Thailand are supposed to provoke sentiment and identification. State authorities actively attempted to supplant former senses of belonging with new attachments to a region. The need for love and commitment to region is one of the ideological messages promoted through state education, and schoolchildren are indoctrinated into the belief that "administrative boundaries define communities" (Mulder 1997:82). Arguably this state-driven project of creating regional identities has been largely successful with these regional designations achieving a central place in everyday consciousness. Jory notes that "the people of these regions are

likely to refer to themselves as ‘southerners’ (*khon tai*), ‘northeasterners’ (*khon isan*), ‘northerners’ (*khon phak nüa*), or by some other geographical category, rather than by an ethnic category” (Jory 1999a:339). This was also my experience while conducting fieldwork, where many conversations turned to questions of regional difference and belonging. As will be shown below, the discussion of regional stereotypes is a natural frame for everyday discussions.

One example illustrates the explicit connection of southern Thai identity with administrative boundaries and Luang Phò Thuat. During my fieldwork I interviewed a tattooist of sacred designs in Hat Yai on several occasions.<sup>89</sup> A devotee of both Wat Chang Hai and Luang Phò Thuat, he and I spoke often of his faith (*khwam satha*) in the ancestral monk. One point that he frequently reiterated to me was the strong connection between Luang Phò Thuat and the South, as this excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates:

He has lived for a time in other parts of Thailand: seven years in Isan and six years in Chiang Mai, he said. He talked about monks that are important for those regions Ajan Man, Ajan Fan, Ajan Khao, Ajan Waen etc. However, in the south “there is only Luang Phò Thuat” (*mi Luang Phò Thuat yang diao*). At another point in the conversation he said that “in the fourteen provinces of the South” (*nai sipi jangwat phak tai*) Luang Phò Thuat is far and away the “top ranking” monk (*andap raek*).

His formulations not only refer to the South as an entity but connect the popularity of monks with the administrative designations of the nation-state. This connection is made most explicitly through his evocation of “the fourteen provinces of the South”.

Such an example illustrates how Thongchai Winichakul’s (1994) thesis on the power of cartography to create Siam/Thailand as a distinct geographical entity and basis for a geographically-based national identity

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<sup>89</sup> This tattooist will be discussed in more detail in chapters six and seven.

can also be productively applied to the regions within Thailand's geo-body. It also illustrates a taken-for-granted connection of this space with Buddhism via Luang Phò Thuat, something that I will deal with in more detail, especially in Part Two of this thesis.

Both Thai and international scholarly productions have also validated the existence of a distinct 'southern Thai culture'. Since the 1980s the Institute of Southern Thai Studies in Songkhla province has researched, collected and catalogued 'the culture' of the region. The Institute oversees an impressive museum within which is gathered a comprehensive collection of material cultural artefacts, folklore, historical texts and so on. It has also produced the comprehensive *Encyclopaedia of Thai Culture, Southern Region [Saranukrom Watthanatham Thai, Phak Tai]*.<sup>90</sup> These are valuable resources, but their rubrics are determined by the administrative boundaries created by the Thai state. The title of the *Encyclopaedia* also firmly locates southern Thailand and its culture as encompassed by the Thai state, and all cultural forms from the fourteen southern provinces come to be regarded as making up the range of 'southern Thai culture'.

Some studies have gone as far as arguing that regions in Thailand form effective cultural units. One such study has shown that the category of 'region', independently of religious adherence or ethnic identification, can have substantial influence on "political knowledge", "attitudes" and "behaviour" (Albritton and Sidthinat 1997). Southern Thais, regardless of religious adherence, were found to have higher levels of "political efficacy" but also a higher acceptance of traditionalism (elite-dominated politics) than the inhabitants of northern Thailand (Albritton and Sidthinat 1997:76-81). This suggests that there exists something of a southern-Thai political 'culture' that is not radically cross-cut by religious differences. However, I would

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<sup>90</sup> Published with support from the Thai Commercial Bank.



caution that this approach may run the risk of naturalising the category of 'the South' and 'southernness', and de-emphasising the underlying diversities that also characterise the region.

### *The Complexity of the South*

The construction of a singular South or southern Thai culture is problematised by the great diversity contained within its boundaries. The south is home to small populations of Moken, or 'Sea Gypsies', locally known as Chao Nam ('water folk'), who inhabit areas along the Andaman coast, and also of tribal hunter-gatherers, known as Sakai or Ngo Pa, who live in heavily forested areas – for example, Betong district in Yala province, and areas of Phatthalung province (see Hamilton 2001, 2002). However, the three ethnic groups that dominate the South are the Thai, the Malays, and the Chinese.

Again, each of these groups is internally differentiated: 'The Chinese', who dominate business in urban centres or are clustered in areas previously given to tin-mining and rubber-tree plantations, are descendents of a number of dialect groups. In many cases these 'Chinese' are so thoroughly intermixed with 'the Thai' that it becomes problematic talking about them as a distinct group.

The category 'Malay' is no less problematic. It is generally accepted that ethnic Malays were long-standing inhabitants of the upper part of the Malay Peninsula and that many of the elements that make up 'southern Thai culture', such as *manora* and *nangtalung*, as well as local mythical narratives, have much in common with Malay cultural forms.<sup>91</sup> However, in contemporary Thailand, ethnic Malays are primarily considered to be those

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<sup>91</sup> For a recent discussion of the changing nature of *manora* in recent years, see Guelden (2002, M. P. Guelden 2005).

who speak a Malay dialect, as distinguished from other Muslims in the south who speak Thai and are therefore considered to be ethnic Thai. Ethnic Malays are generally associated with the provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala, as well as Satun and some areas of Songkhla province. This area, with the exception of Satun, largely coincides with the historical Muslim kingdom of Patani. A view which distinguishes between religious and ethnic identification of southern Muslims is put forward by Schliesinger as follows:

The Southern Thai can be divided into two major religious categories: Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim. These labels have become principally a social categorization, not an ethnic classification. Due to their different religious mainstreams, both groups have developed markedly diverse traditions and customs. The Southern Thai Muslim *are not confused with* the Pattani Malay, also Muslim but ethnic Malay people, who live in large numbers (1,500,000 in 1995) in the four southernmost provinces of Thailand – Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun (Schliesinger 2001:104, emphasis added).

These distinctions are not without their merits, and it is certainly of benefit to illustrate the fact that southern Thai Muslims do not constitute a singular population. However, including the inhabitants in the category of ‘Pattani Malay’ creates another highly problematic unity. Historically, Satun was not a part of Patani, and today the majority of Muslims there speak Thai.<sup>92</sup>

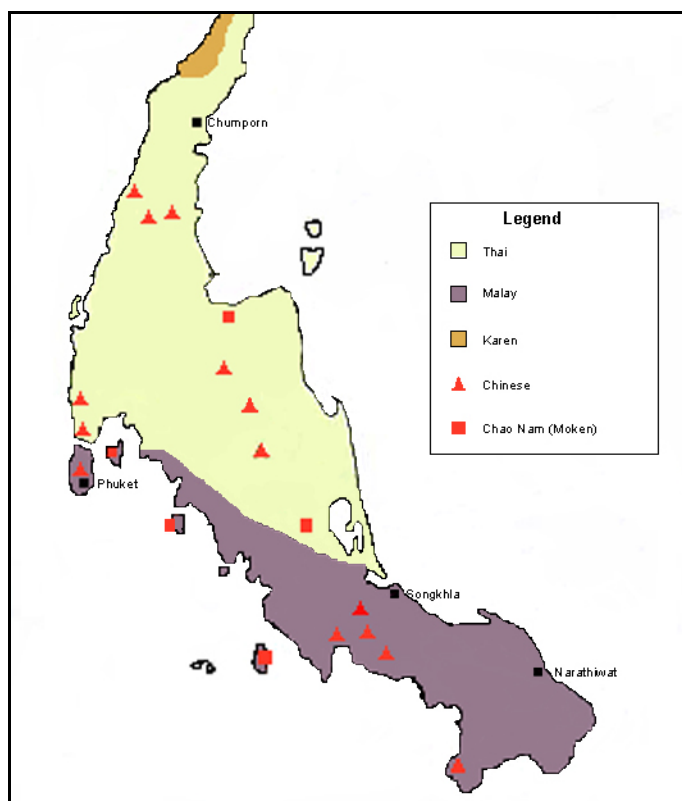
Schliesinger’s statement that the different populations of Muslims are not confused with each other is also a curious one. One may ask, “Confused by whom?” Is the distinction clear to everybody? It has been my experience

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<sup>92</sup> This distinction can also be translated into effective political terms. The separatist violence that has plagued the provinces that correspond to the kingdom of Patani since 2004 is almost totally absent in Satun.

that these different groups of Muslims in southern Thailand *are* confused with each other quite often. As Marcinkowski argues, the Malayness of Muslims in the far South is erroneously regarded as “a distinctive characteristic of Thailand’s Muslim community in general” (2002:3).

Consider this representation of the ethnic make-up of the South from the 1970s, produced by the CIA (Figure 5).<sup>93</sup> According to this map, the Malay world dominates well beyond the abovementioned provinces and includes all of Songkhla, parts of Phatthalung, Trang, Krabi, and all of Phuket. A representation of this kind presents a very different model of the southern Thai Malay population, which in national understandings is considered to be primarily confined to the four southernmost provinces. This representation suggests that the Malay influence is in fact much more widespread than is usually admitted in Thai nationalist imaginings.



**Figure 5. Representation of southern Thailand’s ethnic makeup. Source: Adapted from a map produced by the CIA in 1974. Accessed at: [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle\\_east\\_and\\_asia/thailand\\_1974\\_ethnic\\_groups.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/thailand_1974_ethnic_groups.jpg)**

<sup>93</sup> During its involvement in the Vietnam war, the US sought to demarcate the religious and political peoples of Southeast Asia for strategic purposes.

I do not include this map because it accurately represents the ethnic diversity of the South. Its principal defect is the image of a 'border' existing between 'Thai' and 'Malay' zones. This representation does not do justice to the geographical and cultural interpenetrations that exist. What this map provides, though crudely, is a sense of southern Thailand as the meeting place of different cultural traditions, with its alignment along a north-south axis and the influence of the Malay world increasing as one moves south along the Peninsula.

The identity of this region is also contested, and since 2004 this contestation has become explicit as separatist movements in the lower South have re-embarked upon guerrilla campaigns, ostensibly to re-establish an independent state.<sup>94</sup> A final map of interest portrays a radically different version of the region. Posted by the Patani United Liberation Organisation, this map does not portray 'southern Thailand' at all but the independent state of Patani.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> This purported goal is far from clear, however. One of the distinctive characteristics of the current conflict in southern Thailand is the lack of any clear political agenda. Many commentators assume that the insurgents are 'separatists', a notion that the PULO map (Figure 5) would support. However, there is evidence to suggest that this is not the case. Furthermore, the motivations of Thai state authorities in the region are themselves not clear and tend to contribute to the overall uncertainty surrounding the conflict (see Askew 2007).

<sup>95</sup> The issue of spelling here is important. The word 'Pattani' refers to the Thai province and its capital. 'Patani', by contrast, refers to the Malay kingdom annexed by Siam early in the twentieth century. This will be discussed further, especially in chapter five.



**Figure 6.** Map of the lower South and northern Malaysia indicating the territory claimed by the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), one of the main separatist groups that has historically fought for an independent Patani. Also of interest is the correspondence between the ‘border’ of Patani and the historical zones of influence portrayed in Figure 4.

The territory claimed in this map, while respecting current national boundaries, incorporates all of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun provinces, and most of Songkhla. In this alternative representation there is no ‘lower South’ of Thailand, only Patani. I do not include this map to suggest that this representation is more real than that of the Thai state but to illustrate that the area in which the fieldwork took place is a contested terrain. This contestation is directly relevant to understanding the role of Luang Phò Thuat in the region.

#### *A Region Apart*

A striking feature of both scholarly and everyday statements about southern Thailand is a tendency to emphasise its distance, and difference, from the national norm. For example, in his social geography of Thailand Wolf Donner states that:

Geographically, economically, ethnically and politically, the South of Thailand is rather different from the core of the kingdom. The long

distances from the capital, the lack of land transportation during a long period of history, the economically different structure compared with the central parts, the fairly large share of non-Thai population – these and other factors have set the South apart from the rest of Thailand (Donner 1978:403).

Furthermore, southerners are often presented as being somewhat mysterious to Thais from other parts of the country, as is suggested in this quote from

*The Nation*:

The violence that flares up frequently in the South of Thailand makes some people believe that Southerners are aggressive by nature. This is not true. Nearly all the people of the South – *including the Muslim majority in Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Satun* – love their homeland and believe in peace.

Nonetheless, in sociological terms, Southerners have distinctive characteristics that are sometimes difficult for outsiders to understand (*The Nation*, 8 February 2004, emphasis added).

This setting apart of the South can be encountered in everyday conversations, where regional identities are associated with rather standardised and well-worn tropes and stereotypes that spring readily to the lips of individuals. A typical example was a casual discussion I had in 1999 with a married couple from Trang.<sup>96</sup> The husband was a Sino-Thai Trang local, the wife a northerner. Our conversation quickly turned to the qualities which are thought to distinguish the northerners from the southerners in terms of their behaviour and physical features. The couple made some comments about the differences between people in the north and the south: the northerners are more polite and smile more, while the southerners are rougher and more abrupt. Southerners have rather darker skin while

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<sup>96</sup> One of the West coast provinces of the South, see Figure 3.

northerners are known for their comparatively light skin. Furthermore, northern women are more feminine in their manners and speech. Northerners talk slowly and southerners fast. The couple referred to a well-known joke: two trains pass each other at high speed but two southerners travelling in opposite directions manage to have a conversation with each other.<sup>97</sup>

Although these stereotypical differences were enumerated playfully, suggesting an underlying solidarity and camaraderie manifest through the good-natured joking, it is significant that the qualities ascribed to the southerners are almost without exception those that are more distanced from dominant understandings of 'Thainess'. Thai people are generally represented as being relaxed, unhurried, cheerful, smiling.<sup>98</sup> Southerners on the other hand, are stereotypically thought to be fast-talking, opinionated and 'fierce' (*du*). Politeness and femininity (and sexual submissiveness) in women are presented as a distinctively Thai quality in dominant constructions of gender and beauty, including those produced for tourist consumption (E. Cohen 2001b, Hamilton 1997). These qualities are more associated with the women of the North of Thailand, rather than those of the South.<sup>99</sup> For example, pale skin, a typically northern trait, is considered more desirable than dark (as is indicated by the wide range of skin lightening

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<sup>97</sup> Note that these stereotypes refer to 'southern Thai' (Buddhists), and not to Malay Muslims of the South. This is one example where Muslims are excluded from being typical 'southerners'.

<sup>98</sup> As is evidenced in the nationally promulgated notion of Thailand as the 'land of smiles', particularly in terms of the nation's self-conscious self-construction as a tourist destination.

<sup>99</sup> Anecdotal evidence from some Songkhla and Hat Yai locals suggests that a large number of the sex-workers based in Hat Yai are also northerners. One professional translator from Songkhla who did a lot of business translating documents needed for marriage said that it is very common for ethnic Chinese Malaysian and Singaporean sex tourists to marry northern Thai women. Although there are many reasons for this apparent prevalence of northern Thai women in the Hat Yai sex industry, it might suggest that the northern Thai women are considered to more closely fit Chinese (and Thai) beauty ideals than women from other regions.

cosmetic products available in Thailand). Again, the stereotypically dark-skinned southerners are constructed as distant from Thai beauty ideals. As already mentioned, similar statements are made in relationship to Buddhism. Northerners and northeasterners are stereotypically more devout and show a higher level of deference towards monks, while southerners are often characterised as more casual in their interactions with monks. Yet again, in the field of religion, southerners are considered to be more distant from national ideals.

The statements and stereotypes listed above confirm the existence of the 'South' and a distinctive southern identity, and therefore imply the encompassment of the Thai nation-state. They also simultaneously create a distance between the stereotypes of 'southernness' and 'Thainess'. The cumulative effect is that the South is included in the national whole but rarely regarded as typical. The reason for this has to do with the peculiar spatio-temporal logic according to which the Thai nation-state has been constructed.

#### *The Geographic Logic of Thai National Historiography*

According to the dominant historical imagination in Thailand, the core of the nation-state is a unified entity in motion, not only through time, but also in space. Thongchai Winichakul, a prominent theorist of the spatial qualities of Thai history, calls this "the geographic logic of Thai national history" (2004:9-15). One of the characteristics of this logic, which essentially projects the boundaries, dimensions and characteristics of the modern nation-state into the past, is the notion of an orderly succession of 'national capitals'. According to this historico-geographical logic there is a movement of the Thai nation in a linear, teleological, manner from the 'original'



kingdom of Sukhothai, to Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Bangkok (Thongchai 1994:155).

Nationalist historiographers, most prominently Luang Wichit Wathakan, producing a national story for the first time, created a myth of a succession of Buddhist kingdoms originating at a point of purity in the kingdom of Sukhothai. As Reynolds argues, Sukhothai was made the earliest location of a culturally, religiously and ethnically pure Thai-Buddhist society, characterised as benign and patriarchal, and succeeded by a more militaristic and muscular Ayutthaya (C. J. Reynolds 1992:321-5). He states that “Luang Wichit helped to construct the pure Thai-Buddhist paradigm of the dominant ethnic group. He made Sukhothai the earliest site of this pure Thai-Buddhist society, ‘pure’ both in terms of ethnic dominance and in terms of social structure “(C. J. Reynolds 1992:324).

This history is therefore the history of kingdoms which are themselves metonyms for contemporary Thailand. Mulder expresses this succinctly in his discussion of the way history is constructed in the Thai school system when he observes that in this historical consciousness “Sukhothai is Thailand, and so is Ayutthaya” (Mulder 1997:134). However, in reality, argues Thongchai, rather than being manifestations of the same transhistorical essence, these ‘capitals’ were in fact relatively autonomous states, which were at times in direct and open conflict with each other (Thongchai 2004:11).

As a result of the dominant temporal-spatial logic of national imagining, Thai attempts to locate their origins tend to retrace this linear movement and look to the North. As Yoneo Ishii states, “[i]n this perspective, the nuclei of political power are seen as having moved from the inland north to the deltaic south, the further north, the more ancient and the further south, the more recent” (Ishii 2002: 1). This north-south dynamic in the dominant national imaginary concerns not only the movement of capitals

but also the movement of the ethnic group(s), Tai speakers, from the region of 'origin' in what is now southern China into the area which became Siam, and later, Thailand. Nationalist discourses which have promoted the notion that Thailand is ethnically homogeneous reinforce the view that the movement from north to south of the ethnic Tai forms the central narrative of the Thai nation (Mulder 1997:44). Such an imaginary has allowed a northern city such as Chiang Mai to be characterised as an imputed "place of origins" (R. C. Morris 2000a).

The logic of the narrative moves the core of the nation from a point of apparent ethnic, cultural and religious purity to increasing mixing and 'pollution'. Such assumptions inform characterisations of the South and southern Thai people made by some Western scholars. Consider, for example, this description of the 'origins' of the southern Thai:

The ancestors of the Southern Thai migrated southward from China at the end of the first millennium AD. The exact date when the first Tai reached southern Thailand is still debated, but some scholars believe they arrived as early as the tenth century AD. There, they intermixed with Mon-Khmer-speaking peoples – especially the Mon and Khmer groups – and with the Malay and Negritoes who also inhabited the area. *Because of their mixed origin*, many Southern Thai still differ somewhat in appearance from their central Thai neighbors to the north, being of a darker hue (Schliesinger 2001:103, emphasis added).

This account is thus the story of two origins, one which deals with a core of 'pure' ancestors, the Tai, while the other is of the southern Thai as essentially mixed.<sup>100</sup> The apparently homogeneous Tai people move from China to the South and it is only when they reach the south that they mix with other

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<sup>100</sup> "Tai" refers to speakers from within the Tai language group, while "Thai" refers to citizens of Thailand. As I am arguing that southern Thailand is essentially a construction of the Thai nation-state, "southern Thai" is certainly more appropriate than, say, "southern Tai".

ethnic groups. The Mon, Khmer, Malay and 'Negritos' are excluded from true ancestor status and are instead relegated to a subordinate position, functioning as a 'stain'. Their role in this narrative is to explain why the southern Thai are somewhat different from the norm. This is reminiscent of Herzfeld's point that minorities are conceived of as "symbolic pollutants" of the supposedly uniform national whole (Herzfeld 1997:68). The hegemonic assumptions of this account can easily be evoked by an ironic reversal which is equally valid but which most Thai would find absurd: that due to the predominance of Chinese migration to Bangkok and other parts of central Thailand, the "mixed nature" of the central Thai has meant that they are "of a lighter hue" than their Thai neighbours to the south.

I now turn to the issue of Buddhism in the South to suggest that similar dynamics are at work. As a part of the Thai nation-state, there has been an impetus to produce the region as a Buddhist space. At the same time, however, the region is not seen to be representative of Buddhism in its pure form.

#### *The South as a Buddhist Space*

Buddhism is by no means a recent arrival on the Malay Peninsula. From the ancient Mahayana Buddhist kingdom of Srivijaya, which counted much of modern day southern Thailand within its sphere of influence, to Nakhon Sri Thammarat, which acted as a centre of dissemination of the Theravada school from the 12th century CE, the landscape of the South is littered with evidence of the long-standing presence of various forms of Buddhism. Nakhon Sri Thammarat, as a centre of diffusion of Singhalese Theravada Buddhism to kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia (Schliesinger 2001:52, Wyatt 1975:2) during the twelfth and thirteenth Centuries (C.E.), was very significant for the establishment of Sukhothai as a Theravada Buddhist

kingdom. Nakhon's Phra Mahathat stupa has long been regarded as one of the most significant sacred sites in the country. But in spite of this long historical record of a significant Buddhist presence in the upper South, events of the more recent past have overshadowed its identification and symbolic signification.

Unlike other parts of the country, in the South the main problem was not only the assimilation and domestication of local Buddhist traditions but also the incorporation of a religiously unassimilable Muslim population. This was made even more problematic by the close relationship between Buddhist and national rituals. Many of the early complaints by Malay Muslims in the former kingdom of Patani were a response to what they saw as the imposition of Buddhist rituals upon them. They objected particularly to the requirement that they pay respects to Buddhist images or to images of the Siamese king, which was seen as tantamount to idolatry (Marks 1997:17).

One result of this has been the almost exclusive focus on the Muslim regions in discussions of the national integration of the South. For example, Girling only deals with the "largely autonomous Malay-Muslim states of the South" in his discussion of the national integration of the region (Girling 1981:53). It would appear from this description that the 'upper South' should be considered an unproblematically integrated part of the central region.

However, it should also be noted that the assumption of an unproblematic integration of the predominantly Buddhist upper South also conceals tensions inherent in the nationalising process. There is evidence to suggest that Muslims were not the only ones who resented the impositions of the centralising Siamese state. For example, the expansion of a national Buddhism relied on the *avant garde* of forest monks of the royalist Thammayut order, most of whom originated in the Northeast. In a sense, the locus of orthodox (national) Buddhism moved to the Northeast and it was this region that became the powerhouse for the production of normative,

officially recognised, charisma. In the South as in other parts of Siam, these monks were often received with suspicion and even violence by local (non Thammayut) monks (Taylor 1993b:112).

Taylor concludes that local leaders must have resented the intrusion of northeastern monks “largely because of associations with hegemonic interests of the Siamese state and its elites”.<sup>101</sup> This conclusion is somewhat speculative as it is not possible to know the true reason for local resentment towards these Thammayut monks. At that time southern Buddhist monks probably had no concept of the “Siamese state” and its interests, and it may have simply been the unwanted intrusion of monks from an alien tradition that generated such resentment and resistance. Regardless of the precise motives at work, however, this example illustrates that local traditions were not organised within a coherent national structure.

Regional Buddhist traditions in the South, I would argue, are more thoroughly aligned with the project of state building than in other regions. The production of regional heroes was itself aligned with this project rather than being the result of local resistance to incorporation. This provides a potential contrast with heroes from other regions, such as Khruba Siwichai in the North, who have been the focus of oppositional sentiment (Turton 1984:49). It is striking in the South that evocations of Luang Phò Thuat tend to evoke a regionalism that implies the hegemony of the national whole.

In the lower South there are numerous examples of attempts to construct the region and its landscape in Buddhist terms, despite the historical and demographic preponderance of Muslims in this area. This theme will be elaborated in more detail throughout, so I will present one example here. One of the first things that travellers arriving at Hat Yai

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<sup>101</sup> Although in many other instances, also in the Northeast, much of the resentment towards the forest monks came from villagers due to the monks’ often forceful disdain for animistic practices and belief in spirits (Taylor 1993b:112-23).

Airport see when they exit the terminal is a large mural bearing the words “Welcome to Southern Thailand” (Figure 7).<sup>102</sup>

Of the twelve images portrayed, nine are Buddhist. The central image is that of the statue of Luang Phò Thuat from Wat Chang Hai in Pattani, while a second image connected with Luang Phò Thuat, the stupa at Wat Pha Kho in Satingphra (number 4), also figures prominently.<sup>103</sup> Chinese ritual practices and religious figures are represented to a lesser extent,<sup>104</sup> while there is only a single rather anonymous and difficult to discern image testifying to a Muslim presence in the South, an interior of the Kru Ze mosque in Pattani (number 10). In short, this montage gives the overwhelming impression that Theravada Buddhism dominates southern Thailand.

It is also significant that this mural depicts religious figures, sites and rituals. In other parts of the South where Western tourism dominates, southern Thailand is more commonly represented with images of pristine nature, white beaches and alluring women. The choice of images here is perhaps due to the fact that the majority of people who use this airport are either domestic visitors or tourists from Malaysia and Singapore, and reflects the quite different character of tourism in the lower South compared to the beaches and wilderness tourism of the upper South.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> The “Amazing Thailand 1998-9” logo shows that this mural is connected with the Tourism Authority of Thailand’s efforts to promote Thailand as a tourist destination.

<sup>103</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly given the location of the mural, the images are predominantly from the lower South, with only the images of the Nakhon and Chaiya stupas and images of Phò Than Khlai and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu coming from outside this area. It is also worth noting that these two stupas and monks have also been paired with each other. Phò Than Khlai is associated with Nakhon, while Buddhadasa Bhikkhu was based at Suan Mokkh, Chaiya district, Surat Thani province, during his lifetime.

<sup>104</sup> The small image of Jao Mae Kuan Im (11), as well as image (12), which I have been unable to identify, appear to have been rather clumsily added after the initial painting of the mural. In the case of Kuan Im, this is probably because the statue, located at the Municipal Park in Hat Yai, was itself completed after this mural was painted.

<sup>105</sup> Tourism, and its connections with religion in the lower South, will be returned to in chapters seven to nine.



Figure 7. Mural at Hat Yai Airport welcoming visitors to southern Thailand.



**Key**

1. Statue of Luang Phò Thuat in his stupa at Wat Chang Hai, Pattani province.
2. a. and b. festival of Chinese deity from Pattani, Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao. Carrying images across water and fire respectively.
3. Reclining Buddha image in the cave shrine at Wat Khuha Phimuk, Yala province.
4. Stupa at Wat Pha Kho, Satingphra, Songkhla province. Temple at which Luang Phò Thuat was abbot.
5. Phò Than Khlai, revered monk from Nakhon Sri Thammarat.
6. Stupa of the great relic, Wat Phra Mahathat, Nakhon Sri Thammarat.
7. Phra Phuttha Taksin Mingmonkhol Buddha image at Wat Khao Kong, Narathiwat province.
8. Phra Boromathat stupa at Chaiya, Surat Thani province.
9. Than Ajan Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.
10. Kru Ze mosque, Pattani province.
11. Statue of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist bodhisattva, Jao Mae Kuan Im, Hat Yai, Songkhla province.
12. Unknown.

Despite such attempts to construct southern Thailand as a Buddhist zone, in the Thai popular imaginary the South is routinely equated with Islam, and especially the violence associated with the separatist movements. This tendency was amply illustrated by a northern Thai lecturer, who upon hearing about my intention to study Buddhism in the South exclaimed, “Why? Aren’t they all Muslims down there?” I had not said which part of the South I was going to.

I would argue that the attempt to obscure difference and present the South as typically Thai has produced a sort of ‘return of the repressed’ in the national psyche. The South as a whole bears the stereotype and indeed ‘stigma’ of violence, danger, and ‘Islam-ness’. The recent increase in violent conflict in the lower South appears to have reinforced such notions. Notably, the violence has occurred almost exclusively in the provinces that correspond with the historical Malay kingdom of Patani – Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala, and part of Songkhla province. Yet other parts of the South are ‘tarred with the same brush’. Thai newspapers fuel this impression, running headlines such as *tai raboet!* (the South explodes!). English-language papers do much the same. In recent years, *The Bangkok Post* has subtitled most of its reports on the continuing struggles in the former Patani kingdom with “Southern Violence” or “Violence in the South”, while in 2004 *The Nation* online edition has carried an index of its reports on this issue entitled “The South is on Fire!”<sup>106</sup>

Statements of this kind suggest that the violence that is occurring in one small part of the South is characteristic of the region *as a whole*.<sup>107</sup> This has

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<sup>106</sup> The notion of the “southern fires” (*fai tai*) is often used in press reports about the conflict in the former Patani region.

<sup>107</sup> I tested this theory through a search of the *Bangkok Post*’s online archives. The search expressions “violence in the South” or “southern violence” turned up more than a hundred hits each, while similar expressions referring to the other Thai regions were almost non-existent. Violent occurrences in other regions are thus not presented as qualities of *the regions* themselves – “northern violence” or “Isan violence” are not expressions that are readily assimilated into popular understandings.



concrete effects. For example, a travel writer doing a story on the islands off the coast of Phang Nga, which is a great distance from where the violence is occurring, must reassure his friends that he will be safe when they hear that he is “going south” (*The Nation* 3 July 2004). Likewise, tour operators in Phuket and other popular tourist destinations in the South are concerned about the negative impact of the violence on other parts of southern Thailand. The vice president of the Thai Hotels Association expressed his concern “that tourists may feel that the whole southern region isn’t a safe place for travel, even though the affected provinces are more than 400 kilometres away” (*The Nation* 30 April 2004).<sup>108</sup>

In a way this is an unintended consequence of attempts to construct the South as a singular region. It has allowed one image to stand as a metonym for the whole, which elides the various internal differences and contradictions of the region. However, the content which comes to stand as a metonym for the South is not that which makes it ‘Thai’ but that which makes it also non-Buddhist and non-Thai. The complexity of value of this region, whereby it is at once constructed as Buddhist and Thai and yet other, was at the heart of the negative or perplexed reactions that my study elicited in many Thai. I would argue that this ambivalence makes a study of Buddhism in the South more, rather than less, compelling.

#### *Recent Scholarly Interest in the South*

Up until the recent past, the South was also an area that inspired little scholarly interest compared to the other parts of the country. In 1964, Alastair Lamb, commented that the academic literature on southern Thailand

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<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, this notion was reproduced in the controversial novel *Platform*, by Michel Houellebecq (2002), whose climactic scene portrays western sex tourists being massacred by Muslim extremists on a beach resort in Krabi. This scene brings together the two main imaginaries of the South – “beaches and bombs” (see below) – in a horrifying juxtaposition. Here Krabi becomes a zone of danger although it is far from the area in which violence has actually occurred.

in the fields of archaeology, history and ethnography were “depressingly small” (Lamb 1964b:74). In the 1970s, David Wyatt commented on the relative dearth of interest in that region’s history in his study of the Chronicles of Nakhon Sri Thammarat, *The Crystal Sands*. He noted the tendency to focus on “the ancient principalities of North Thailand and Laos”, although the South has an equally “rich written history” (Wyatt 1975:5). Partially Wyatt puts this down to contingency, noting “the accident of ... late discovery by the outside world [of important historical inscriptions]” (Wyatt 1975:5). While inscriptions from the southern region were discovered earlier than those of the North, they were not published in Bangkok until later. This was in part due to the difficulties of the texts but also because “the history of the South is so little known that historians have lacked any context into which to set them” (Wyatt 1975:5).

This tendency has also been reflected in the social sciences, where studies of the southern region are much less common than in other regions. Furthermore, those studies which have historically taken place have tended to focus squarely on interethnic relations and the problem of assimilating or integrating the Muslims of the lower South. In a sense this has been the ‘metonymic prison’ for scholarship of the South.

In recent years this situation has changed somewhat and there has been a burgeoning of interest in the South. A good indication of the recent nature of this interest is that the first ever international conference entirely focused on southern Thailand was not held until 2002. Called *Experiencing Southern Thailand: Current Social Transformations from the People’s Perspective*, the conference promised both an orientation towards change and giving voice to alternative, subaltern voices that challenge the assumptions and perspectives of the national elite, central Thai viewpoint. The rationale for the conference was summed up in an article that appeared in *The Nation* about the event:

Beaches and bombs! Although the two seem to have nothing in common, many residents in the deep southern provinces believe that odd coupling is what people from other parts of the country tend to associate with their *region*.... For a long time, the *region* has been perceived as a land of violence – stemming mainly from the Muslim separatist movement – operating against the backdrop of a beautiful landscape. The reality, say local residents, is very different (Nantiya Tangwisutijit, emphasis added).

This statement illustrates the complexity of a project to undermine stereotypes. Although the purpose of the conference was to demonstrate that the South is a lot more diverse than people in the rest of Thailand tend to think, it is not clear who the ‘local residents’ referred to actually are. The statement implies that there is a region – in the singular – which can be represented by the ‘local residents’ as different from the general Thai imaginary. However, as my argument has suggested, it is not only a matter of illustrating the diversity *within* the South, it is also important to consider the diversity *of* imaginations of *the ‘region’ itself* in ways that open up the possibility of it not being a singular region – a defined space, one of the building blocks of the nation-state – but something else entirely.

I suggest that the recent interest in southern Thailand is linked to an academic focus that now privileges the interstices and margins, and in which hybridity and subaltern voices stand as correctives to the monolithic domination of states and other official discourses. This is not to say that all studies of the region fit this characterisation, but I would argue that in the current academic climate the South achieves a new attractiveness precisely for the reasons that it was less interesting to scholars in the past. In this sense, the growth of interest in the margins and that which challenges the national hierarchy of value parallels the interest in unorthodox religious forms discussed in the previous chapter. The potential problem with these

approaches is the same: both underestimate the extent to which they depend upon the very categories they seek to critique, such as the coherency of the nation-state. This is not to denigrate the impulse or the goals of such a scholarship. In fact, I clearly locate my own project within the trajectory of this change in focus. Rather, this discussion has emerged from my reflections on my own motivations for conducting the sort of study I have, and my own realisation of the extent to which my intention to challenge national ordering principles simultaneously depends upon and potentially obscures them.

### *Conclusion*

Southern Thailand is both real and really made up. It is a part of Thailand but also apart, included within national imaginaries but rarely standing for the whole. Nevertheless, the production of the South and southernness are intimately tied to the production of the categories of the Thai nation-state itself.

In this chapter I have located my thesis in relationship to 'the South' both as a physical location and a discursive category. The impetus to do this was in large part due to Luang Phò Thuat's explicit and implicit connections to the category of 'the South'. In turn, this discussion has allowed me to consider the significance of doing a study about Buddhism in the South and helped to illustrate the manner in which national hierarchies of value impacted upon my study. Finally, I suggest that changing attitudes towards these hierarchies have been partially responsible for the flourishing of scholarship on the South, including my own project. This scholarship might not, however, be as subversive as it may at first appear, because it may reinforce, rather than undermine, the hegemonic categories of the nation-state.

I have located this thesis among the shifting signifiers of the South to illustrate the contested and politically charged terrain upon which Luang Phò Thuat treads. The next part of the thesis will turn to the genesis of his story and his significance for a range of locations and on a number of scales, including but not limited to 'the South'. His connection to the South is just one of many roles he plays. As will be shown, by bridging a number of scales, locations, eras and ontological categories, Luang Phò Thuat provides a 'vehicle' for understanding the complex overlappings that produce a social reality.



## **PART II**

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UNFOLDING THE BODHISATTVA





## Chapter Four

### The Royal Lord: Somdet Jao Pha Kho and Satingphra

When mankind arose in the world, and began to gather in groups, those groups raised up a person of truth, justice, ability, force, and power to preside over them in order that they might be governed so as to live in peace and prosperity, safe from all dangers. When mankind had further progressed and states (*ban muang*) had been formed, a Bodhisatva appeared in the world of men, a man of merit, bravery, and ability surpassing all other people, so the assembled people invited him to become their leader, and he was named the King ...

—*Traiphuum Phra Ruang*, cited in Day and Reynolds (2000).

History is that which turns documents into monuments.

— Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (1972)

The museum at the Institute of Southern Thai Studies on the island of Kò Yò in Songkhla province contains a display entitled ‘The Three Somdet’. Located inside the replica of a traditional timber house, the display features the life-sized statues of three monks, the Somdet Jao (‘royal lords’) of Pha Kho, Kò Yai and Kò Yò. They are legendary monastic figures who are believed to have been friends who wandered *thudong* together on occasion through the peninsula countryside.<sup>109</sup> The diorama portrays a seventeenth century scene, complete with bronze bowls containing betel nuts and areca leaves. The three monks sit examining texts laid out on the floor in front of them, written on the accordion-style *khoi* books that were used in the seventeenth century to record not only Buddhist scriptures, but also legal texts, such as royal decrees of endowments of land and labour to local monasteries.<sup>110</sup> Somdet Jao Pha Kho sits in a superior position, apparently instructing the other monks. He is so named because he was the abbot of

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<sup>109</sup> Somdet Jao Kò Yò is associated with a stupa located at the highest point on the island of Kò Yò, presumably where his ashes are interned. Recently, another monastery on the island, Wat Laem Sai, constructed a large golden Buddha image given the same name as the monk. The abbot of this temple claimed to have had a vision of Somdet Jao Kò Yò in which he requested that the image be built (see Figure 43, on page 311).

<sup>110</sup> They are called *khoi* books as they are made from the bark of the tree of that name.

Wat Pha Kho,<sup>111</sup> a monastery on the Satingphra Peninsula. However, a nearby plaque explains that this is one and the same monk as Luang Phò Thuat (Yiap Nam Thale Jüt).<sup>112</sup> The plaque also emphasises the mythological origins of this monk and outlines the concept of ‘Thuat’ as referring to a class of locally-respected and benevolent ancestral spirits, often rendered in animal form (*thuât ngu*, *thuât sūa* – ‘ancestor snake’, ‘ancestor tiger’), capable of intervening in the affairs of their present-day ‘descendants’. The title ‘Luang Phò Thuat’ is explained to be a subcategory of this class and is reserved for the spirits of powerful ‘ancestral’ monks.<sup>113</sup>



**Figure 8 Statues of the ‘Three Somdet’ at the Museum of Southern Thai Culture. From left to right Somdet Jao Kò Yai, Somdet Jao Pha Kho, and Somdet Jao Kò Yò. Somdet Jao Pha Kho is clearly portrayed as the superior figure, and appears to be instructing the other two monks.**

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<sup>111</sup> Local people in Satingphra refer to this temple as Wat *Phra* Kho (named after its large reclining Buddha image, locally known as Phra Khotama) and Lorraine Gesick follows this tradition in her work. However, the temple is officially known as Wat *Pha* Kho and is also rendered in this way in all documents I have encountered, including the temple’s own publications. I adhere to the latter convention as it reflects my emphasis exploring the public and official manifestations of the monk, and not merely the ‘local point of view’.

<sup>112</sup> I.e. “Luang Phò Thuat who trod on saltwater and made it fresh”.

<sup>113</sup> As discussed in chapter one.

The display provides a complex blend of historical and mythical elements. It is set up in the typical 'secular' fashion of a museum: it depicts a mythical scene and includes an academic explanation of local beliefs. However, the realism of the display, complete with genuine historical paraphernalia, strongly suggests a real historical scene. Further complicating its impact, the secular nature of the display is also somewhat undermined by the many visitors to the museum who treat the statues as religious figures, bowing down before them and even sometimes making small offerings. There is evidence of devotional acts, for example a small amount of gold leaf attached to each of statue. Thus the museum's attempts to produce a disinterested gaze of an 'objective' historical scene is challenged by the ongoing "corporeal" (Pinney 2001) responses of visitors who engage with these images in an embodied, and religious, manner.

These complexities of historical and mythical, secular and sacred inform this chapter. The primary focus is the story of Somdet Jao Pha Kho and a number of 'historical' details involved in its creation. However, this is not a historical study but an ethnographic account of a contemporary story and the manner in which it both draws on elements of the past in its construction. I am interested in the way the story is anchored in the past and perceived to be a true representation of the past. History and myth are not opposed but instead possess mutually reinforcing qualities. Far from demystifying and disenchanting him, the rational production of historical knowledge contributes to his legitimacy, and therefore his charisma.

Although this chapter largely deals with a number of texts, I consider it to be ethnographic. I was only able to encounter these texts in the specific circumstances of conducting fieldwork. Furthermore, the mode of encountering the stories have informed how I have been able to present them here. For example, the temple murals that I use to guide the reader through the story of Somdet Jao Pha Kho present a localised version of the story

specific to Satingphra. Likewise, the story of Luang Phò Thuat I reproduce below is an amalgam of a large number of retellings I encountered in Satingphra and from the 'history' (*prawat*) booklets produced and distributed by temples such as Wat Pha Kho.

In this chapter I seek to disaggregate the figure of Luang Phò Thuat to convey the complex and disparate elements that have contributed to producing an apparently singular figure. While his life story is generally told as a singular, seamless narrative, I want to demonstrate the palimpsest of stories that underpin his existence. In particular, I am interested in the elements that have contributed to his importance for the region and for a particular – Buddhist – vision of southern Thailand. These include the important miracles he was supposed to have performed, as well as the notion that he is none other than the future Buddha, Sri Ariya Mettaya. It deals with the earliest documentary evidence of his life in the form of royal decrees that connect him with claims made to the king of Ayutthaya for exemption from taxes and corvée labour obligations by particular monasteries on the Satingphra Peninsula during the seventeenth century (CE). These documents relate episodes from the life of Luang Phò Thuat which have remained among the core elements of the hagiographic tradition that carries on into the present. These early documents, the primary purpose of which was to legitimate the land rights and privileges of particular communities, raise the importance of Luang Phò Thuat's connection to landscape and territory. This is both of central importance to residents of Satingphra in terms of their sense of connection to place, and the territorialising ambitions of the Ayutthayan kingdom in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This suggests that Luang Phò Thuat has never been an entirely 'local' figure and that his local charisma and the influence of distant Ayutthaya were mutually interdependent.

The palimpsest of narratives also reveals certain tensions within Luang Phò Thuat's figure, such as those between the different locations that make claims to his life and therefore his charisma. The issue of naming reflects this tension. As Jackson notes, "in Thai folklore, the honorific titles of royalty arose, gods and spirits often change from one locality to another, and there is considerable variation between the honorific titles" (P. A. Jackson 2004b:361).<sup>114</sup> The names, 'Somdet Jao Pha Kho' and 'Luang Phò Thuat', are connected with different geographical areas that claim privileged connections to this historico-legendary monk – Satingphra and Pattani respectively. Likewise, these two names reflect different eras within his 'career'.<sup>115</sup> 'Somdet Jao Pha Kho' is how he is most commonly referred to on the Satingphra Peninsula, where there is some documentary evidence of his existence in the form of manuscripts written late in the seventeenth, or early in the eighteenth, century. 'Luang Phò Thuat', by contrast, emerged as recently as the 1950s when the first images of the were made at Wat Chang Hai in Pattani province. Until that time Wat Chang Hai had no apparent historical connection with Somdet Jao Pha Kho. However, it is Wat Chang Hai that produced the first images of Luang Phò Thuat and created the association with Somdet Jao Pha Kho and Satingphra, and it is also Wat

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<sup>114</sup> Examples of titles he includes are "*Phra, Phraya, Phaya* and related compound honorifics such as *Phra Jao, Phra Maha, Thao Phra Maha, Phra Ong, Phra Ong Jao*, and so on" (P. A. Jackson 2004b:361).

<sup>115</sup> The issue of naming is also problematic relative to the career of the monk. As most monastic 'names' are in fact honorific titles and change through the monk's career, the choice of which name to use is somewhat arbitrary. I have chosen to use 'Somdet Jao Pha Kho'. However, during his life he was known as a child as 'Pu', when he first ordained he was referred to as 'Jao (or Phra) Samiramo', or 'Phra Ram' for short. Later in his career he was said to have been promoted to the rank of 'Somdet Phra Rachamuni Samiramo'. Later, locals apparently referred to him as '(Somdet) Jao Pha Kho' or 'Than Jao Pha Kho Phu Mi Bun'. All these namings are significant, expressing nuances of his identity in particular circumstances and in relationship to particular social and political contexts.

Chang Hai that is nowadays the undisputed centre of his cult.<sup>116</sup> Thus the contemporary existence of Somdet Jao Pha Kho, although in some ways historically prior to the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat Wat Chang Hai, also depends upon this later construction. If not for the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat at Wat Chang Hai, Somdet Jao Pha Kho may have remained an obscure, highly localised 'ancestral' figure. Simultaneously, Luang Phò Thuat depends upon the sense of historical reality associated with Somdet Jao Pha Kho provided by the texts and other evidence of his life in Satingphra. The merging of figures is not seamless or without tension. In both Satingphra and Pattani, informants with whom I spoke disavowed the identity of these two legendary monks. However, these protests are muted and do not generally disturb the public image of Luang Phò Thuat and his apparently successful merging of many places into one.

The specific factors which led to Wat Chang Hai and Pattani becoming central to Luang Phò Thuat's identity will be dealt with in the next chapter. In chapter six, I will consider how the elements that have derived both from Satingphra and Pattani have contributed to his contemporary designation as a *bodhisattva* and the consequences this has for Thai-Chinese religious interactions. Now, however, I turn to Satingphra, Somdet Jao Pha Kho's original 'stamping ground'.

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<sup>116</sup> The centrality of Wat Chang Hai in connection with Luang Phò Thuat was illustrated in humorous fashion by the abbot of Wat Phang Thia, a temple in Satingphra district (and the source of the murals contained in this chapter). In 1962 this abbot, Phrakhru Palat Chaliao, had built a large altar statue of Luang Phò Thuat for his temple which was, as far as I know, at that time the largest in existence (the temple still advertises this image as the biggest in southern Thailand, e.g. in Figure 41 on page 308, though this is no longer the case). The abbot showed me the cover of an amulet magazine that featured his statue but wrongly stated that it was located at Wat Chang Hai. The abbot commented, somewhat ruefully it seemed to me, that although the statue was at his temple, Wat Chang Hai got all the advertising.

*Satingphra Today: A Signposted Landscape*

The Satingphra Peninsula is a thin strip of land located between the gulf of Thailand and Songkhla Lake (*thale sap*), the country's largest freshwater lake. The peninsula stretches southward to Khao Daeng (Red Mountain), the site of the old city of Songkhla, which is situated across the mouth of the lake opposite the contemporary city. Although administratively a part of Songkhla province, historically Satingphra has been closely connected with the polity of Phatthalung to the north. Today the peninsula is, for the most part a relatively sleepy rural backwater. However, archaeological finds on the peninsula suggest that the area has been politically significant and a hub on cross-peninsula trading routes.<sup>117</sup> The large number of old Buddhist monasteries, some reputed to be very old, also testifies to the historical importance of Buddhism in this region.

Previously only accessible by water, the peninsula became easier to reach after it was connected by roads in the 1960s. The southern end was not connected to the mainland, however, until the 1980s with the building of the Tinsanulond bridges across Songkhla Lake. Today buses and *songthaeo*<sup>118</sup> ply the single-lane highway connecting Satingphra to regional centres. And domestic and foreign tourists now have unprecedented access to the peninsula, which is now a convenient travelling distance for day trips from Hat Yai.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> There was a flurry of archaeological interest by western scholars in the 1960s, probably facilitated by the opening up of the area to road travel. For examples see (Lamb 1964b, 1965, O'Connor 1964, 1966, Wales 1964). This interest was largely enabled by the efforts of the then abbot of Wat Machimawat (Wat Klang) in Songkhla town, who had collected artefacts found in Satingphra and stored them in a museum in his monastery. This museum still exists today.

<sup>118</sup> Covered pickup trucks with two or three benches in the back, usually used for public transport where the volume of traffic does not warrant the use of buses.

<sup>119</sup> Hat Yai's significance for tourism, and the modes of tourist practice associated with it, are explored more fully in chapter seven.

Perhaps due to its historical importance, the peninsula is home to a number of sites of potency and 'ancestral' presences. These include the burial place of the Muslim founder of Songkhla, Sultan Suleiman,<sup>120</sup> the revered reclining Buddha statue at Wat Jatingphra, and the tiny but highly revered Buddha image known as Jao Mae Yu Hua.<sup>121</sup> Along the southern end of the peninsula Chinese shrines are devoted to the spirit of Red Mountain (Pu Thuat Hua Khao Daeng). The existence of so many figures testifies to the long-standing presence of Theravada Buddhists, Muslims and Chinese on the peninsula and in neighbouring Songkhla.

In contemporary Satingphra by far the most obvious such figure is Somdet Jao Pha Kho, whose presence has been increasingly, and often literally, 'sign-posted' in recent decades. Prior to the 1960s, when his first amulets were produced in Satingphra, an intimate local knowledge of the landscape was necessary to identify his presence. Gesick argues that for those local inhabitants with sufficient knowledge the landscape and its ancestral presences, imbued with power (*saksit*), acted as a kind of text:

Local inhabitants also 'read' Luang Pho Thuat's 'biography' in the landscape, thus; "Here is the tree under which his umbilical cord was buried, there is the field where the cobra gave him the crystal ball, here is the tree which grew from his staff, there is the sea where he turned

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<sup>120</sup> The old city of Songkhla used to be situated at the southern tip of the Satingphra Peninsula before moving to the other side of the entrance to Songkhla Lake, its present location. Though a Muslim, Suleiman receives a certain amount of reverence and devotional worship from Thai and Chinese-Thai in the Songkhla area. At Suleiman's burial site signs have been erected advising Thai not to attach gold leaf (*pit thong*) to his grave as this is offensive to Muslims. The annual festival in honour of Songkhla's ancestral spirit of Red Mountain (*Pu Thuat Hua Khao Daeng*) features a shrine devoted to Suleiman. (Although the former spirit has been taken up in a Chinese context, I suspect that there is an identification between these two figures).

<sup>121</sup> Associated with the legendary Lady White Blood (Nang Lüat Khao), this figure attracts pilgrims to the monastery in which she is housed (for a fuller description of the significance of this figure, see Gesick 1995:62-5).



salt water to fresh, hear [sic] is the hill where he found (or left) the Buddha's footprint (Gesick 1985:160).

Signs of various kinds may also be added to sites, for example through the construction of temples, statues or depositing of votive tablets, "thereby enlarging the significance of the local terrain" (Gesick 1985:157). The landscape is therefore open to a number of elaborations, whereby the significance of certain features is expanded and objectified. The creation produces new regimes of legibility, allowing much broader populations to access the various significances of the landscape. Knowledge is no longer contained 'within' the landscape, accessible only to those with an intimate knowledge of the terrain or those who have heard the stories told by their elders. Such ready accessibility of the landscape to outsiders facilitates its usefulness in both nationalist and tourist discourses and undermines the authority of traditional holders of knowledge.<sup>122</sup>

Many elaborations have taken place in Satingphra over the last four decades, producing a dramatic increase in the presence of Somdet Jao Pha Kho in the landscape. In Stewart Wavell's report on his visit to Wat Pha Kho in 1962 and his discussions with the abbot of the monastery, he does not mention Somdet Jao Pha Kho at all. His attention instead is focussed on evidence of Shiva lingam worship at that site (Wavell 1965). Although it was the eve of the spread of the Luang Phò Thuat 'cult' throughout the country – the first amulets of Somdet Jao Pha Kho were produced at Wat Pha Kho in 1963 – knowledge of this figure still remained relatively contained 'within' the landscape and only accessible to those with intimate knowledge of the local landscape. The contrast with today could not be more striking. It would not be possible for a contemporary visitor to Wat Pha Kho and its

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<sup>122</sup> For instance, in Satingphra local matrilineages who claimed traditional ownership of land based on knowledge of ancestral movements have been marginalised by monks and other men.

surrounding area to miss the significance of Somdet Jao Pha Kho: his presence is there for all to see virtually everywhere one looks.

This presence is signposted for the many visitors to the monastery, which has become one of the primary tourist attractions on the peninsula. Every day, coaches, cars and minibuses disgorge mainly foreign Chinese or domestic tourists, who pay their respects at the various shrines dedicated to Somdet Jao Pha Kho and buy amulets and other souvenirs. As one ascends the hillside to Wat Pha Kho itself, one passes first the *thudong*<sup>123</sup> image of Somdet Jao Pha Kho, and then immediately comes to the well in which he is said to have washed his robes. Close to the stupa is a shrine hall in which his footprint, embedded in stone, is to be found, together with more statues, and plaques on the walls on which his biography is written in Thai, Chinese and English. Nearby is a ruined hall. Signs placed there for the benefit of tourists reveal this to be a 'courthouse' (*san tham khwam*) where the Royal Lord presided over the resolution of local disputes and dispensed justice when it was called for. Inside another building one finds a museum devoted to Somdet Jao Phra Khao. The display features his walking stick and the magical crystal ball he was given as a child. Here too, amulets, small statues and other devotional trinkets bearing Somdet Jao Pha Kho's image are available to be 'rented'.<sup>124</sup> Temple booklets detailing the history of the monastery and the biography of the Royal Lord are also made widely available throughout the complex.

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<sup>123</sup> Wandering ascetic, i.e. following the Dhuthanga (Pali) ascetic regime.

<sup>124</sup> Sacred objects (*sing saksit*) in Thailand are not generally considered to be bought/sold (*sü/khai*) but rented (*chao*), suggesting perhaps that these objects are never truly alienated from their source of sanctity. They are possessed only provisionally, dependent on the ongoing devotional behaviour of the possessor. Sacred objects are therefore set apart from other commodities as alienable objects, at least in this symbolic/linguistic sense. Such hair-splitting distinctions are often greeted with cynicism by commentators on the trade of sacred objects in Thailand who see this as an attempt to obscure its commercial nature.

Though Wat Pha Kho is the most important location associated with Somdet Jao Pha Kho, it is not the only site on the peninsula imbued with his presence. In the surrounding area, features of the landscape that Gesick identifies as locally significant have undergone similar elaborations – and explication for visitors. The tree under which the umbilical cord or placenta was buried is now labelled as such. The field in which the snake spirit presented him with the crystal ball, known as ‘cradle field’ (*na ple*), is now the site of a small Buddhist sanctuary in which statues that depict this scene have been built (Figure 9 and Figure 10). The desire to project the story of Somdet Jao Pha Kho to a wider audience is clearly an important factor in these elaborations. When I spoke with the head monk of this small sanctuary he expressed the hope that this would lead to some of the tourists who visited Wat Pha Kho to stop at this site too.



**Figure 9. Depiction of Somdet Jao Pha Kho as an infant encountering a magical snake spirit. Located at a Buddhist sanctuary at *na ple* (cradle field).**



**Figure 10.** Second depiction of the infant Somdet Jao Pha Kho with the snake spirit. Located at the *Ton Liap* Buddhist sanctuary, the site of the burial of the infant's placenta.

Novel elaborations may also occur from time to time, made possible by individuals whose abilities allow them to detect and access the presence of the saint at certain points of the landscape. A shrine devoted to Luang Phò Thuat built at Hua Khao Daeng, near the site of the old city of Songkhla is one example. It was built after a young local man was possessed by the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat, who revealed this site as a location where he had planted his umbrella and camped (*pak krot*) during his many wanderings. According to the medium's uncle, who lives nearby and now maintains the shrine, the young man then channelled Luang Phò Thuat for a time, earning a significant following, including several rich and prominent figures, before he passed away several years before I conducted my research there.

The emergence of additional sites associated with the life and movements of the ancestral saint entail additions to his biography so that landscape and life-story continue to reflect in one another. These days the

life of Somdet Jao Pha Kho is primarily told in the temple histories now produced in small booklets, and seemingly infinitely republished in popular books, magazines, websites (and theses). But written texts are not the only form of history-making. In various monasteries across the peninsula, the biography of Somdet Jao Pha Kho is told in series of murals on the walls of shrine halls. An example of these can be found in Wat Phang Thia, a monastery that had no apparent historical connection with the life of Somdet Jao Pha Kho, but participated, along with many monasteries in the region, in the sudden flourishing of his amulets in the early 1960s.<sup>125</sup> In 1962 it built what was then the largest Luang Phò Thuat statue in existence.<sup>126</sup> It is with the aid of these murals that I tell the first portion of the Luang Phò Thuat biography, what might be called the ‘Satingphra version’ of his history.

### *The Story of Somdet Jao Pha Kho*

Most retellings of Luang Phò Thuat’s life begin with his birth and events that occurred while he was still a baby. They testify both to his special qualities and to the morality of his parents: Nai Hu and Nang Jan. Extremely poor but morally virtuous,<sup>127</sup> this couple went to the temple every *wan phra*, listened to the sermon and made merit. They lived on the land of Sethi Pan (Rich Man Pan) as his debtors (*luk ni*).<sup>128</sup> Nang Jan gave birth to a son, Pu (crab), in 2125 BE (year of the dragon; 1582 CE). On the day of his birth there occurred a portentous earthquake of great strength. Nai Hu took

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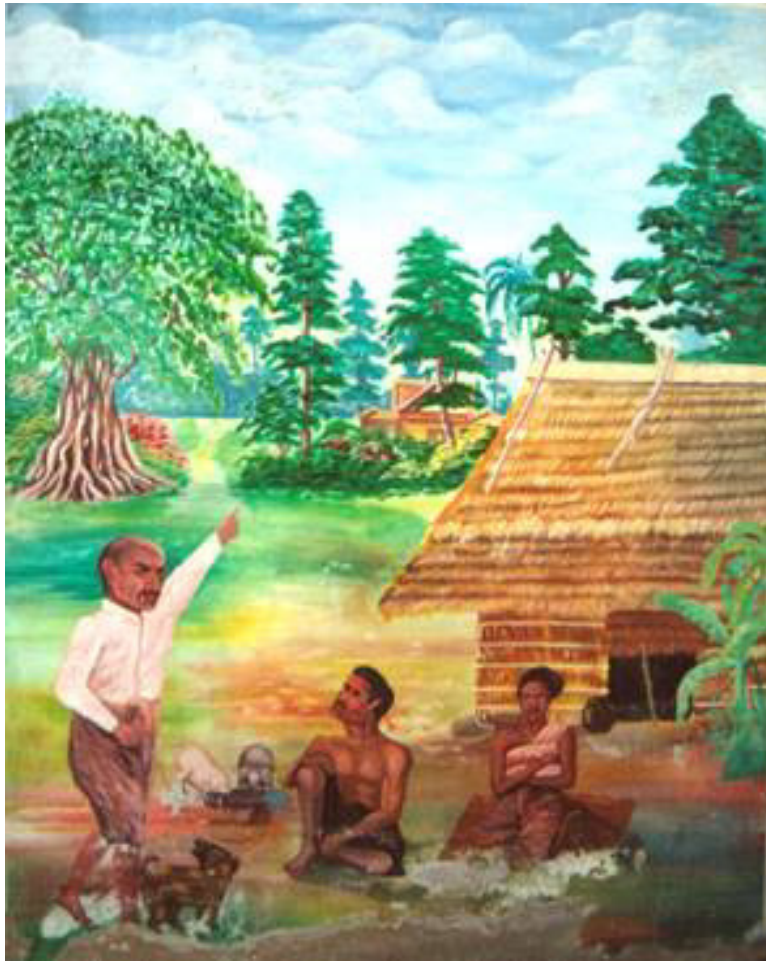
<sup>125</sup> My thanks to Phrakhru Palat Chaliao, the abbot of Wat Phang Thia, who kindly allowed me to photograph these murals.

<sup>126</sup> In 2002 this monastery was advertising its large statue with a large billboard next to the highway. The billboard featured a giant picture of Luang Phò Thuat and was written in Thai, English and Chinese (Figure 41 on page 306).

<sup>127</sup> The temple history produced by Wat Pha Kho describes them as follows: *pen khon yak jon tae tang man yu nai silatham an di ngam* [They are poor people but they are firmly established in (firm practitioners of) morality] (Wat Pha Kho npd:51).

<sup>128</sup> The land that he owned is now called Ban Liab.

the placenta of the child and buried it at the base of a fig tree (*ton liab*) which stood not far from a sandalwood plantation owned by Sethi Pan.<sup>129</sup> To this day this tree is considered by villagers to be extremely powerful (*saksit*) and is now the site of a Buddhist sanctuary (Samnak Ton Liab).



**Figure 11. Setthi Pan orders Hu and Jan to work in the fields soon after Pu is born. Source: Mural at Wat Phang Thia, Satingphra.**

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<sup>129</sup> Probably the tree depicted in the background of Figure 11.



**Figure 12. Hu and Jan make offerings to the snake spirit that has wrapped itself around Pu's cradle. Source: Mural at Wat Phang Thia, Satingphra.**

**Figure 13. Setthi Pan returns the magical crystal ball. Source: Mural at Wat Phang Thia, Satingphra.**



As it was rice harvesting time, Sethi Pan ordered all his labourers to work in the fields, including Nang Jan, even though she had only just had the baby (Figure 11). Nang Jan begged to be allowed to stay at home but Sethi Pan ignored her pleas and the usual custom of confinement after

childbirth, forcing Nang Jan out to work in the fields the day after she delivered her son. While in the fields she put her baby into a crib (*ple*) that she fashioned from a piece of cloth and suspended between two *mao* trees. One day, when she returned to feed her baby she found a giant cobra, as thick as the trunk of a betel tree, coiled up around the crib. Alarmed, she cried for help and was soon joined by Hu. Believing that the snake was, in fact, a guardian spirit, the couple made offerings in order to propitiate it (Figure 12). It is not clear whether these rites, or the great merit of the child caused the snake to withdraw. But when the parents went to their baby in the crib they found a small magical crystal ball (*luk kaeo saksit*).

Upon hearing about this miraculous gift, Setthi Pan immediately demanded the crystal ball for himself. Hu and Jan had no choice but to comply. However, as soon as the landlord took the object into his possession various misfortunes befell him and his family, no doubt due to his greed, until he was forced to return it to its rightful owners (Figure 13).

The story then details the child's monastic career from his ordination as a novice at a local monastery, to becoming a high-ranking monk in Ayutthaya. The story relates that at the appropriate age, Pu was taken to Wat Chedi Luang (known as Wat Di Luang nowadays), a local temple where his uncle was the abbot, and became a novice (Figure 14). Novice Pu showed great aptitude in learning the Buddhist scriptures. Later, he travelled to Nakhon Sri Thammarat, the main centre of Theravada Buddhism on the Malay Peninsula, to continue his monastic education. It was there that he was ordained as a monk with the monastic title of Phra Samiramo, although he was also less formally known as Jao Ram by local villagers.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> The ceremony is usually depicted as taking place on a raft in the middle of a canal. This was a relatively uncommon method of ordaining which took place when there was no properly consecrated ordination hall in which to carry out the ceremony. Any location that was completely surrounded by water, and which remained so throughout the year, could be used instead.





**Figure 14 Pu is brought to Wat Di Luang by his father. Source: Mural at Wat Phang Thia, Satingphra.**

After a period of time in Nakhon, Jao Ram decided to travel to the centre of Theravada Buddhist influence, Ayutthaya. There were no roads at that time and almost all traffic between Nakhon and Ayutthaya was by boat. So Jao Ram boarded a junk captained by Nai In. During the course of the voyage, when the junk was off the coast of Chumporn (the northernmost province of contemporary southern Thailand) a terrible storm arose that lasted for seven days and seven nights (Figure 15). By the end of the gale all the fresh water on the ship had been used. Blaming their ill fortune on the presence of the monk, the crew decided to maroon him on a nearby island.<sup>131</sup> However, before this could happen the monk placed his left foot into the sea and instructed a crewmember to taste the water at that point (Figure 16). To the amazement of all present, the water was fresh. The crew filled their water supply and then continued on their way to Ayutthaya.<sup>132</sup> Impressed by

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<sup>131</sup> In some versions the foreignness of the crew is emphasised, being described as Malay or Chinese.

<sup>132</sup> Resonances can be found here with the story of Phra Sila – or Stone Buddha – described by Swearer on journey from Sri Lanka to Nakhon Sri Thammarat, where “the miraculous power of the Stone Buddha image caused rain to fall when there was a shortage of fresh water” (Swearer 2004:205).

the monk, Nai In and the rest of the crew developed a special faith in him. Upon arriving in Ayutthaya Nai In designated one crew member to become Jao Ram's personal servant.



**Figure 15. The junk's crew blames Phra Sami Ram for a terrible storm. Source: Mural at Wat Phang Thia, Satingphra.**



**Figure 16. Luang Phò Thuat performs the miracle for which he is most well known. Source: Mural at Wat Phang Thia, Satingphra.**

Eventually Jao Ram came to study under the supreme patriarch himself. He learned the Dhamma and Pali language there until he achieved an exceptional level of knowledge. He asked permission to spend the rains retreat (*jam phansa*) at a temple outside the temple walls where it was very peaceful (and practised meditation there).

At that time a warlord of Sri Lanka wanted to expand his power. Suspecting that Siam's religion would be weak after wars against Burma, he devised a puzzle in which the words of the Abhidhamma were made on 84,000 small golden tablets and were filled into seven large containers. Then seven Brahmin ambassadors were sent in seven ships laden with treasure to Siam. These ambassadors made a wager with the Siamese king that if all the monks in the kingdom could assemble the tablets in the correct order within seven days all the treasure contained in the seven boats would be his. However, if the monks failed the Siamese king would be forced to relinquish wealth or power. (Many versions I read or heard state that Siam would have literally been forced to become a dependency (*müang khün*) of Sri Lanka.) The king's monks began trying to solve the puzzle but without success. At the last minute Jao Ram was called to the royal court. Before entering, his feet were washed and, as he stepped on a stone, he made an imprint in it. Jao Ram proceeded to assemble the words of the scriptures without hesitation. Realising that seven tablets were missing, Jao Ram detected that they were being concealed in the ambassadors' top-knots (Figure 17). Jao Ram named these tablets – the heart of the Abidhamma – and the astonished Brahmins removed the hidden tablets and gave them to the monk. Conceding that they had lost the wager, the ambassadors presented the king with the treasure. This amazing feat earned Phra Samiramo the favour of the king. He was promoted to the rank of Phra Rachamuni (some versions claim he became the supreme patriarch at this point) and was offered the kingdom to rule. Different versions state that he either declined the offer or ruled for

three days before returning power to the king.<sup>133</sup> He continued to live in Ayutthaya for a time. It is said that during a cholera epidemic he miraculously cured the population by washing his robes and distributing the holy water (*nam mon*) produced.



**Figure 17. Phra Sami Ram solves the Dhamma puzzle. Source: Mural at Wat Phang Thia, Satingphra.**

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<sup>133</sup> This practice has some precedent. For example, in Sukhothai, “the king was enjoined to rule righteously but to relinquish his throne on religious holidays to monks, who would sit on the throne and explain the Buddhist doctrine” (Calkowski 2000:257).



**Figure 18. Phra Rachamuni walks *thudong* from Ayutthaya to Satingphra. Source: Mural at Wat Phang Thia, Satingphra.**

Some time later he headed back to Satingphra, this time by land, wandering in the *thudong* fashion (Figure 18) and performing a variety of miracles along the way. Upon his return he became the abbot of the royal temple Wat Pha Kho. There he restored the historical *stupa* and also convinced the king to decree the temple lands exempt from the usual taxes and the people there free from corvée labour, becoming instead ‘temple slaves’ (*kha phra*). This was seen as being a great boon for the local people, as the life of a temple slave was generally considered to be less arduous than that of ‘free’ men, who had to devote about one month in two to corvée labour (see Charnvit 1976:43).<sup>134</sup> The monk then became known as Somdet Jao Pha Kho. Holding the status of a monastic lord, he ruled over the land in a righteous fashion, bringing peace and prosperity to the local area.

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<sup>134</sup> Indeed, by the late Ayutthaya period the desirability of ‘temple slave’ status meant that the central authority was forced to perform periodic surveys in order to determine that people were not avoiding the corvée by illegally residing in temples (Charnvit 1976:116-7 [n.26]).

This time of benevolence and calm lasted many years, although some accounts suggest that the danger of pirates remained. It is said that Somdet Jao Pha Kho was at one time accosted by pirates who attempted to kidnap him (Figure 19). Once again he is said to have performed his desalinating miracle<sup>135</sup> and so impressed the pirates that they let him go.

The final details of the story of Somdet Jao Pha Kho involve his disappearance and the prediction that he is the *bodhisattva*, the Buddha-to-be, Sri Ariya Mettaya. The story relates that Somdet Jao Pha Kho was visited in his quarters one day by a young novice carrying a magical flower (*dòk mai thip*) that he had been given by a mysterious old man. This man had said that the monk who could identify the flower would be the future Buddha. Somdet Jao Pha Kho was able to identify the flower (Figure 20). Soon after, he and the novice are said to have entered the monk's quarters. They were not seen again. The same evening astonished local villagers saw a ball of fire circle the temple three times before disappearing off into the distance, some accounts state two balls (Figure 21). It is believed that these were the spirits of Somdet Jao Pha Kho and the novice.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> As this was referred to by my Thai teacher and friend in Songkhla, Wuthinat Jiraphan.

<sup>136</sup> Consider the account in the Sri Lankan chronicle, the *Thūpavamsā*, in which King Duttagāmanī expires and is taken to Tusita heaven. "Before disappearing, however, the King in his chariot circumambulates the Mahāthūpa three times, a final act of relic veneration until he is reborn as the chief disciple of the future Buddha Mettaya" (Trainor 1997:168-9).

I cannot resist drawing attention to the possible connections between this element of the story and the introduction of the Siam Nikaya in Sri Lanka, a process which began in 1753 (as detailed by Blackburn 2003). At that time there were no higher ordination monks in Sri Lanka and the lineage of 'Disciplined Ones' was led by a novice monk. It was at his instigation that Siamese monks from Ayutthaya were brought to Sri Lanka. Perhaps there is a connection, given that the southern ordination lineages were of central importance for the interactions between Siamese and Sri Lankan Buddhism. It could be speculated that this element of the story remembers the great monk leaving, at the request of a novice ambassador, to re-establish a higher ordination lineage in Sri Lanka.

**Figure 19.**  
Somdet Jao  
Pha Kho is  
accosted by  
pirates.  
Source:  
Mural at Wat  
Phang Thia,  
Satingphra.



**Figure 20.** Somdet  
Jao Pha Kho  
identifies the  
heavenly flower.  
Source: Mural at  
Wat Phang Thia,  
Satingphra.



**Figure 21. Somdet Jao Pha Kho disappears from Wat Pha Kho in the form of a fireball. Note the magical crystal ball glowing at the tip of the reliquary stupa. Source: Mural at Wat Phang Thia, Satingphra.**

In the Satingphra version of the story it is generally accepted that the monk did not actually die but travelled to a heavenly realm. One woman in particular with whom I spoke was very clear on this point, emphasising to me the fact that he “*did not die*” (*mai sin bun*). As a result of this he remains an active presence at that location. Several villagers I spoke to mentioned that the fireball sometimes returns to Wat Pha Kho on particular occasions. But it is also conceded by villagers today that the monk might possibly have appeared elsewhere and helped people in other places. The ‘Satingphra version’, however, does not proceed past this point, either in the temple history, in the murals found at a number of temples, or in the oral retellings of local people, all of which end with the fireball(s) disappearing from Wat Pha Kho. This open ending, as will be shown in the next chapter, has



allowed for further elaborations of the story to take place in other locations. I now consider some of the important elements of this story, in particular the connections between Somdet Jao Pha Kho and place-making.

### *Belonging in Place*

Hagiographic recounting is never a neutral story; it always has an upshot or point and it is directed at particular constituencies (Wyschogrod 1990:8). In this section I consider some of the elements of the story of Somdet Jao Pha Kho and their performative force.

A central aspect of the hagiography related above is the tension that exists between the poor parents of the child Pu and the rich landlord, Setthi Pan.<sup>137</sup> Gesick suggests the possibility that the reference represents an articulation of resentment of local forms of debt bondage whereby struggling villagers were forced to borrow rice from richer members of the community, and then pay off their debts in labour (Gesick 1995:48, fn.30).<sup>138</sup> It is therefore highly likely that this section of the story expresses a desire for liberation from injustices that were prevalent at the time.

This section of the story, I would argue, also represents an account of the legitimacy of power that derives from genuine belonging in place. It is clear that the manner in which Setthi Pan behaves is unjust according to local understandings. Corresponding to this is the implication of Pan's out-of-placeness in the local milieu. His title alone '*setthi*' (rich man) might suggest foreignness, as Reynolds notes that the title '*setthi*' contains the connotation

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<sup>137</sup> As will be shown below, this part of the story was not part of the 'original' manuscripts but was first recounted by an outside observer early in the twentieth century.

<sup>138</sup> Here she is making reference to Vandergeest's (1990) description of informal twentieth century debt bondage following the abolishment of official forms of slavery.

of Chineseness as it denotes “wealth and eminence and, by implication, a merchant background” (editor’s foreword in Cushman 1991:xii).<sup>139</sup>

Setthi Pan’s demand that the mother return to work reveals another aspect of the imposition that could confirm a certain ‘foreignness’. His actions at this particular moment flaunt the ritual procedures surrounding the process of giving birth and subsequent recovery. Such an act would appear to contravene certain ritual proscriptions associated with the period of postpartum recovery, itself given ritual significance in Tai practices (Hanks and Hanks 1964:205). The postpartum resting period is a liminal stage during a rite of passage. It is therefore to be expected that premature removal from this state could lead to the dangers of pollution and vulnerability to spirit attack (Douglas [1966] 2002). In fact, this is indeed what appeared to have come to pass as the baby Pu is immediately set upon by the snake spirit while hanging in his cradle.

The offering of the crystal ball by the guardian spirit is symbolic of the inherent belonging of the boy in that place. It is an inalienable possession – that which should not be circulated (Weiner 1992) – demonstrating not only the right of Luang Phò Thuat and his clan to inhabit the land but also the enduring nature of this right. The power of the spirit is objectified and passed on to him, the power of the place itself. The misfortunes that befall Setthi Pan when he unrightfully demands the object can be seen as testimony to the illegitimacy of his claim to the land on which he forces the local peasantry to work.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, the story as a whole follows this logic through: the accomplished monk returns to Satingphra to renew the monastic control

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<sup>139</sup> It should also be noted that the practice of tax farming was quite prevalent in the area during the nineteenth century and these ‘farmers’, who were often Chinese, were often extremely ruthless in their methods of extracting wealth from the local peasantry.

<sup>140</sup> Wyatt notes the common belief in the need for piety in handling Buddha relics or failure to do so resulting in terrible illness. The ability to handle relics is a symbol of a “strict and persistent morality” “none but the moral and holy might dare to touch – let alone handle – the bodily relic of the Lord Buddha...” (Wyatt 2002b:11).

over the peninsula and begins a righteous reign. The narrative arc therefore moves from the dominance of a 'foreign' and unjust control to the reestablishment of a legitimate representative of place and the agent of a utopian age. There is also a millennial flavour to this element of the story, associated with Somdet Jao Pha Kho's identification as a *bodhisattva* and future Buddha Sri Ariya Mettraya. I will discuss this below.

As already noted, the burying of the placenta is also designed to tie the child to place, as though through an invisible umbilicus. The burying of the placenta under the tree now located at Samnak Ton Liap is given emphasis in the story and the site is now one of the main repositories of the extraordinary power of Luang Phò Thuat on the peninsula.<sup>141</sup> It is also one of the few sites at which the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat is said to have appeared during the sacralisation of amulets. The notion that burying the placenta in this manner is supposed to maintain the relationship between child and local territory plays out through the narrative structure of the story, wherein the young child departs and returns with his powers increased. This reflects the fact that monks were often the most mobile members of local communities. The practice of monks travelling away from the village to learn more and returning with a higher status was quite common (Kamala 2003:159). Monks therefore provided an important linkages between local villages and wider political and social structures.

The narrative also includes powerful symbols of marking and claiming territory by Somdet Jao Pha Kho. Best known are his transformative footprints. Most famous is the one which turned salt water fresh, but also that which imprinted the stone in Ayutthaya, or the footprint now venerated

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<sup>141</sup> The connection to place is double, in this case, as large trees such as this one are often considered to be the residences of spirits of place, or guardian spirits (Darlington 1998, Isager and Ivarsson 2002:404). Trainor also notes the association of trees with *cetiya* or reliquaries and the ancient Indian practice of propitiating spirits thought to reside in trees, also serving as boundary markers for communities (Trainor 1997).

at Wat Pha Kho. Such acts domesticate territory. In the case of the desalinating miracle, it purified, made drinkable, and therefore domesticated an aspect of the 'landscape'. Such acts of intimate connection with the landscape have a strong history in Buddhism, and can be traced back to such quintessential acts as the Buddha calling upon the power of Earth to subdue Mara,<sup>142</sup> which resulted in a purifying flood.<sup>143</sup>

These elements of territorialising power are prevalent in the story but they are not just expressions of local belonging. As a 'royal lord' who embodied the authority of the king of Ayutthaya, Somdet Jao Pha Kho's role in Satingphra is also suggestive of the extension of royal power down the peninsula. This leads into a discussion of the political significance of Somdet Jao Pha Kho and the area he was said to have ruled for the process of state formation, past and present.

#### *State formation in Satingphra*

Although the historical evidence about premodern Satingphra is very thin, it is clear that the region was a frontier zone of sorts.<sup>144</sup> In the seventeenth century the region was a zone of contact, interaction and conflict. The fluctuating power and influence of the Siamese kingdoms to the north, most importantly Ayutthaya, and the various Malay sultanates to the south, made this region a frontier land where ethno-religious difference was playing an ever-increasingly significant role. The previously Buddhist Malay sultanates had converted to Islam one to two centuries beforehand, and various 'pirates' raided the agriculturally-based Buddhist communities up

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<sup>142</sup> The Buddhist equivalent of the Devil. The embodiment of all the defilements the Buddha set out to overcome.

<sup>143</sup> Another example is the story of the Buddha placing feet on two mountains in an act of claiming the territory he straddled. (Tambiah 1987:117).

<sup>144</sup> As is made clear in Figure 4 on page 123.

the Peninsula. In many ways the middle section of the peninsula, and the area around Songkhla Lake in particular, were a major point of contact between the Islamic-dominated 'maritime' and Buddhist-dominated 'mainland' Southeast Asia.<sup>145</sup>

Wyatt describes this period as one of instability and rebellion, stating that "[f]or a time in the seventeenth century, chronic rebellion had been the rule for the more distant reaches of the Malay Peninsula" (Wyatt 1984:137). In 1630 the Malay sultanate of Patani actually attacked Phatthalung and Nakhon Sri Thammarat, bringing Songkhla into the fighting as well (Wyatt 1984:110). Later in the seventeenth century there was long-running conflict between Patani and Songkhla, with Ayutthaya and Nakhon finally assisting Patani to defeat the ruler of Songkhla around 1680 (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:19). Teeuw and Wyatt note that the Siamese records at that time contain numerous mentions of attacks by the Achenese, the Aru and by Johore on the east coast of the peninsula during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries at a time when Ayutthaya was preoccupied with conflicts with Burmese and Khmer kingdoms (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:9).

It should also be noted that during this period the area was certainly not 'Thai' in the modern sense. Teeuw and Wyatt make the point that at that time Phatthalung was a Muslim province or dependency of Ayutthaya, periodically ruled by Muslim governors, and that Songkhla also had a substantial Muslim population. Nakhon Sri Thammarat, which became a Siamese province early in the sixteenth century and was ruled by a governor appointed by Ayutthaya (Wyatt 1984:110), is often portrayed as the southernmost arm of Siamese influence, acting as Ayutthaya's deputy on the peninsula, albeit with a great level of autonomy. Kobkua states that, on the

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<sup>145</sup> Of course, 'Southeast Asia' as a geographical designation did not exist until after the Second World War and is more the product of geo-political realities at that time than the reflection of any intrinsic identity.

whole, “up to the reign of Rama I, Nakorn was the sole Siamese authority in the south. Its autonomy was so great that outsiders have often mistaken Nakorn’s status, and accorded its governor the title of *raja*” (Kobkua 1988:7).<sup>146</sup> Zulkifli Mohamad (2002:9), goes as far as suggesting that Nakhon was not as purely Siamese as is often assumed in Thai historiography, stating that “the Sultan of Ligor”,<sup>147</sup> although formally under the suzerainty of Ayutthaya, retained a deal of independence. Overall then, the picture painted here is one of constantly shifting alliances, with peninsula states attempting to balance the desire for their own autonomy with the need for the protection of more powerful states.

*The Encyclopaedia of Thai Culture, Southern Region* (1999:2431-4) suggests that Wat Pha Kho played an important role in the struggle against the marauding of neighbouring Muslim ‘provinces’ (*huamüang khaek*) that had completely destroyed a number of towns and monasteries around that time.<sup>148</sup> The *Encyclopaedia* states that the “central authorities” (i.e. Ayutthaya) made use of the institution of Buddhism as a bulwark against invading Muslim groups to provide a defence against invasion, described as being of both a cultural and political nature (*pen thi sakat kan kanrukran thang wathanatham lae kanmüang*). To this end the abbot of Wat Pha Kho (*jao khana wat pha kho*) was given special rights and powers, as well as special responsibilities. Rights included an exemption from the ‘rice-field tax’ (*kha*

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<sup>146</sup> It would however appear that the governor of Nakhon himself sometimes ‘mistook’ his status, rebelling against the authority of the centre and declaring himself *raja*, as for example during the power vacuum that ensued following the sack of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767. As a result, the new Siamese king in Thonburi, Taksin, was forced to send an army to defeat Nakhon and install a new governor (Wyatt 1984:140-1). Kobkua herself notes that as late as the reign of Rama I Bangkok made Songkhla its viceroy in the South and charged it with administering its Malay dependencies in part because it wanted to curtail the power of Nakhon “as its loyalty to Bangkok had become suspect” (Kobkua 1988:7).

<sup>147</sup> I.e. Nakhon Sri Thammarat.

<sup>148</sup> In the 1698 *tamra*, reprinted in *Thesaphiban* in 1912, the editor, possibly Prince Damrong, identifies ‘Ujong Tanah’ as Malay for ‘Land’s End’ and therefore that these pirates hailed from Johore (Gesick 1995:72, fn.1).

na) for the temple and the lands it controlled and an exemption of villagers under the control of the temple from corvée labour outside the purview of the temple. The monastery was also granted political power and the right to dispense justice without limitations from outside power. Significantly, in the case of an attack or danger to the territory or religion, the abbot had an obligation to gather all able bodied people to aid in the defence of “the boundary stones (*sema*) and the religion” (*Encyclopaedia of Southern Thai Culture* 1999:2434).<sup>149</sup>

There is evidence to suggest that the battles with ‘pirates’ amounted to a cultural war at some level and involved the symbolic control over territory. For example, Gesick notes that the ruler of Nakhon Sri Thammarat, having routed the Ujong Tanah pirates that had been raiding the area, “[d]uring his triumphal return journey ... built stupas on Khao Daeng (Red Mountain) and surrounding islands at the southern tip of the Sathing Phra Peninsula” (Gesick 1995:47). Furthermore, it is recorded that his wife subsequently toured through Sathingphra in order to restore temple buildings, install Buddha images, rebuild monks’ quarters and bestow land for the upkeep of the monasteries – all considered to be virtuous acts of merit-making. This would appear to be not only a means of defending against the dangers of ‘pirate’ attacks, but also as a method of bypassing local centres of ‘Siamese’ power, such as Nakhon Sri Thammarat. Therefore it is necessary to consider the practice of monastic landlordship in some more detail.

Monastic landlordship can be viewed as a territorialising strategy of premodern Buddhist polities. Charnvit discusses the building of monasteries and the provision of temple slaves as one of the primary means of territorial expansion and consolidation during the Ayutthayan era. He notes that in the kingdom of Ayutthaya the *Sangha* was the “best means for the government to

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<sup>149</sup> For a detailed study of Buddhism in this area during the Ayutthaya period, see Suthiwong (1975).

reach down to the villages" in an era "in which communications were poor and where state power could scarcely reach the peasant population directly" (Charnvit 1976:136). Thus "Buddhism was ... used for essentially empire-building purposes" (Charnvit 1976:101), especially through the building of temples, which not only glorified the current king but also provided a means of dealing with the perennial problem of maintaining a stable manpower base.

Ishii (1986: xv), by contrast, notes that while monastic estates (*thorani song*) existed in Theravada countries, they were not that common, probably because monarchs usually sought to maintain the dependence of the *Sangha* and avoid it becoming an alternative source of political power. However, in a situation where distant states were in constant rebellion, as was the case in peninsula Thailand, and where religion was becoming an increasingly significant source of differentiation, it is not surprising that the support of Buddhist institutions might have been a preferred strategy.

Control was asserted by means of the longstanding practice of assigning temple slaves, who were exempt from corvée labour and only worked for the temple to which they were attached. This enabled "the clustering of dense populations in permanent settlements within easy political reach" (Charnvit 1976:102, see also Terwiel 1984). It was common for such endowments to provide not only land for monasteries but to include peasants, craftsmen and so on to "keep the buildings and monuments in good repair, to maintain the monastery grounds, and to protect the Sangha's property from vandals and thieves" (C. J. Reynolds 1979:190). In Siam, this practice was gradually phased out by a number of bureaucratic changes during the reign of King Chulalongkorn which marked the transition of the economy from its reliance on indentured labour to a system of wage labour relations, 'rationalised' the Sangha administration, and finally in 1905 put an



end to legal claims to renew endowments with the Conscriptio Act (C. J. Reynolds 1979:191).

Although this practice has been superseded, I argue that the idea of monastic landlordship as expressed in the Somdet Jao Pha Kho story continues to be significant. I return to this point below, but first it is necessary to consider the texts and textual traditions which expressed the process of state formation and the complex relationship between centre and periphery central to the Somdet Jao Pha Kho story.

### *The Power of Texts*

Any attempt to understand the genesis of the figure of Somdet Jao Pha Kho must take into account the textual tradition wherein he was originally recorded, namely that of the royal decrees and their accompanying texts, and subsequent elaborations. Historically, the elements of the Somdet Jao Pha Kho story as it is told today did not exist in one place but are the product of a complex accretion over time. There is some historical documentary evidence relating to the life of Somdet Jao Pha Kho, though no documents that actually date back to the period in which he is supposed to have lived. Manuscripts (*tamra*) are in the form of royal decrees and accompanying texts pertaining to royal endowments to monasteries and their subsidiaries. These belonged to important local ordination lineages and exempted their monasteries from taxes, and their surrounding communities from *corvée* and other forms of indentured labour. Included in these documents are details of the crystal ball, Pu's ordination as a novice at Wat Di Luang, his academic aptitude, his ordination on a raft in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, his travel by sea to Ayutthaya during which he performed the desalinating miracle, and his solution of the riddles of the foreign ambassadors which led to the king granting his request for the people around Wat Pha Kho to be exempted from taxes and *corvée*.

labour and to work instead on the upkeep of the temple and those under its control. The same manuscript also mentions Phra Samiram's finding of a Buddha footprint on Pha Kho hill and "his refurbishment and successful request for the royal endowment of the ancient reliquary stupa there" (Gesick 2002:3).

These are the only details included in this manuscript, and as Gesick notes the next texts that deal with the life of Luang Phò Thuat were written by Siamese elites early in the twentieth century as part of the project of constructing a national history. The primary example is *The Chronicles of Phatthalung*, written by Luang Siworawat in 1917, in which he used manuscripts obtained from the South, including the two mentioned above. He also records details from the oral tradition of the people living around Wat Pha Kho, who referred to Luang Phò Thuat as Than Jao Pha Kho Phumibun,<sup>150</sup> which includes the story that Luang Phò Thuat impressed some pirates who had captured him into returning him. In this account, he also states that local people believed that the footprint on Pha Kho hill was that of Somdet Jao Pha Kho, and that he did not die "but disappeared by *iddhi* powers" (Luang Siworawat, translated and cited by Gesick 2002:4).

The other elements of the story, such as the burial of the placenta of the child Pu, the existence of Setthi Pan, the curing of the cholera epidemic, his *thudong* walk from Ayutthaya to the South, the story of the novice with the 'heavenly flower' and his disappearance as a fireball, do not appear in any documents prior to the 1960s, when these elements from local oral history

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<sup>150</sup> Literally meaning 'one who has merit'. See below for my discussion of the significance of this appellation.

were compiled into printed temple pamphlets (Gesick 2002:5). This is of course not to say that these elements are necessarily recent additions.<sup>151</sup>

I now turn to the crucial documents, the royal decrees. These documents demonstrate the connections between this monastic figure and a particular kind of centre-periphery relationship that they represented. Stored and maintained at local temples such as Wat Pha Kho, these documents were 'discovered' by Siamese elites who surveyed the areas early in the twentieth century. As Gesick (1995) relates, when shown the texts by their local guardians, these men were told of the miraculous power that could make these texts – repositories of the voice of the king himself – too dangerous to read. In some cases, sections of the texts were ground up and used in the production of herbal remedies. Thus, Gesick emphasises, far from being historical materials in the traditional sense, these texts were regarded as talismanic and potentially perilous objects in their own right. In this sense these texts were in themselves protective objects associated with taboos of various kinds. They embodied the invulnerability-providing power of the king's voice.

Tony Day, making use of Gesick's work, connects such texts and the process of state formation:

In seventeenth century southern Thailand, a region prone to frequent attacks by 'pirates' from Johore, passages of ornate language that gave

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<sup>151</sup> There is also a gender element to these transformations – particularly from predominantly oral to written forms. Gesick reports that authority to know the details of the story was passed down matrilineally and reflected the claims to ownership passing along female descent lines. By contrast the written texts have almost exclusively been produced by men – particularly abbots or former monks. Furthermore, the dominant movement in Thai nationalist discourse produced in the twentieth century has been to deemphasise matriarchal figures such as Lady White Blood and to circumscribe local female oral traditions (Gesick 1995, C. J. Reynolds 1994:67). It would appear, however, that female authority at the local level has not completely disappeared and on my visits to Wat Pha Kho. Young men I approached about the stories would direct me to older women as they 'know the correct stories'. However, the widespread perpetuation of the Luang Phò Thuat story by monasteries such as Wat Pha Kho has been predominantly controlled by men.

voice to the authority of the distant king of Ayutthaya, protected the rights and freedoms of various Buddhist temples and the kin groups and lands associated with their upkeep (Day 2002:159).

Taking the 'local' perspective on this relationship, Gesick makes the point that these texts 'meant' more to the communities that preserved them than merely their supernatural powers of protection:

The petitioners for *tamra* did not petition the king merely to have powerful royal utterances inscribed to keep as talismans in their villages. They petitioned in order to have powerful royal utterances inscribed *with the particular words* that would insure the continuance of their communities' autonomy (Gesick 1995:46).

This suggests the process of state formation was negotiated and promoted in both directions rather than simply being something imposed from Ayutthaya. This notion is supported by the elaborations within the textual tradition produced by local communities.

Gesick notes that the *tamra* were comprised of two main interpenetrating and interdependent 'texts': those concerning royal decrees of endowments to local monasteries of tax-exemptions, land and temple slaves; and accompanying 'historical narratives', which are locally composed histories of the monasteries in question, their surrounding communities and heroic figures associated with their establishment and maintenance (Gesick 1995:22-3). The local communities not only maintained and copied the decrees when they deteriorated but added supplementary historical narratives "in which the 'ancestry' of the *tamra* was remembered and recorded" (Gesick 1995:37). Thus, besides a concern in the local community with retaining the historical documents that testified to their rights, there was also a concern to maintain the 'pedigree' of the documents themselves

through appending additional histories detailing how the endowments were decreed in the first instance.

It seems that in order to bolster their case, many of these appended historical narratives portray an originary encounter in which a local figure, through his miraculous powers or some other exemplary behaviour, earns a debt of gratitude from the king. The story of Somdet Jao Pha Kho in these manuscripts thus follows similar lines to those of other heroes of the region who are said to have petitioned kings of Ayutthaya to endow temples belonging to local ordination chapters.<sup>152</sup> These other figures include another 'magic monk' locally known as Phra Khru In, a local of Bang Kaeo in neighbouring Phatthalung.<sup>153</sup> A brief recounting of his story, as preserved in local manuscripts, will illustrate the narrative parallels with Somdet Jao Pha Kho.

Phra Khru In was associated with the Pa Kaeo, or Langka Kaeo lineage, another important lineage in Phatthalung. Like the Luang Phò Thuat narrative the story of Phra Khru In follows the 'local boy makes good' format. Born in Bang Kaeo, Phatthalung, Phra Khru In became a monk who travelled far and wide in a Chinese junk, dispersing enemies by magic. He returned to his elderly parents and restored several monasteries in his local area, then took a list of these monasteries to the king of Ayutthaya to request their endowment. However, when he arrived he found the city besieged and on the verge of falling to the enemy. When the king of Ayutthaya asked for volunteers to defend the city, Phra Khru In requested a horse and five hundred white-robed ascetics, whom he led into battle. Taken by surprise by

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<sup>152</sup> There were four important ordination lineages in this area: Langka Ram, based around Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Langka Kaeo in Phatthalung, Lankachat centred on Wat Pha Kho in Satingphra, and an originary Langka Doem chapter of an unknown location. Each of the other three lineages have similar textual histories of petitions made for monastic endowments made to kings of Ayutthaya.

<sup>153</sup> Short for Phra Khru Intharamoli.

this tactic, the enemy fled in confusion. The king was of course very grateful for this action and immediately granted the requested endowments (as related by Gesick 1995:43-4).

The chronicles of Nakhon Sri Thammarat also include an analogous set of stories, including that of an heroic elephant-tamer who won the Ayutthayan king's favour when he presented him with a fine white elephant and was able to petition the king to restore temples and reaffirm the privileges of his kin group (Gesick 1995:45).<sup>154</sup> In all these cases these local heroes acted as representatives of older ancestral figures. They are all responsible for renewing and restoring important Buddhist structures and relics established by more ancient originary figures. Thus Phra Khru In restored temples built by the ancient Lady White Blood and her brother/husband Phaya Kuman, while Somdet Jao Pha Kho's petition to the king was related to the restoration of the ancient reliquary stupa at Wat Pha Kho.

Each of these stories turn on a north-south axis. Within the narrative framework of these texts the local community in Satingphra is oriented towards the north, towards Ayutthaya, which represents the centre of civilisation and the source of sacred power. To the south, by contrast, there is only the peril of lawless agents – 'pirates' – against whom the miraculous and protective powers of heroic figures are vitally important. In each case a journey is made along a north-south trajectory between the periphery and centre. This journey has precisely the performative effect of inscribing periphery *as* periphery and centre *as* centre. The movement of the ancestral figure to the capital and back, in the process bearing the gratitude and the powerful words of the king, connects these two geographically distant

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<sup>154</sup> 'White', or albino, elephants are widely considered to be auspicious and associated with royalty in Southeast Asia. Elephants will also feature in similar stories of territorial expansion in the Pattani region in the next chapter.

realms and constructs them as belonging to a single political entity. In the case of the Somdet Jao Pha Kho story, this journey is broken by Nakhon Sri Thammarat. Yet although Nakhon is an important centre of Buddhist learning, it is constructed as subsidiary to Ayutthaya as it was not possible for the monk to complete his training there. He realised that he 'needed to' travel on to the political centre as his education could only be completed there.<sup>155</sup>

The arc of this journey thus equates the completeness of the Buddhist scriptures with the political entity of Siam itself. A growing proximity to Ayutthaya is associated with the accumulation of Somdet Jao Pha Kho's knowledge of the Dhamma. This parallel between political power and integrity and the wholeness of the Buddhist scriptures is borne out in the episode of the Abhidhamma puzzle. Like Phra Khru In, Somdet Jao Pha Kho travels to Ayutthaya because it represents the pinnacle of knowledge and power. However, instead of finding plenitude at the symbolic core these local heroes find a dangerous lack. Both monks find that Ayutthaya is vulnerable and in need of saving. In the case of Phra Khru In, it is literally threatened with invasion. In the case of Somdet Jao Pha Kho, the threat is more metaphorical. The integrity of the kingdom is associated with the wholeness of the Buddhist scriptures, which are literally fragmented into its 84,000 component parts by the Sri Lankan envoy. The knowledge of the monastic order as a whole is shown to be lacking, and it is only the actions of the extraordinary heroic figure that reconstruct the scriptures and reasserts the kingdom's integrity and sovereignty. The versions that suggest that the loss of the wager would have led to Siam becoming a tributary state imply

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<sup>155</sup> This is perhaps not completely true to Nakhon's historical status, where its monks in different eras were often considered to be *superior* to those elsewhere in the kingdom and it was elders from Nakhon that were at times brought to other centres as part of efforts to purify the religion there.

that the ability to maintain the integrity of the scriptures is a prerequisite for sovereignty.<sup>156</sup>

Thus in the narrative space of these stories and their elaborations, local heroes like Somdet Jao Pha Kho actively participate in state formation. The narrative contains the classic elements of state formation – local knowledge, talismanic power, and invulnerability – outlined by Tony Day:

I argue that whether monumentalized as a temple, worn as an amulet, or printed as a ‘modern’ text, knowledge in the region is conceived of as a magical talisman that offers time-annulling protection against danger and misfortune. In this way, the acquisition and activation of knowledge at all levels of society, rather than counteracting the state, contributes instead to its continuous reformation / re-formation (Day 2002:92).

In a similar vein, he states that:

In all cases knowledge acts as a talisman of invulnerability that transforms the bearer and those who seek the protection of the same talismanic sphere of influence into a ‘state’ of well-being. What really differentiates one invulnerable ‘state’ from the next is scale, rather than ideological and technological differences... (Day 2002:160)

In examples that echo the institution of monastic landlordship, Day notes that economic competition between peasants would have been susceptible to manipulation by states “which promoted ancestor-consciousness as a form of centralizing social control while at the same time holding out ‘positions of power’ to peasants and their families” (Day

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<sup>156</sup> Through this analogy between a political entity and the Buddhist scriptures, this story participates in a notion that can be traced to the archetypal Buddhist king, Asoka. Upon conversion he is said to have collected relics of the Buddha, divided them up into 84,000 parts and constructed 84,000 reliquary stupas throughout his kingdom to stand for each of the elements of the Buddhist scriptures (Trainor 1997:40-1). The parallels between the integrity of the scriptures, territory and righteous rulership are here made clear.



2002:57). These strategies represent attempts to encourage villagers to participate in the king's own conception of time and ancestral power "by means of which he imagined that he could control the world of the village, the powerful supernatural forces associated with ancestors, and time itself. Engaging repeatedly in ritual activity and acquiring enhanced status enabled villagers to participate (*bhakti*) in the state" (Day 2002:59).

The logic of the Southeast Asian "theatre state" (Geertz 1980) characterised by powerful symbolic gestures precisely due to its political weakness and inability to enforce coercive control over peripheral areas, works both ways in this context. Not only are the miraculous words of the king supposed to work their protective magic over the domains that they endow, but the locally constructed narratives of local heroes are also constructed in a manner designed to convince or even 'coerce' the political centre through the performative power of its own 'utterances'. The kingdom is presented as oddly vulnerable at its core, and yet, paradoxically, it is the word of the King, in the form of a decree, which is needed to ensure the ongoing monastic endowments. The centre does not merely make a claim over the periphery, the periphery also makes a claim over the centre.

These elements of the story, which are recounted with great relish in present-day conversations, suggest why it has retained its relevance in the modern era. The current emotional power of such a story should not be underestimated in a society where a crucial aspect of national identity is the "core myth of never having been colonized" (Hong 2004:352).<sup>157</sup> Somdet Jao Pha Kho occupies a similar space to other 'national' heroes and heroines who have been virtually deified in recent years within Thai popular culture.

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<sup>157</sup> See also Herzfeld (2002) on what he calls "crypto-colonialism" in Thailand. See also P. A. Jackson (2004a) on "semi-coloniality".

*Luang Phò Thuat the Bodhisattva*

Another important element of the Somdet Jao Pha Kho story is his designation as a *bodhisattva*, and indeed as none other than the future Buddha Sri Ariya Mettaya (*phra si an*).

The concept of the *bodhisattva* is complex in the context of Theravada Buddhism. It has been associated with both claims to legitimacy of rulers and the millenarian aspirations of villagers. Importantly, too, it is a concept shared with Mahayana Buddhism, but generally given a very different emphasis.<sup>158</sup> All these aspects of the *bodhisattva* concept are significant for exploring the reasons for Luang Phò Thuat's development and the manner in which he has been taken up by different populations in recent years.

Though an essentially otherworldly conception, it has been noted that the ideal of the *bodhisattva* has been used again and again for political purposes in Theravada Buddhist societies (Bechert 1973:89, 93).<sup>159</sup> The commonly held notion that the king is the individual with the greatest accumulated merit would imply that other men<sup>160</sup> can make claims to the throne on the basis of having superior merit (see, for example, Charnvit 1976:46-7). The concept of *barami* (accumulated stores of merit), Jory notes, is historically and scripturally tied to the *bodhisattva* ideal (Jory 2002:37). Furthermore, the main text upon which the concept of righteous leadership was based was the tales of the Bodhisattva, the Vessantara Jataka. This was, according to Jory, one of the most important texts in the premodern Thai State for the expression and dissemination of a political theory based on the concept of *barami* and the exemplary figure of the *bodhisattva*-king." (Jory 2002:38).

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<sup>158</sup> This aspect will be further elaborated in chapter 6.

<sup>159</sup> These are generally considered to be Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

<sup>160</sup> I use the gender-specific term here advisedly.

Importantly, individuals claiming high levels of accumulated merit often feature as foundational or restorative figures (Charnvit 1976:42, Tambiah 1984:296). As Tambiah states:

Some of the holy men have figured in the literature as 'pioneers', aiding state formation by working on the frontiers of expanding polities. Whether they antedated the arrival of Buddhism in the region or acted as parallel agents to Buddhist monks in these colonizing activities, we see in Southeast Asia an active collaboration between holy man and political ruler from the very beginning of known dynastic history. Buddhism, with its monastic literary traditions, has in due course provided the best-developed ideological and reflexive statement regarding the union of religion and polity (Tambiah 1984:298).

Thus Buddhist monks and other holy men are seen in their role of consolidating the Buddhist polity, working at the frontiers, as a sort of *avant-garde* of the expanding polity. The story of Somdet Jao Pha Kho would also suggest that such linkages between religion and polity are salient in this case.

Tambiah, however, also notes the tendency of holy men of a variety of kinds to be associated with 'millennial Buddhism', which "in its most articulated form it may be identified with the messianic hopes surrounding the coming righteous ruler and the coming Maitreya Buddha" (Tambiah 1984:298). Such millennialism has a long history in the North and Northeast of Thailand, and the charisma of particular holy men has formed the centre of rebellions against the expansion of the centralising Siamese state in the early twentieth century (see, for example, Keyes 1977).<sup>161</sup>

Accordingly, there are elements in the Somdet Jao Pha Kho story that would appear to be the fulfilment of the millennial sentiments of villagers

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<sup>161</sup> Paul Cohen has also written on the connection between the *bodhisattva* ideal and the desire to produce an ideal 'Buddha Land' (*phuttaphum*) in the Yuan tradition of Northern Thailand (P. T. Cohen 1983, 1999, 2000).

living on the Satingphra Peninsula. After rescuing the kingdom of Ayutthaya from at the best humiliation and at the worst outright loss of sovereignty to a foreign – non-Buddhist – power, the saint returns to his home town a hero, takes up a monastic landlordship and, combining the roles of saint and secular ruler, governs the peninsula in peace and accordance with the principles of the Dhamma, dispensing justice fairly to all who would come to the temple and plead their case. However, at the same time as expressing this apparently millennial vision for society, the return of the saint to Satingphra with the favour of the Ayutthayan king also represents the consolidation of the power of Ayutthaya in that part of the peninsula. The restoration of the *chedi* at Wat Pha Kho and the rule according to Dhammic principles served to firmly stamp the authority of Theravada Buddhism in this region.

Jory states that the *bodhisattva* tradition of kingship declined with the forces of Thailand's modernisation and was increasingly replaced by "national-dynastic historical narratives" (Jory 2002:63). "Today", he states, "the concept of barami survives in Thai political discourse only as a relic of the form or moral-political system of belief of which it was once a part" (Jory 2002:63). I would argue that the concept of the *bodhisattva* continues to be of importance in imaginings of legitimate state power. Also, as a term with multiple meanings within Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions, the concept of the *bodhisattva* provides a productive space for cultural innovation. These points will be expanded upon in the following chapters.

Conclusion: Many Places into One



Figure 22. Image of Somdet Jao Rachamuni ... Kò Yò, located outside Wat Suwankhiri, Songkhla Province.

At the southern end of the Satingphra Peninsula, just outside Wat Suwankhiri, is a small and relatively unattended shrine with the statue of a monk inside. The writing on its base, partially illegible due to age, announce it as ‘Somdet Jao Rachamuni [...] Kò Yò’. Built in 1962, this statue closely resembles images of Luang Phò Thuat. In fact, I thought it *was* Luang Phò Thuat until I inspected the image more closely and was able to read the name inscribed on it. The current

abbot of Wat Suwankhiri was unable to explain the reason for this naming. He said that it *was* in fact an image of Luang Phò Thuat and had no explanation for why it was named “Kò Yò”.

He rationalised that the same monk can have different names in different places: thus Luang Phò Thuat is known as Somdet Jao Pha Kho at Wat Pha Kho while he is known as Luang Phò Thuat Wat Chang Hai in Pattani. This throws into question whether Somdet Jao Kò Yò, one of the three Somdet mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, is in fact a separate monk, as he is represented in the museum display. In a sense, the abbot of Wat Suwankhiri was proposing a notion reminiscent of Gesick’s (1995) argument that local stories have historically been in ‘conversation’ with each

other, and it is considered perfectly reasonable for different places to have their own variations of common stories, each containing different emphases, different details and so on. The differences in stories from place to place complement and confirm, rather than contradict and exclude, each other. Since the mid-twentieth century Luang Phò Thuat has emerged as an increasingly singular figure and a multiplicity of 'places' have been rendered 'the same' by his *saksit* presence. This powerful presence, linked together by a series of related narratives, provides the mechanism by which multiple locations may become one.

In a similar way, the story of Somdet Jao Pha Kho provides a dramatisation of the original encounter between periphery and centre in which a relationship of exchange was developed between the two. Rather than merely representing the incorporation or domination of a far-flung part of a kingdom, the monastic endowments and the decrees they produced were a mutually supportive performative act. Somdet Jao Pha Kho's ability to provide protection and a 'state of well being' for the local inhabitants – historically or mythologically, whether historically 'real' or not – is also dramatised in the story. The notion of Somdet Jao Pha Kho as a *bodhisattva* reflected both the legitimating ideology of Buddhist power but also the millennial sentiments of the local population who thought of Somdet Jao Pha Kho as a *phu mi bun*. A range of territorialising practices, including monastic landlordship and the provision of invulnerability, intimately link this Buddhist power to the locality. If we think of state formation as occurring at multiple levels of society, and based on multiple instances of participation, such millennial aspirations, far from representing a desired escape from state control by a local population, may also express the fact that 'the state', in its ideal form, *is not present enough*.

In the next chapter I turn to Pattani of the 1950s and 1960s and the social milieu from which Luang Phò Thuat emerged. I argue that 'the state',

that was already inscribed in the stories of Somdet Jao Pha Kho and could be reworked according to the new imperatives of state building involved in the incorporate of the Pattani region. As I will argue, this fusing of narrative and places took on a new dimension in the 1950s, this time in a new border zone which at that time was being contested in a three-way struggle between Thai state authorities, separatist movements, and communist insurgents. Though there may have been a certain amount of contingency involved in the initial production of the figure of Luang Phò Thuat in Pattani, I argue that it is the various factors discussed above, including Luang Phò Thuat's credentials as a 'national' defender, which made him an ideal candidate to emerge in another context of conflict and danger. And in the process Luang Phò Thuat became a figure who performatively sutured 'Buddhist' and 'Muslim' historical spheres of control and thereby came to embody the notion of a unified South.





## Chapter Five

### Suturing the State: Luang Phò Thuat and Pattani

All saints are more or less constructed in that, being necessarily saints for other people, they are remodelled in the collective representation which is made of them.

— Pierre Deloiz (cited in Wyschogrod:7)

What happened to Somdet Jao Pha Kho after he miraculously disappeared from Satingphra in the form of a fireball? Where did he go, and how did he end his life? For the residents of Satingphra the ‘spirit’ of the lord of Pha Kho remains an enduring, and in a sense still living, presence. Somdet Jao Pha Kho is still closely attached to place: he remains bound to the sites of power – the hill on which his footprint is imprinted, the tree under which his placenta was buried – already inscribed by his physical being. However, the story of his life was not circumscribed by his death. His ‘oeuvre’ – in the sense that a saint’s life-work is his life itself – was not yet complete. The extraordinary and indeterminate nature of the monk’s departure from Wat Pha Kho left the door open for new elaborations of his life story. Moreover, the fact that he disappeared rather than died has meant that it has been possible for another site to stake a claim to his bodily remains, and to lay claim to his charisma in death.

It was not until the 1950s that the new elaborations emerged, not in Satingphra but in the province of Pattani, one of the four Malay-Muslim dominated provinces that make up the ‘deep’ South of modern-day Thailand. In 1954, Phrakhru Wisaisophon, locally known as Ajan Thim, the abbot of Wat Chang Hai, an obscure village monastery, began producing amulets depicting a monk named Luang Phò Thuat Yiap Nam Thale Jüt. In a short time these amulets gained a reputation for providing their wearers with invulnerability and became very popular among the armed forces, especially the Border Patrol Police (Peltier 1977). This reputation soon spread beyond the armed forces and nowadays Luang Phò Thuat amulets

are among the most sought-after and valuable in Thailand, and Wat Chang Hai is one of the most well-known and (until the eruption of violence in 2004) well-patronised monasteries in southern Thailand.

Around the time the first amulets were produced, Anan Khananurak, a prominent local Sino-Thai merchant and politician, compiled and wrote pamphlets detailing the history and identity of Luang Phò Thuat which were printed by Wat Chang Hai.<sup>162</sup> Identifying Luang Phò Thuat as one and the same monk as Somdet Jao Pha Kho, these pamphlets outlined for the first time the 'missing years' following the monk's disappearance from Wat Pha Kho. These brochures became the basis of the most frequently encountered version of the life of this saint. In the process, Wat Chang Hai, Ajan Thim, and Pattani itself, became primarily associated with the saint in popular consciousness.

This chapter deals with the emergence of the epicentre of Luang Phò Thuat's influence in Pattani and the manner in which this was tied with Satingphra. I consider the main actors responsible for this process, Anan Khananurak and Ajan Thim. In particular, I focus on Ajan Thim and the manner in which his role is now remembered. I also argue that the 'shift' from Satingphra to Pattani was intimately tied to the new imperative towards state-building in peripheral regions that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat cannot simply be explained as the result of changing state policy. Rather, it was a consequence of the intersection of the interests of state authorities and local figures expressed at the intersection of Buddhism and more localised religious traditions. I therefore argue that similar processes of state formation as

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<sup>162</sup> The Khananurak dynasty was one of the most influential in that area, with long-term involvement in local politics. Nai Anan himself had held the position of mayor of Pattani and members of his family had been involved in the construction of the shrine for the famous local Chinese goddess, Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao.

outlined in the previous chapter, involving participation at a number of levels, were at work despite the different context and 'modern' system of state power. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the production of invulnerability and local knowledge remained an aspect of state formation during the 'modern' era, as well as the continuing development of the palimpsest of narratives to make many places into one.

As stated, Ajan Thim and Nai Anan are the two individuals who are most responsible for the "enfranchisement" (Gell 1998), the endowing of social agency, on Luang Phò Thuat, and allowed his various images to become widely respected objects of power (*sing saksit*). However, the manner in which they each did this differed. As already stated, Anan Khananurak researched the history of the saint, compiled stories and produced the first histories of Luang Phò Thuat in brochures printed and distributed by Wat Chang Hai. By contrast, Ajan Thim reinscribed and rearticulated the presence of Luang Phò Thuat in a more embodied fashion. As the result of a series of visions and other 'discoveries', Ajan Thim proved himself to be the primary and privileged 'medium' through which the essence of Luang Phò Thuat came to take material form. It needs to be emphasised, however, that Ajan Thim never claimed to be possessed by the ancestral saint. His 'mediumship' derived from his superior ability 'to see the world as it really is', especially his superior sensitivity to the presence of Luang Phò Thuat, and the authority that derived from them. In his own wanderings, Ajan Thim literally retraced the footsteps of Luang Phò Thuat, rediscovering paths and sites – caves, waterfalls and other features of the landscape considered to be places of power – that had been marked by the saint's presence during his 'originary' wanderings, and reawakening their association with him.

Before moving on to the conclusion of the Luang Phò Thuat story it is necessary to provide some background details about the character of Wat

Chang Hai during the period of my fieldwork and the nature of my research there. In addition I will also consider the social milieu out of which Luang Phò Thuat emerged in the 1950s in order to contextualise the significance of his coming to prominence when he did.

*The Wat Chang Hai of my Fieldwork*

My fieldwork took me to Wat Chang Hai on many occasions between 1999-2002. In early 2001, I spent about one month living at the monastery in order to observe more closely the goings on there. I attended several amulet casting and sanctifying ceremonies and observed events surrounding the main rites (*song nam*) paying respect to Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim that occur in April of each year. During this time, I was also able to interview a number of the older members of the community, a number of whom were able to recall Ajan Thim. Some of these men had been ordained as monks during Ajan Thim's time as abbot of Wat Chang Hai and could remember the construction of the first Luang Phò Thuat amulets.

Sadly, my stay also coincided with the sudden and unexpected death of the abbot of Wat Chang Hai, Phra Phaisan Siriwat (Phra Sawat) from illness. He became another in the line of abbots of Wat Chang Hai, including Ajan Thim himself, who had died prematurely (the only abbot to have escaped this fate had moved away from the monastery). This curious fact produced an amount of speculation in the local communities. Although doctors at the hospital in Hat Yai where Phra Sawat had died declared the cause of death to be due to complications associated with diabetes, different theories about the cause of his death floated during the subsequent weeks. One prominent theory I heard was that this was proof of the power that resided in the monastery grounds itself, the power attributed to Luang Phò Thuat's presence. It was explained to me by a resident monk that such an enormous

amount of power can be burdensome over time for the abbot who must channel it, for example, during the processes of sacralising sacred objects. This process always involves 'inviting the spirit' (*anchoen winyan*) of Luang Phò Thuat and the charisma (*barami*) of the abbot must be very great to cope with it. However, it is a great strain and even monks such as Ajan Thim succumbed after a time. Such comments revealed a double-sidedness of this power residing in the monastery: both regenerative, healing, benevolent, but also taxing and dangerous.

It is this reputation for power which has made Wat Chang Hai a thriving centre of religious tourism and sacred production.<sup>163</sup> This fame is expressed in the number of visitors who come to the monastery to pay their respects to Luang Phò Thuat, make devotional offerings and requests, and buy amulets and other images in his likeness. In the month that I spent at this monastery, as well as the many shorter visits, tour buses ranging from air-conditioned coaches to dilapidated chartered city buses would arrive daily. Patrons would disembark and move past various vendors selling food and amulets for the roughly fifteen-minute visit to the monastery. Signs outside the monastery warned visitors not to buy amulets from outside as they could not be guaranteed to be genuine. During their short stay, visitors would generally move straight to the shrine hall (*wihan*) housing the main images of Luang Phò Thuat in order to make offerings of flowers, candles and incense. They would sometimes also make offerings at the stupa housing Luang Phò Thuat's remains, before proceeding to one of several locations where they could purchase amulets, statues, and other

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<sup>163</sup> This level of patronage has been negatively affected by the recent violence in the region, including the bombing of Wat Chang Hai itself and the killing of two monks nearby. The abbot himself has complained publicly that the flow of pilgrims and tourists has dried up, and the number of tour-buses arriving at the monastery has diminished dramatically. I am not in a position to comment on what effect this might be having on the cult of Luang Phò Thuat and the popularity of his images at this point as my fieldwork took place before 2004. In the description above, however, I continue to use the 'ethnographic present'

paraphernalia bearing Luang Phò Thuat's image. According to a number of tour guides and bus drivers with whom I talked as they waited for the tourists to return, the patrons of these tours were on three or four-day tours of the South, during which they would visit several famous locations in the South associated with both leisure and worship.<sup>164</sup> Minibuses carrying mainly Chinese Malaysian and Singaporean tourists were also common. In addition to the shrines dedicated to Luang Phò Thuat, was a shrine hall dedicated to Kuan Im which, I was told, had been built to accommodate the large numbers of Chinese visitors to the monastery.

Wat Chang Hai is also the site of regular image consecration ceremonies and the monks are called upon to consecrate large batches of factory produced images that are transported to the monastery and stacked in the ordination hall (*bot*), where all such consecration rituals take place. These ceremonies are often attended by photographers from amulet magazines, especially *Saksit*, where stories about such events appear on a regular basis.

The charisma of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim has also contributed to the popularity of other ritual services provided both within the monastery and in the surrounding area. Several kinds of ritual specialist live in Chang Hai village, providing services for visitors.<sup>165</sup> These include performers of *manora*, tattooists of sacred designs, and at least one horoscope reader (*mò du*). Each of these traditions derive their practice and attribute their efficacy to the power of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim. For example, in the case of the tattooists Ajan Thim's esoteric knowledge plays a role and he was credited with developing many of the sacred verses (*khatha*) and designs used in their ritual procedures. Using sacred designs (*yan*) created by Ajan

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<sup>164</sup>. Religious tourism in the South will be dealt with more thoroughly in chapter seven.

<sup>165</sup> I will discuss cross-border ritual relationships further in chapters Six through Nine.

Thim, and making use of a series of Pali mantras which he formulated, this group maintains a lineage from generation to generation.<sup>166</sup>

Every year, coinciding with the rites of lustrating (*song nam*) Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim, disciples of the tattooing lineage come from around Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore to pay respects to their masters (i.e. those who tattooed them) (*wai khru*), a ritual obligation that is taken very seriously. As part of the proceedings the members of the lineage, led by the elderly leaders, make offerings of food at the reliquary stupa of Luang Phò Thuat. In the evening many of the men attend a ceremony known as *pluk sek khon* (consecrating people) in order to 'recharge' their tattoos.<sup>167</sup> These rites take much the same form as the consecration of amulets. The tattooed men, their shirts removed, sit in the ordination hall while monks from the monastery perform a consecration rite. I observed men with particularly powerful or dangerous tattoos – such as a tiger or the monkey god Hanuman – being overcome during the ceremony, throwing themselves suddenly on the men behind them or making strange guttural grunts.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Members of the lineage explained to me that those who receive tattoos should follow certain rules and prohibitions set out by the tattooist. For example, they must avoid eating three fruits: papaya (*malakò*), gourds (*namtao*), and star apple (*mafüang*). No explanation for this prohibition was given but I would speculate that the reason is that these fruits are hollow. Given that the primary function of these tattoos is to provide invulnerability, fruits which lack solidness throughout are suggestive of inner weakness. Hollowness may also associate the fruits with femininity and therefore vulnerability to penetration. Tattooed individuals should also avoid eating the food offered when they attend *cheng meng* (if Chinese) or funerals, presumably because this food may be contaminated through their association with death. Food itself is problematic for the maintenance of invulnerability because it crosses bodily boundaries. It is thus not surprising that many of the prohibitions associated with wearing these tattoos focus on the avoidance of problematic or dangerous foods.

<sup>167</sup> A number of men used the 'battery recharging' metaphor when explaining to me why they did this. A similar logic was used for the re-consecration of sacred objects.

<sup>168</sup> I discuss this further in chapter 6.

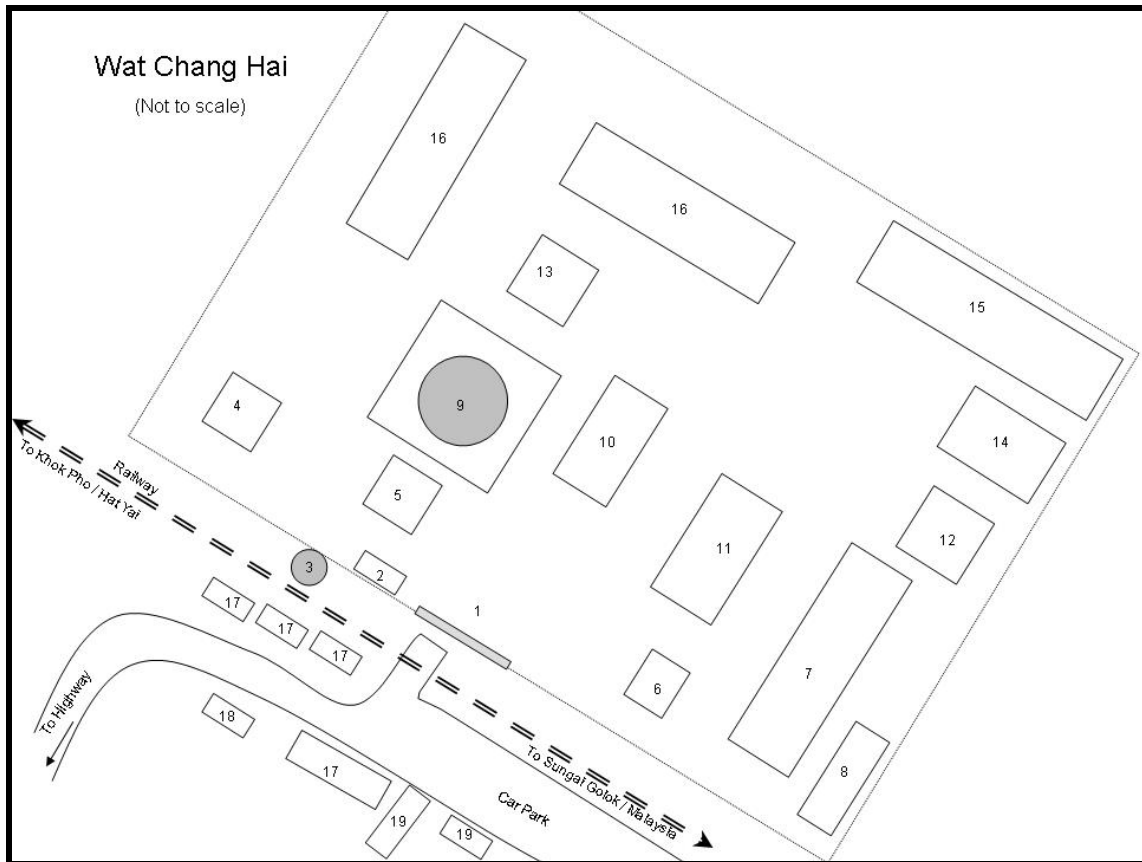


Figure 23. Map of the main buildings of Wat Chang Hai and surrounds

**Legend:**

- |                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Main gate.                      | 12. Abbot's residence                         |
| 2. Votive offerings / amulet stand | 13. Ajan Thim's residence (uninhabited)       |
| 3. Luang Phò Thuat reliquary stupa | 14. Dining room / kitchen / mae chi dwellings |
| 4. Jao Mae Kuan Im shrine          | 15. School building                           |
| 5. Luang Phò Thuat wihan.          | 16. Monks' quarters (kuti)                    |
| 6. Amulet stand                    | 17. Assorted vendors                          |
| 7. Foundation building             | 18. Home of <i>manora</i> expert              |
| 8. Amulet-making workshop          | 19. Homes of tattooists                       |
| 9. Main stupa / Ajan Thim relics   |   |
| 10. Ordination hall                |   |
| 11. Main wihan                     |   |





Figure 24. Side road leading to Wat Chang Hai. It's all about the amulets.



Figure 25. Billboard at Wat Chang Hai advertising the 1999 batch (run) of amulets. They are advertised as “Historically auspicious objects” (*wathu mongkhon haeng prawatisat*).



**Figure 26.** An image of Luang Phò Thuat riding an elephant in the Luang Phò Thuat shrine hall at Wat Chang Hai. This image is reminiscent of (or has produced?) one variation of the myth of Wat Chang Hai's origin, in which Luang Phò Thuat himself found the location of the monastery while riding through the jungle on an elephant.

**Figure 27.** The stupas of Wat Chang Hai. In the foreground is the stupa in which Luang Phò Thuat's remains are interred. Ajan Thim's remains are interred within the larger stupa in the background. The railway line is also visible in the foreground.





**Figure 28. Statue of Ajan Thim outside the ‘Somdet Luang Phò Thuat Wat Chang Hai’ primary school, build in 1963.**

In addition to ritual functions and magical practices, Wat Chang Hai plays a number of other roles in its local area. Wijeyewardene states that “[m]onasteries ... act as integrative mechanisms within a particular territory” (Wijeyewardene 1986:138), and that certain monasteries may have particular objects of special veneration which transforms them into palladia of their respective political units. This is certainly true of Wat Chang Hai, where Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim’s charisma permeates many aspects of the official landscape.<sup>169</sup> Local schools, a nearby vocational training unit (sponsored by the Queen), and even a wing of the district hospital, have been constructed with the assistance of funds from Wat Chang Hai. Each institution bears Luang

Phò Thuat’s name. Monastery funds have also provided scholarships for poor students, and while I was there a local student was being sponsored to study at university in New Zealand.

Like the museum display mentioned in the previous chapter, the construction of these ‘secular’ institutions offer further proof of the power of Luang Phò Thuat. This was illustrated in a conversation I had with a school

<sup>169</sup> The presence of the charisma of Luang Phò Thuat in both Satingphra and Pattani has provoked developments along very similar lines. For example, there has been a mirroring in the development of local infrastructure – schools, colleges, hospitals and so on – centred on, and sponsored by, both monasteries.

teacher from Pattani. When I asked him why he has special faith in Luang Phò Thuat, he first mentioned all the miracles that he had performed but then also referred to the building of hospitals and schools and other things for the benefit of society. He said that this allowed him to “see the charisma of Luang Phò Thuat more clearly than that of other monks” (*hen barami chat kwa ong ün*). In other words, the efficacy of the monastery, its support of so many charitable acts was a further concretisation of Luang Phò Thuat’s charisma. These building projects, although beneficial for the community in general, strengthened the Buddhist state apparatuses and added a sense of legitimacy to its presence. The production of sacred capital and capital developments are therefore intrinsically related in contemporary Thailand. ‘Local’ power and state institutions mutually supported each other, both feeding off, and contributing to, each other’s legitimacy.

The close association between Luang Phò Thuat and local state authorities are illuminated by the conditions under which he first emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. This was a time of transformation of the mode of state formation in the region which involved a new imperative to produce Buddhist space in this Muslim-dominated area.

#### *Sarit and the Buddhist State in Pattani*

In 1950s Pattani the figure of ‘Luang Phò Thuat’ similarly emerged at the periphery of Thai power, under circumstances of instability, uncertainty, and struggle over territory. The fact that this period had been characterised by danger was often present in the reminiscences of people I spoke with in Pattani and Yala. While I was conducting fieldwork, before the new outbreak of violence had begun, local men – as well as long-term Chinese devotees from Malaysia and Singapore – who could remember those times would emphasise how dangerous they were compared to the relatively

peaceful present. The roads were subject to banditry and other dangers. “You wouldn’t have been able to travel around by yourself like you do,” one local man had told me, referring to my frequent motorbike rides to villages and monasteries in the area. Sadly, this situation would appear to have reasserted itself.

In the 1950s and 1960s a new urgency to consolidate the Thai nation-state in peripheral areas coincided with the increasingly widespread circulation of images of popular monks, what Tambiah (1984) has dubbed the “cult of amulets”. This trend saw a great level of interest in the patronage of remote meditation masters by the increasingly affluent Bangkokians. By the 1980s a number of popular magazines had arisen devoted to the lives of forest meditation masters, detailing their lives and sacred images associated with them (Kamala 1997:15). Buddhists have been using votive tablets for centuries as reminders of the Buddha’s virtues, for protection, or as souvenirs of pilgrimages (Pattaratorn 1997). However, the modern cult of amulets saw the mechanical reproduction of images and, as far as I am aware, represents the first time in the Theravada tradition the images of individual, historically contemporaneous, monks were reproduced on such a wide scale.<sup>170,171</sup>

As already stated, Luang Phò Thuat amulets have always had a close connection with the armed forces. This association has continued to the

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<sup>170</sup> Prior to this the majority of votive tablets found in the territory of modern Thailand represented the Buddha or anonymous saintly figures (*bodhisattva* or *arahant*) figures, deities or other figures of legend (see, for example, Coedès 1927, Lamb 1964a, Steffen and Annandale 1902). Also represented, especially on early Buddhist votive tablets, were aniconic images such as the wheel, stupa or bodhi tree. Coedès also notes that at times very large numbers of tablets were made as acts of extraordinary merit, however, these were relatively rare occasions compared to the everyday capacity to order batches of thousands and thousands of amulets.

<sup>171</sup> Even the most famous (and expensive) pre-twentieth century amulets that are associated with one particular monk, the Somdet amulets produced by Somdet Phutthajan To in the nineteenth century did not portray this monk himself but images of the Buddha.

present day. Attesting to this continuing relationship, Luang Phò Thuat amulets were presented to soldiers serving in Iraq in 2003 after a mortar attack near the position of Thai troops participating in the “peace-keeping” effort there (*The Nation*, 23 November 2003).<sup>172</sup> The chief reason for this connection was the reputation of Luang Phò Thuat amulets for providing invulnerability from attack. This would have been an important consideration in the time of instability and danger in which the southern Thai countryside was plagued with Muslim insurgency, banditry and Malayan Communist activities.<sup>173</sup> As stated, it was also a time of unprecedented assertion of central control by the Thai government in every part of its periphery.

This period also saw the beginning of functional territorialisation (i.e. controlling use over land through classification of types and uses) by the Thai state. This mode of bureaucratic control over territory can be traced to 1961 with the introduction of the National Park Act (see also Isager and Ivarsson 2002:399, Vandergeest and Peluso 1995) and has continued to be expanded since that time (Isager and Ivarsson 2002:399).<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> It should also be noted that the officer who presented the amulets was Lt-General Phisarn Wattanwongsiri, at that time the Fourth Army regional commander who had been closely involved in dealing with the violence in “the three southernmost provinces” (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat) since 4 January, 2004.

<sup>173</sup> It would be interesting to know what role Luang Phò Thuat and Wat Chang Hai are playing in the current crisis.

<sup>174</sup> It is also worth noting that the Sai Khao National Park, which covers part of the legendary ‘stamping ground’ of Luang Phò Thuat, was one of the earliest National Parks created in Thailand. Sai Khao National Park is one of the oldest national parks in the country, under the protection of the Forestry Department since 1936, it became a national park in 1954, the same year that the first Luang Phò Thuat amulets were made (see *Bangkok Post* 8 May 1997). Late in my fieldwork I encountered the story that Luang Phò Thuat’s mother had lived at the Sai Khao waterfalls. It is interesting to note that the waterfalls are located on small mountain in the Sankalakhiri mountain range called Khao Nang Jan (‘Lady Moon Mountain’). The reader will recall that Luang Phò Thuat’s mother’s name was Jan. This may just be a coincidence, though an interesting one. When I queried monks at Wat Chang Hai about this story they referred to official written histories to confirm that, in fact, Luang Phò Thuat’s mother had lived in Satingphra.

The emergence of the cult of Luang Phò Thuat roughly coincides with the installation of the Sarit regime and a new approach to maintaining national hegemony. Jory refers to this as a “third phase of assimilation”, associating it with the “military-bureaucratic regimes from the 1960s to the 1980s, when national security and the communist threat were the major concerns of the state” (Jory 1999a:338). Characteristic of these regimes was the promotion of a sense of ethnic homogeneity of the national populations. Members of all ethnic groups were encouraged to think of themselves as Thai. Yet at the same time there was a qualitative shift in the manner in which symbolic institutions such as the monarchy and Buddhism were used for purposes of national integration.

With the ‘revolution’ (*pathihan*) of 1957 that brought Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat to power “[w]hat is now known in the cultural and religious history of Thailand as the ‘dark age’ (*yuk muet*) had begun” (Kamala 1997:229). Although Sarit’s coming to power could be viewed as a continuation and extension of policies begun by his predecessor, Phibun Songkhram, there is also reason to see this event as a rupture. Indeed, in many ways the approach taken by Sarit was diametrically opposed to that of his Phibun. Sarit, it has been argued, came “to power out of a crisis of cultural transition” between an old order and new one (Wyatt 1984:278). The new order, made up of the first generation of leaders educated in Thailand, distinguished itself by a return to many traditional notions of power and authority. “At this critical moment”, Wyatt states, “Sarit tried to provide his countrymen both a sense of where they were coming from, in terms of traditional values and national identity, and a clear vision of where they were going” (1984:278-9).

Sarit’s policies of so-called “developmental authoritarianism” depended upon *popular* acceptance of the monarchy and state-supported Buddhism. Writing in the context of the Thanom and Prapas regime in

Thailand, Tambiah states that Thailand's "revered (but relatively powerless) kingship is propped up by a powerful military clique which champions Buddhism as the state religion and as a sacred national heritage" (Tambiah 1973:55). Sarit re-established a number of court rituals in 1957, including the ploughing ceremony, drinking water of allegiance and changing of the robes of the Emerald Buddha (Tambiah 1976:229). Also integral to Sarit's new vision of authority was the rehabilitation of the monarchy, which had suffered as an institution since the end of absolute rule, and especially during the Phibun era. Under Sarit's supervision, monarchical rituals that had fallen into disuse since 1932 were revived. The King and Queen began their tours of the nation, visiting the South for the first time in 1959, and Sarit consistently associated himself with the monarchy in order to bolster his own image.

Paralleling the rehabilitation of the monarchy, the centralisation of the Sangha was reinforced. As discussed in chapter two, Sarit modelled a new Sangha Act on the 1902 one which "renewed state authority of the sangha and gave absolute power to the supreme patriarch" (Kamala 1997:229).<sup>175</sup> This also began what Kamala (1997) calls the "forest invasion period", which, according to her periodisation, carried on until 1988. This time saw the previously peripatetic forest monks of the Northeast increasingly settling in forest hermitages.

One of Sarit's priorities was to 'develop' the nation's infrastructure in peripheral areas. Indeed, the concept of 'development' was central to attempts to domesticate the periphery. This was especially the case in Isan

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<sup>175</sup> The desire for complete control of the Sangha was exemplified in the case of Phra Phimontham, a high-ranking and highly-respected monk who was persecuted, disrobed and prosecuted on what appeared to be trumped up charges by Sarit and his coterie. The monk's main crime appeared to be his teaching of a non-orthodox form of *vipassana* meditation to lay devotees (for discussions of this case, see P. A. Jackson 1989:94-111, Kamala 1997:229-32, Tambiah 1976).



(Gray 1991:52), but also in the far South, which was also considered to be a problematic area for the purposes of national integration. Infrastructure programs, largely funded by U.S. military and economic aid promoted the increasing integration of the peripheral areas of the nation-state and, importantly, allowed greater levels – and novel kinds – of access to remote areas, and increasingly rapid communication between these areas.

The Sarit coup also had consequences for relations between the military-bureaucratic elites that controlled power in Thailand and Chinese businessmen who controlled the economy. Instead of following the policies of harassing the Chinese as Phibun had done, Sarit:

ushered in the technocratic policy – approved by the World Bank – of limiting the public sector’s economic role to providing infrastructure for, and generally facilitating, the private sector. It was a bargain that suited both sides: the Thai political elite prospered in multiple ways from a thriving business; and Chinese businessmen, protected against economic and political encroachments, prospered all the more in an expanding international environment (Girling 1984:389-90).

It was at that time of economic growth that powerful alliances were formed between Sino-Thai business enterprises and state officials such as generals and bureaucrats (Gray 1991:53), with the king also providing patronage to the emergent capitalist class. In this process local elites were displaced by urban capitalists for ritual honours, for example for presiding over *Kathina* rituals at royal temples.

This period saw the construction of a wide range of local and regional heroic figures, with the year 1962 being of particular significance. It was also in this year that the statues of Thao Thepkasatri and Thao Srisunthorn, the local heroines who were instrumental in saving the island from a Burmese invasion were raised in Phuket, while a statue of Phò Khun Mengrai was

built in Chiang Rai at the far northern tip of the country (*Bangkok Post* 23 May 2002).

Luang Phò Thuat was another figure who experienced a flourishing in this year. Although the first amulets of Luang Phò Thuat were built in 1954, production of these amulets was confined to Wat Chang Hai until 1962, when there was a great proliferation of production of Luang Phò Thuat amulets across southern Thailand, Bangkok and other parts of the country. This is clearly recognised in the amulet magazine world, with a number of 'special editions' of publications presenting only Luang Phò Thuat amulets from the year 1962 (BE 2505). Also in 1962 a statue of Luang Phò Thuat was erected at the temple in Betong, the southernmost point of the nation-state. The Luang Phò Thuat cast image was built in Betong, Thailand's southernmost city, in 1962 to commemorate the building of the Phra Mahathat Chedi Phra Buddhadhamma Prakat at Wat Putthathiwat, which was built in honour of the Queen.<sup>176</sup> The influence of the royalty in the South expanded during this period (McCargo 2007) and local sacred sites, including Wat Chang Hai, received well-publicised visits from members of the royal family. As mentioned, a craft centre, sponsored by the Queen, was built near Wat Chang Hai, with funds coming from the sale of Luang Phò Thuat amulets. In addition, there is a small residence, described to me as a palace, near the craft centre which also testifies to the extent of royal presence in the vicinity.

Luang Phò Thuat amulets, statues and other images therefore have a close association with institutions and symbols constructed during this period of unprecedented expansion of the Buddhist state into the far South.

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<sup>176</sup> It is also interesting to note that the model used for the amulets produced in conjunction with this occasion were statues made in the image of Somdet Phuthajan To, made in 1952 by Luang Pu Nak of Wat Rakhang in Bangkok (Suwat and Urapong 1994:232). See also Stengs (2003:246-9) on the relationship between these two monks and the Samnak Pu Sawan movement.

It is in this context that we must consider the conclusion of the Luang Phò Thuat biography.

*The Pattani Version*

The history as described in the Wat Chang Hai booklet is largely the same as the Satingphra version, described in the previous chapter, up until the point of his disappearance from Wat Pha Kho. In the Wat Chang Hai booklet, researched and written by Anan Khananurak, the fireballs at Wat Pha Kho circle the temple three times on a full moon night before flying off towards the southeast. Anan then states that the next part of the story derives from what Ajan Thim himself told him. These details would appear to be a combination of Thim's retelling of locally prevalent folklore about a legendary monk known as Than Langka.<sup>177</sup>

According to this story, some time after Somdet Wat Pha Kho disappeared, an old monk who was extremely strict in the ways of the Dhamma appeared in Saiburi (the Thai name for Kedah, once a largely independent sultanate much the same as Patani which is now a Malaysian state). He is described as tall and very dark-skinned and especially good at preparing herbal remedies, which he used to cure sick villagers. People did not know his real name nor where he had come from and they just called

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<sup>177</sup> The name apparently suggesting an origin in 'Langka' (Sri Lanka), as does the fact that he had dark skin. However, the name is open to many possible interpretations. It has, for example, been considered by some as evidence that Than Langka is the same monk as Somdet Jao Pha Kho as Wat Pha Kho was the centre of the Langka Chat ordination lineage (Gesick 2002, as discussed in the previous chapter). However, this is hardly conclusive given that there were a number of lineages in the region beginning with 'Lanka'. Another possible connection is with the ancient kingdom of Lankasuka, which has been alternatively identified with both Kedah (see Wavell 1965) and Patani (for example, Mohamad 2002). All these facts taken together are suggestive of substantial historical links between Buddhism on the Malay Peninsula and Sri Lanka. Such connections are also evident in the tales of Lady White Blood (Gesick 1995, Munro-Hay 2001) and the Chronicles of Nakhon Sri Thammarat (Munro-Hay 2001, Wyatt 1975).

him 'Than Langka Ong Than Dam'. The account also 'notes' that at that time the ethnic Malay people (*khon malayu*) of this region were Buddhists, thus locating the story of Luang Phò Thuat in a pre-Islamic past.<sup>178</sup>

Than Langka became the abbot of Wat Koranai in Saiburi. He ran his temple with the power of Dhamma and healed the illness and suffering of the people through his compassion (*metta*). After an indeterminate period he appears to have won the respect of the ruler of that state, Phraya Kaemdam.<sup>179</sup> This ruler apparently desired to found a new city and he travelled forth to search for an appropriate location with an entourage that included his younger sister as well as several elephants. At a certain point in the jungle the elephants stopped and refused to go further and then walked in three circles. Phraya Kaemdam thought that this was an auspicious sign and wanted to build a new city there. However, his younger sister did not like the location and so they kept on looking. Finally, they encountered a mouse deer on the coast and the sister said that she liked that location. They founded a city there and called it 'Pattani'. On their return journey to Saiburi Phraya Kaemdam decided to clear the land and build a temple at the location where the elephants had halted, which he named 'Wat Chang Hai' ('the

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<sup>178</sup> Given the age in which Luang Phò Thuat was supposed to have lived, this suggests that the presence of Islam is much shallower than it actually is. Most oral retellings that I heard of the Luang Phò Thuat story go even further in this respect with statements to the effect that, "back then Saiburi was a part of Thailand". They thus retrospectively (and anachronistically) integrate Kedah into the Thai nation-state by projecting the current form of the nation-state backwards in time (in the manner discussed by Thongchai 1994) (see further discussion below).

<sup>179</sup> *Kaemdam* = 'black cheek'. I have not been able to find any other reference to a ruler by this name.

temple given by elephants').<sup>180</sup> He then asked Than Langka to become abbot of this temple in addition to Wat Koranai.<sup>181</sup>

Although Than Langka was very old and there was only rugged jungle and mountains between his two temples, he walked *thudong* back and forth many times. The narrative lists the places that he stopped along his way, which included Tham Lòt mountain, Tang Kiab mountain, and the Sai Khao waterfalls located only a few kilometres from Wat Chang Hai. The account in the booklet states that to the east of these waterfalls are two standing Buddha images carved from wood and reports that the villagers from Sai Khao village call these images Luang Phò Tang Kiab Yiap Nam Thale Jüt and they believe that Than Langka himself built them.

Than Langka requested of his disciples that regardless of where he died his remains should be buried at Wat Chang Hai. Soon after this he passed away in Saiburi. According to his wishes, his disciples carried his body from Saiburi to Wat Chang Hai. This was a difficult journey given the terrain and took around ten days. This was in a sense Than Langka's final journey and again the itinerary is marked. It is usually recounted that wooden markers, or small stupas were left at the points where the entourage paused along the way.<sup>182</sup> Than Langka was cremated at Wat Chang Hai and his remains were interned under a stupa there. A portion of the remains were returned to Wat Koranai and kept under an almost identical stupa. Both places are now

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<sup>180</sup> Another explanation of the name is: 'the monastery where elephants call', from an abbreviated form of *ròng hai*, to call. This was, for example, the explanation given by the elderly abbot of a Thai monastery in Penang whom I interviewed.

<sup>181</sup> As usual many different stories are circulating regarding the founding of Wat Chang Hai. One that I have heard several times is that it was Luang Phò Thuat himself who founded the temple as he was riding through the jungle on the back of an elephant. This narrative might have arisen because of two statues in the main *wihan* of Wat Chang Hai that show Luang Phò Thuat riding on the back of elephants, or these statues might have been created following the story.

<sup>182</sup> This is similar to the account given by the spirit medium mentioned in the previous chapter, who also claimed to have located his shrine to Luang Phò Thuat based on the presence of a wooden marking post.

considered to be very *saksit* locally, although the site in Kedah is not widely known about or visited.<sup>183</sup>

This ends the story.

It would appear that this story of the founding of Wat Chang Hai bears many similarities with a number of tales in the local Malay annals concerning the founding of Patani. For example in the *Hikayat Patani* Phaya Tu Nakpa, the king of Kota Maligai (located somewhere upstream from present-day Pattani) decides to found the city at the site where members of his hunting party had spied a white mouse-deer (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:146-7).<sup>184</sup>

Teeuw and Wyatt discuss the *Hikayat Marong Maha Wangsa*, the so-called Kedah Annals. They relate that in these Annals:

... it is told that King Marong Mahapodisat in Kedah sent his four children to four different regions in order to build new settlements.<sup>185</sup> One of the four was a daughter, who was sent to the east. She received the elephant Gemala Johari as mount and the magical *keris*<sup>186</sup> Lela Misani as protection. When the elephant arrived near the sea, across the mountains, it stopped. A city was built in that place, with the princess as its queen, and it soon become extremely prosperous. Her ministers then wanted to return to Kedah in order to report to the king on their experiences. The princess sent them off, saying: "It is well for you to return to my royal father. Tell him that this country is called Patani; it is

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<sup>183</sup> The stupa in Kedah apparently still exists though it has not become a major site of pilgrimage. However, at least one individual from Ban Chang Hai had made the trip there. He showed me a photo of a simple wooden stupa in a fairly dilapidated state, stating that is how the stupa housing Luang Phò Thuat's remains at Wat Chang Hai used to look before its renovation a number of years previously.

<sup>184</sup> This would appear to be a relatively common motif in such founding myths. Wijeyewardene notes that in the chronicles of Swann Kham Daeng from the North, the legend begins with the chase of a golden deer. The wandering of the deer, he states, established the boundaries of the müang in question (Wijeyewardene 1986:227).

<sup>185</sup> The name "Mahaphotisat", 'great *bodhisattva*' suggests that the ruler of Kedah was at that time Buddhist.

<sup>186</sup> *Keris*: Malay-style knife with royal and talismanic protective qualities.

because of the magical power of the keris Lela Misani that this place had been called Patani (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:218-9).<sup>187</sup>

However, they also mention another version of the foundation myth related by Phra Si Burirat which is derived from unknown Malay sources but is very similar to the Kedah Annals. It diverges in some detail, namely that:

Her magical elephant Buemosati had chosen a site still some distance from the sea, while she preferred a site closer to the shore. The men sent out to seek such a site reported that they had found one on the beach, which abounded with deer. She went out deer-hunting, and was about to give up the chase when an albino deer suddenly appeared before her. It was perfectly white, with eyes like rubies. Her men chased it along the shore and had it completely surrounded, when suddenly it disappeared. When she caught up with her hunters and asked them where it had gone, they all replied in chorus that 'It came and disappeared at directly this spot on the beach (*ma hai sia thi trong pata ning*)' [with *pata* being the East Coast Malay version of *pantai* "beach", and *ning* "here/this"] (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:218-9).<sup>188</sup>

In such stories, elephants and royalty feature as colonising powers, able to penetrate the wilderness and bring new centres of civilization into being. There are numerous accounts in the annals of cities being founded by "elephant doctors" (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:279). Lady White Blood and her brother held the occupation of catching and taming elephants. The Chronicles of Nakhon Sri Thammarat also contain stories of four elephant doctors settling land around the capital and using their trades to provide funds for local monasteries. There are also Thai communities in Kelantan

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<sup>187</sup> Regarding this story in the Kedah Annals, also see Wavell (1965:28).

<sup>188</sup> This version is from *Pattani San* (Pattani writings) Annual Vol.1: 1935.

who claim to be descended from elephant doctors (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:279).<sup>189</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that Anan Khananurak was quite familiar with this version of the story. Attaching the story of Than Langka and the founding of Wat Chang Hai to the history of Pattani underscores the Buddhist roots of the kingdom but also suggests a continuity with that Buddhist past. However, the story does not provide any clues as to the connection between Pattani and Satingphra. These connections are provided in other supplementary texts in the temple booklet which accompany the biography of Luang Phò Thuat.

#### *Consolidating Luang Phò Thuat*

Much of the Wat Chang Hai booklet deals explicitly with the question of the identity of Luang Phò Thuat, the evidence of his enduring presence at Wat Chang Hai, the genesis of the amulets that were created in his image, and many testimonials of various individuals regarding the miraculous powers of Luang Phò Thuat and his amulets. These sections of the booklet are concerned with establishing the authenticity of Luang Phò, both as a historical figure and the source of ongoing sacred power and miracles.

It is significant that Nai Anan feels it necessary to address the question of whether Somdet Jao Pha Kho and Than Langka were one and the same monk, suggesting that at the time of writing this notion was not self-evident. He gives several reasons for his belief that they are one and the same. One is that he himself claimed to have had visions of Luang Phò Thuat. Anan states

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<sup>189</sup> Teeuw and Wyatt reason that elephant doctors would have had to be much more mobile than other members of the community, who were kept under close watch by rulers on the Malay Peninsula. They could therefore act as vanguards for the setting up of new communities. One should also not forget the role of Buddhist monks, also featured in some of these stories, who might also be seen to provide such a function.



that after he had supported the construction of the first amulets in 1954 he had wanted to call them Than Chang Hai. However, he then had a vision in which a monk stated that he wanted them to be called Luang Phò Thuat Yiap Nam Thale Jüt.<sup>190</sup>

The second piece of proof is an account of a local child being possessed by the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat. Anan recounts a story about a boy who had been beaten by his father and went to hide in the temple grounds. The villagers came looking for him and when they found him he spoke to them in the voice of an old man, saying that he was Than Yiap Nam Thale Jüt. To test this, the villagers brought a vessel containing salty water to him. The boy placed his foot in the water and transformed it into well water. Then, by way of offering more proof, he asked the villagers to build a fire. When they had complied and the coals were red hot, he walked onto the coals and stood there. The father was very alarmed and begged forgiveness from his son. The boy walked off the coals as though nothing extraordinary had happened.<sup>191</sup>

It would appear that the miracle of turning salt water into fresh is the crucial factor in linking the two figures. However, evidence suggests that the miracle alone was not necessarily enough to establish the identity of the two legendary monks. The miracle of converting saltwater to fresh appears to have been quite common in the region. During my fieldwork, I heard of at least one other monk whose followers claimed had performed this act, and

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<sup>190</sup> Although Anan also claimed a privileged knowledge of Luang Phò Thuat by means of visions, this fact appears largely to have been 'forgotten' by the local people with whom I spoke. Instead, it is the visions of Ajan Thim that are emphasised.

<sup>191</sup> The connection between Luang Phò Thuat and firewalking is reiterated by a tattooing group in Hat Yai who perform an annual fire walking ceremony in honour of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim. The tattooing group, and their fire walking, is discussed in chapter six. Furthermore, it is extremely interesting that this typically Chinese practice is included in the story.

Burr even reports that Muslim villagers in Satingphra believed that Mohamed had performed this miracle (Burr 1975:79).

The third set of evidence testifying to the identity of Luang Phò Thuat is attributed to Ajan Thim himself. This has been the most enduring historically and it is the stories of Ajan Thim's first encounters with, and recognition of, the ancestral spirit that were most often recounted to me. This reflects the manner in which the 'origin' of Luang Phò Thuat is remembered in present-day Pattani.

According to the booklet, the young monk Thim was asked by villagers of Ban Chang Hai to occupy Wat Chang Hai, which had previously been abandoned beyond living memory, its origins unknown. The monastery was nothing but ruins (*wat rang*) when he became the sole monk in residence there in 1941. It appeared that there were no structures visible on the land at all except for Ajan Thim's *kuti*, recently built by local villagers, and an apparently ancient stupa. The latter was considered very sacred by local people but the identity of the spirit residing within was unknown. One evening Ajan Thim met an old man on the site. And asked him if he knew the boundaries of the old temple. He replied that he should ask Than Yiap Nam Thale Jüt Nai Khüan.<sup>192</sup> Ajan Thim went to the stupa and saw four old monks emerge from it. First there was Luang Phò Si ('Luang Phò colour'), then Luang Phò Thòng ('Luang Phò gold'), Luang Phò Jan ('Luang Phò moon'), and finally a monk even older than the others who called himself Than Yiap Nam Thale Jüt. The ancient monk then proceeded to show Ajan Thim the boundary stones of the old temple and also the location of the

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<sup>192</sup>The word '*khüan*' means mound or embankment, but locally this word was used to refer to the stupa itself. It was also called '*bua*' (lotus). Though it is possible the stupa was no more than an earth mound, elderly villagers consistently described it as being made from wood. One villager possessed a photo of a wooden stupa at Wat Koranai in Kedah, the 'sister monastery' of Wat Chang Hai. When he showed this to me he explained that the original stupa at Wat Chang Hai had looked very similar.

ancient ordination hall. Before he re-entered the stupa, he said he had some important words to say to Ajan Thim: “if the ordination hall is successfully built, the amulets will be powerful” (*bot kò samret, phra khriiang kò saksit*).

As a result of this statement, Ajan Thim set about constructing the first amulets, which he called Luang Phò Thuat, in order to raise money to build the ordination hall. Initial financial support was provided by Anan. The first batches of amulets were consecrated (*pluk sek*) in BE 2497 [1954] by Ajan Thim alone. The amulets proved to be popular, the ordination hall was built, and the *saksit* nature of the amulets was affirmed. In a very real sense, Luang Phò Thuat was brought into existence then.

That the spirit residing in the stupa was a monk was not always a given. The villagers I interviewed at Ban Chang Hai (Chang Hai Village) generally held that the stupa in front of the temple grounds housed the relics of the first abbot of the temple, whom they called Than Chang Hai (‘sir’ Chang Hai)<sup>193</sup> or Luang Phò Thuat (‘Venerable Ancestor’). However, they also said that before the time of Ajan Thim the local people worshipped a spirit associated with the stupa, but that they called the spirit only ‘Thuat’ (‘ancestor’), ‘Phò Than Nai Khüan’ or ‘Phò Than Nai Bua’ (‘Respected Father in the Stupa’).<sup>194</sup> The positioning of the stupa just outside the boundary of the monastery is also suggestive of an ancestral spirit rather than a monk given its peripheral position (see Tambiah 1970). Villagers unanimously stated that before Ajan Thim revealed the true identity of the spirit, they had no idea of the identity of the relics interned there. Luang Phò Thuat’s emergence therefore occurred through the overlaying of a particular

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<sup>193</sup> This is a rather unsatisfactory way of rendering this title. The title ‘Than’ is one of respect, but does not have the connotations of worldly power of Jao (‘Lord’) as in ‘Somdet Jao Pha Kho’.

<sup>194</sup> The word *khüan* (embankment) and *bua* (lotus), it was explained to me, are local words used to refer to stupas. Those who remember the original stupa at Ban Chang Hai recall that it was made from wood and not very large.

localised spirit cult with Buddhist symbolism and power. This process is not without its tensions, as spirit cults and Theravada Buddhism have co-existed for centuries in ways that are sometimes mutually sustaining and complementary, and sometimes in direct conflict (Tambiah 1970). However, there has historically been a certain amount of fluidity between local spirits and the symbols of Buddhism. As Wijeyewardene states:

The personalised spirit is associated with a particular place. The sites of abandoned monasteries become the sites of territorial cults, or, alternatively cult sites are thought to possibly be such. What in some cases is an opposition between the sanctity of Buddhist objects and ritual, which is antagonistic to spirits and spirit possession, may change in other circumstances to become identical... In relation to the spirit cults, the abandoned monastery is analogous to a category of striking natural features such as mountains, caves, cliffs and watersheds which are the abode of powerful protective (or dangerous) spirits... The belief in the personalised spirit is again associated with power symbolised in objects which are of, or stand for the power of the earth (Wijeyewardene 1986:149).

Wijeyewardene also considers that the opening up of the country through road-building and the cessation of local wars, has led to the less specific definition of mystical topography. And yet, he argues, "one may still see the insistence of watershed, centre, and special landmark" (Wijeyewardene 1986:227).<sup>195</sup> I support this argument in relationship to Luang Phò Thuat. Certainly he draws on the power of the land in a number of ways and at a number of sites. As described in the previous chapter with regard to Satingphra, the significance of local sites have been opened up to a much

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<sup>195</sup> This notion that place continues to assert itself despite the apparent deterritorialising effects of transport and tourism is one that I endorse, and which I will explore more explicitly in chapters seven to nine.

wider constituency through the opening up of the landscape and the mass production and circulation of images and narratives.

The cult of amulets developed apace with other technologies of inscription, namely those facilitated by printing presses. It was also in the 1960s that printing presses were finding their way into provincial towns in the South, thus both accelerating the pace at which local legends could be circulated and beginning the production of legitimate, dominant versions of these stories. These local printings constituted a new strand of local history which was at the same time not completely under the control of those writing nationalist histories in Bangkok but also challenged the authority of local oral accounts. This had a profound effect on the sorts of historical sensibilities that became possible. At the time the first amulets were being produced, new histories of local legends were being circulated for popular readership for the first time. For example, the making of the first Luang Phò Thuat amulets coincided with the printing of a new edition of the 1698 *tamra* regarding Somdet Jao Pha Kho in the journal *Sinlapakorn* (Gesick 1995:73).<sup>196</sup> It is quite possible that such popular reproductions played a role in Anan's compilation of the Luang Phò Thuat story.

#### *Kedah and Patani: Connecting Territory*

One curiosity of the splicing together of the two stories to create a single narrative is why it was done at all. Why did Anan Khananurak feel it necessary to supplement the tales of a local hero with those from another region? Would it not have been sufficient to present the story of Than Langka 'as is'? Though contingency may have played its part in this process, I would argue that the story of Than Langka was 'connected' with that of

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<sup>196</sup> Note also the publication of the Chronicles of Songkhla and Phatthalung combined edition in BE 2504 [1961] (Gesick 2002:4).

Somdet Jao Pha Kho to cement its pedigree within the story of the Thai nation.

If these two parts are considered as separate, whole, stories, rather than two parts of the same story, some parallels emerge. Both involve a relationship between the monk and a secular leader based in a centre of power. Both involve a movement back and forth between the established centre of power and the relative periphery and both tell the story of the establishment and/or maintenance of a monastic outpost. The major difference is that in the Pattani version there is no mention of Ayutthaya, only of Kedah. Thus the centre of power with which this story deals is located outside the contemporary boundaries of the Thai nation-state.

In the Satingphra version, as noted in the previous chapter, the action revolves around the relationship between Satingphra and the centre of power and authority in Ayutthaya, and the story relates a journey and a series of exchanges between these locations. The structure of the story, in its evocation of centre and periphery, implies the extent of Siamese authority; it *literally* and performatively constructs this authority and control.<sup>197</sup> By contrast, in the Pattani sections the primary source of patronage for the Buddhist Sangha comes not from Ayutthaya but from the Malaysian state of Kedah (Saiburi), presented as Buddhist at that time. If we consider the spatiality of the narrative from the perspective of the local community then it becomes clear that the orientation of the story is actually *away* from Ayutthaya, towards the south as the source of patronage, power, and 'civilization'. This contrasts with the Satingphra version of the story, where the area south of Satingphra is only mentioned as the source of pirates and other dangers.

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<sup>197</sup> Regardless of the true extent of this power, if 'true' corresponds to 'coercive'.

The usual retelling of the story glosses over or reconstructs the Malayness of the ruler of Kedah, stating simply that at that time the people in this region were Buddhist or even 'Thai', or that that state was simply a part of Thailand. Although Anan was clear in the Wat Chang Hai booklet that it was the Malays (*khon malayu*) who were Buddhists in Luang Phò Thuat's time (itself an anachronism), the more common retelling that I encountered projected the modern Thai state into the seventeenth century. The pre-Islamic Malay past is readily assimilated into Thai understandings of history and territory, and assimilated into notions of Thainess rather than Malayness. Buddhist Malayness in the era of the nation-state is an oxymoron, both in Thailand and Malaysia. In Malaysia, to be Malay is to be Muslim, while in Thailand the Malay-Muslims represent the most intractable source of resistance to dominant constructions of Thainess.

The big difference between the Malay histories and the story of Luang Phò Thuat is the timing. The version popularised by Wat Chang Hai claims that the founding of Pattani coincided with the life of Luang Phò Thuat, in the mid-seventeenth century, thereby obscuring over Patani's much longer history. Moreover, Jory argues that this history "attempts to show the Buddhist origins not only of Pattani but also of Kedah, and the Malay people generally, which is indirectly an argument for the legitimacy of Thai political authority in the region, at a time when that legitimacy was being seriously challenged" (Jory 2004:31). However, the notion that the founders of Patani were Buddhists is also contained in Malay histories. For example the *Hikayat Patani* details the founding of the kingdom *followed by* the kings' conversion to Islam (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970:146-7).

The story of Than Langka, connecting Patani and Kedah, recalls a history of relations and relatedness between these polities which fits uneasily with the nationalist imaginary. This was one of the main trade routes across the northern part of the peninsular and was therefore also one of the main

points from which religious traditions Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, were disbursed (Burr 1975:13, Kuroda 2002:3, Suthiwong 2004).

What the legend of Than Langka illustrates is that 'Thai' local historical sensibilities do not necessarily accord with those of the nation-state and its geo-logic. The insistence of elderly villagers that Than Langka and Somdet Jao Pha Kho were in fact different monks reveals a tenacious rejection of the hegemony of Luang Phò Thuat's identity. This is no small thing: Luang Phò Thuat is, as has been established, one of the most respected and unimpeachable monastic heroes of mainstream popular Thai historical understanding. To challenge the dominant view on this matter would be to invite considerable trouble.<sup>198</sup>

Writing against the grain of nationalist imaginings, which would seek to divide communities split by national boundaries, respected doyen of southern Thai historiography, Suthiwong Phongphaibun, emphasises the historical closeness of Pattani and Kedah. "Since ancient times" these states have been "related in terms of kinship, trade and religion" (Suthiwong 2004). He states that:

There are especially close relations between the Thais of the lower south for whom **Pattani** was the centre, and the people of upper Malaysia for whom **Kedah** and the neighbouring states were the centre in terms of administration, trade, and culture. These factors closely related the peoples of this region in both form and mentality (Suthiwong 2004).

However, he characterises the formation of nation-states as introducing a near-insurmountable split between these once tightly connected groups.

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<sup>198</sup> Whether this is the resilience of a pre-existing local tradition or a local "counter-invention of tradition" (Herzfeld 1997:12) is a moot point. The question of which of these positions is 'true' is of course not as important as the appearance of the difference between local understandings and that which is circulated as hegemonic.



These deeply rooted common cultural characteristics have gradually faded over time as a result of the demarcation of the border. What was once close now seems far apart. This sense of distance, and even sometimes doubt or suspicion, has led to an accumulation of conflict, which has meant what once fitted together now has no meaning (Suthiwong 2004).

For Suthiwong, then, the people of Patani and Kedah were not divided along religious lines but shared a great number of common characteristics and interests.<sup>199</sup> Muslims and Buddhists alike lived in a world where there was a sense of connection between these regions rather than division and difference. Nationalist historiography in both countries has tended to emphasise difference by treating these groups as belonging to different populations. In the minds of historians, at least, the national boundaries have done their work.<sup>200</sup>

At this point we can better understand the significance of Anan's connecting Luang Phò Thuat with Satingphra. It was this act that allowed Luang Phò Thuat to become a symbol of the South, precisely because of his positioning at the juncture between the two distinct parts of the South. I am not arguing that this was Anan's, or anyone else's explicit intention, merely that it was the fact that this connection was made that invested Luang Phò Thuat with a particular power. This power is produced within and emerges from the contradictions inherent in the project of place-making in the South itself.

Given the amount of research that he conducted and the visions he claimed to have had, it would be reasonable to consider him to be an important foundational figure. This is certainly the approach taken by

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<sup>199</sup> See also Horstmann (2004), who makes a very similar argument.

<sup>200</sup> See Wyatt (2002a, 2002b) for a critique of the tendency for histories to treat the nation-state as the natural unit of analysis.

Patrick Jory (2004), who has also written on the origins of Luang Phò Thuat in Pattani. As a historian, it is perhaps not surprising that Jory emphasises Anan's formative role in producing the modern cult of Luang Phò Thuat. However, this is not at all how the majority of villagers at Ban Chang Hai remember it, nor how the 'origin' story is generally recounted in the popular literature. In all these modes of retelling, it is the agency of Ajan Thim that is emphasised. When asked about Anan's role, several villagers dismissed him as merely a financial backer, or 'capitalist' (*nai thun*); his role was characterised as supportive and material rather than generative and spiritual.<sup>201</sup> As far as they were concerned, the only one who was able to identify and mediate Luang Phò Thuat's presence and make it a living reality was Ajan Thim. As one villager stated to me straightforwardly: "Without Ajan Thim there would be no Luang Phò Thuat" (*mai mi Ajan Thim, kò mai mi Luang Phò Thuat*).

How can there be such a discrepancy between the historian and the villagers as to the true source of Luang Phò Thuat's existence? Clearly the ability for such visions of reality to be perpetuated widely in a society and to gain currency as the truth – to have a substantial truth-effect – is dependent on the voice that utters it. Foucault puts the dynamic of authority as follows:

Who is speaking? Who among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true?(Foucault 1972:55).

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<sup>201</sup> Furthermore, the identity of the artisan who first constructed an image of Luang Phò Thuat is considered to be completely irrelevant. His (or her) name is never mentioned. Ajan Thim and Nai Anan are the only ones who could be considered 'artists' in Gell's sense. Note also the denial of personal agency through the use of visions to reveal reality – these are not 'agents' in Gell's sense either in that they themselves do not warp the course of natural events.

However, “ideological discourse is not addressed to a *tabula rasa* but to already ‘subjected’ people” (Turton 1984:43). How this presumption of truth is constructed needs to be considered in its socio-cultural context.

I therefore turn to Ajan Thim and his role in the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat from the Pattani landscape. I also consider the modes of authority and authorisation which have underpinned the legitimacy of his claims and produced the ‘reality effect’ surrounding Luang Phò Thuat.

### *Remembering Ajan Thim*



**Figure 29. Ajan Thim. Unknown date.**

Ajan Thim was not a story-teller, or at least it is not his telling of stories that is remembered. He is the subject of many stories. While Nai Anan appeared to do most of the work in ‘producing’ Luang Phò Thuat, Ajan Thim was the true ‘artist’ as it was he who is the primary source of his social agency.<sup>202</sup> Not just a historical person of significance in bringing Luang Phò Thuat into the present, Ajan Thim is himself a saintly figure, invested with power and authority. The knowledge of landscape and vegetation the producer of amulets makes use of is closely aligned with the ability to act as healer herbalist, but also endows him with an intimate knowledge of the area and its histories. This includes a sensitivity to ancestral traces not possessed by other members of the community.

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<sup>202</sup> See Gell on his definition of ‘artist’ (1998) as the actor conveying such social agency on an object.

Many of the salient points about Ajan Thim were outlined in a conversation I had with one of the tattooists who practised near the monastery:

... he said that as a child he had often seen Ajan Thim at Wat Chang Hai but was very scared of him because he was so silent and mysterious. He said that he rarely talked and when he did it was gruff [he imitated], right in the back of the throat.

He said that Ajan Thim had died in Bangkok, at the Sirithat Hospital. He had taken ill at the temple and the villagers carried him out to a minibus and sent him off. He told me that when the villagers found out he was dead they cried very much. I asked how he had died? He answered that because there were so many people coming to visit and make merit, he didn't have time to eat and often went four to five days on end without food. In the end this took its toll on him and he died.

I asked how it was that the amulets that Ajan Thim had enchanted (*pluk sek*) were considered so powerful (*saksit*). He said that Ajan Thim was extremely strict (*khreng*) in his mode of practice and could predict the future and/or bring about events (*phut arai wa pen jing khün ma*). He also was good at summoning or 'inviting' spirits (*anchoen winyan*). Finally, he had the visions (*nimit*) of Luang Phò Thuat.

He also mentioned Nai Anan's role in encouraging Ajan Thim to produce amulets and then promoting them. He was, however, merely an 'assistant' (*phu chuai*).

Ajan Thim is also considered to have a privileged relationship to Luang Phò Thuat himself. This is no doubt partially a result of his superior merit, but also seems to derive from a more specific, emplaced power and his positioning at this originary moment. Given this relationship, it is interesting to note that certain amulets produced at Wat Chang Hai portray Luang Phò Thuat 'riding' on Ajan Thim's neck, as though the latter was the vehicle for the former.



**Figure 30. Luang Phò Thuat ‘riding the neck’ (khi khò) of Ajan Thim.**

Ajan Thim did not follow the model of the forest-dwelling ascetic, but rather that of the village monk, whose many roles included practising astrology and medicine, and constructing sacred objects (Gombrich 1988:156). Nevertheless he had a reputation for being an extremely strict monk, and this is how he is remembered in the local community. Ajan Thim was particularly renowned for his knowledge of local herbs and his healing abilities using traditional remedies. Local community members continually emphasised these abilities in conversations about him.

Ajan Thim remains a figure of great respect in the village. His *kuti* has remained empty since his death, and it was only quite recently that his personal possessions were removed to a temple museum that is still under construction. Most people I spoke to said that they would be too afraid to enter his *kuti* because of the high level of sacred power there and the commonly held belief that his spirit still resides there. At night, locals often place incense and candles outside his *kuti* as a sign of respect. When people

talk about Ajan Thim it is always in tones of reverence, and sometimes even awe. Those who knew him mention the fact that he seldom spoke, but when he did say something it invariably turned out to be true. One example recounted to me is of a young man who stole a bicycle from the temple grounds. The owner of the bike went to Ajan Thim and complained. The monk gruffly said not to worry because the thief wouldn't get far and would have an accident involving his hand. Surely enough, the thief was hit by a train as he tried to escape the temple and he lost several fingers on one of his hands. Some villagers suggested that Ajan Thim had a black tongue (*lin dam*), a physical sign that his words and reality coincided. This quality promised the possibility of an unmediated mediation of the past and the world, where there is no gap between signifier and signified.<sup>203</sup>

On other occasions when Ajan Thim was due to catch a train, villagers would urge him to hurry to the station as it seemed that he would be late. Again Thim would tell the villagers not to worry as the train would not leave without him, and inevitably the train remained at the station until he had boarded.<sup>204</sup> It was also said that Ajan Thim could stop a train merely by standing near the railway line and adjusting his outer robe (*jiwòn*). This ability 'miraculously' to stop passing trains sometimes had unexpected and humorous consequences. One elderly villager chuckled as he recounted one occasion Thim had not intended to travel but *accidentally* stopped the train by adjusting his robes on the platform of the station. Not wanting to humiliate the train driver, the monk boarded the train anyway and travelled to the next station at Ban Na Pradu. He then returned to Wat Chang Hai on the back of a motorcycle.

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<sup>203</sup> It is worth noting Susan Stewart's remark that to use language in excess of genre is to produce the "unreal effect of the real" (Stewart 1993:27).

<sup>204</sup> This story would appear to echo the famous occasion during the Second World War on which the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat stopped the train loaded with Japanese soldiers from proceeding beyond the temple.

These stories all testify to the immense authority Ajan Thim possessed, and continues to possess. The reasons for this authority can be found within Theravada Buddhist ontology and notion that some individuals, especially kings and monks, possess accumulated merit and charisma (*bun-barami*) which underpins their authority. It is this quality that allows a particular individual's speech to be accepted as coinciding more closely with reality. In such speech the gap between signifier and signified diminishes, or even disappears completely. The belief that an individual possesses superior levels of virtue is crucial for their statements to be taken as true. "Without *barami*, no-one will believe you", said a former prime minister (Gray 1991:47).

This point returns to the discussion in the previous chapter about the categories of *bodhisattva* and *phu mi bun* and their associations with claims to political legitimacy. I now extend this discussion by considering how these categories of being are evoked, and how they are performatively brought into existence.

Christine Gray has provided a detailed study of this construction of authority. She states that:

The possession of *bun* and *barami* entails related powers over language and discourse. It entails control over the naming of experience and the public interpretation of experience (i.e., authority in evaluating the causal roots and future consequences of events, powers of religious prophecy and interpretation). It entails a reciprocal power, the ability to command the silence of others (Gray 1986:754).

All materiality, in Theravada Buddhist terms, consists of illusory forms and moral essences. It is the ability of the virtuous man – exemplified by the king or Buddhist saint – who is able to see beyond the illusory form and reveal the true nature of things. As Gray notes, "[w]hen the king gives names to men, objects, places, historical periods, and social practices, he publicly designates their 'true' moral essence" (Gray 1991:45). This act involves a

“transformation of the Buddha’s absence into a perceptible presence, of the invisible essence of *Dhamma* into a perceptible name-and-form (*nāma rūpa* [P]) (Gray 1991:45). Such utterances therefore have a temporal dimension as superior *barami* is also associated with an ability to speak about longer time periods – to speak of the past or future, and even of former lives – while ordinary men are forced to rely on their empirical understandings, what they have seen with their own eyes. Therefore they cannot be certain of its truth (Gray 1991:48). The possessor of superior *barami* is therefore in a privileged position to bring the (Buddhist) past into life, to revitalise it in the present. The fact that the reality beyond illusion is considered to be made up of moral essences means the ability to discern truth from falsehood is equivalent with discerning right from wrong.<sup>205</sup>

More than merely possessing the correct esoteric knowledge, which would suggest that authority itself resides in canonical knowledge and therefore privileges scriptural learning and book knowledge, the authority to assign name-and-form to the world derives from the authority accumulated through ascetic practices and the generation of extraordinary levels of merit (*bun*). Complementing this ability to speak the truth is the general stillness of the individual possessing *bun-barami*. This person does not chatter or waste energy on trivial matters, but when he speaks his words carry weight. In a sense it is in silence that the authority of the individual inheres.

It is not surprising that villagers at Ban Chang Hai characterised Ajan Thim as being rather gruff and untalkative in manner. But when he did speak, they emphasised, what he said generally came to pass. Furthermore, Ajan Thim’s strictness (*khreng*) is emphasised along with the uncanny

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<sup>205</sup> See also Mulder (1997:95, n), who makes a very similar point about the connection between authority and moral discernment.



correspondence between his words and the world. In all cases these are the qualities of an individual endowed with a large amount of *bun-barami*.

It should also be noted that much of Ajan Thim's authority also derived from his intimate knowledge of, and connection with, the local landscape, including both 'natural' and 'supernatural' elements.<sup>206</sup> Such knowledge allowed him to make apparently authentic 'excavations' of the local terrain to reveal its hidden qualities. In this way he was a primary facilitator of the 'recycling' of ancient presences in the local landscape, a mode of practice characteristic of much Theravada Buddhist practice where sacred objects are rediscovered and incorporated into new forms.

This attitude towards rediscovered sacred objects (and how it differs from Western predilections) was recounted by the Malaysian-based British archaeologist, Alistair Lamb, in his description of his expedition to excavate some ancient Mahayana votive tablets which had been discovered by chance in a cave in the northern Malaysian state of Perlis.<sup>207</sup> He made his way to this archaeological site in order to explore the find. However, on his arrival at the cave he found that the tablets had disappeared. He notes with barely concealed exasperation that the valuable find had been removed by Siamese monks, apparently from northern Kedah or Perlis, in order to grind up and use in the making of new amulets (Lamb 1964a:48).<sup>208</sup>

Ajan Thim seems to have been a specialist at uncovering and revitalising and reproducing Luang Phò Thuat's presence, as well as that of

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<sup>206</sup> I am not sure if this distinction is completely appropriate. Certainly Thim's abilities to identify ancestral auras derives not from a supernatural force but through the perfection of perfectly natural abilities.

<sup>207</sup> Perlis was historically a part of Kedah, only becoming an separate Sultanate in 1842 as a result of Siamese policies.

<sup>208</sup> Interestingly, Lamb also noted in 1964 that: "In the Patani area there is one district which still, so I am informed, yields votive tablets in abundance. This is the neighbourhood of Yala, where there are impressive limestone outcrops with their quota of caves" (Lamb 1964a:57). He goes on to note that votive tablets from these and other caves can be purchased from the Yala people.

other ancestral monks.<sup>209</sup> Although I never heard it suggested that Ajan Thim engaged in the ascetic practice of *thudong*, he is said to have wandered the landscape with his friend Ajan Nòng in order to gather the forest plants (*wan*) used in making the powder variety of amulets. Here, local knowledge, including knowledge of plants, coincides with the ability to produce invulnerability-conferring objects. On a number of occasions Ajan Thim is credited with ‘rediscovering’ sites which had previously been visited by Luang Phò Thuat. These sites have gone on to be locations incorporated into the ever-unfolding geography of Luang Phò Thuat. In one interesting case, Ajan Thim apparently found an alms bowl and other monastic objects (mediating pedestal and a mortar for preparing herbal remedies) in a cave near Wat Tham Talòt, in Sabayoi district of Songkhla province. In addition the name “Somdet Phrarachamuni Samiram Khunuphamajan” is said to be inscribed on the wall of the cave.<sup>210</sup> Although accounts conflict, some informants stated that Ajan Thim was the one who made this discovery.<sup>211</sup>

The trace or inscription left by Luang Phò Thuat’s passing may be seen as the generative and regenerative object of origins (see Stewart 1993:xi). Ajan Thim’s activity in the late 1950s and 1960s involved a reinscription or reiteration of the ancestral routes ascribed to Luang Phò Thuat. It was the first such retracing, though this route has been followed a number of times since. Reiterations of this kind are of course not mere repetitions. Instead, they open the pathways to new social realities and possibilities.

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<sup>209</sup> For example, Ajan Thim has also been credited with the discovery of another ancestral monk known as Luang Phò Thuat Krai.

<sup>210</sup> This would appear to identify the monk with Somdet Jao Pha Kho. I will not speculate on its authenticity, although I do find it strange that an ascetic monk, whose ultimate goal is to destroy any last vestiges of ego, would choose to inscribe his own name in this way.

<sup>211</sup> What is interesting about this find is that Wat Tham Talòt is situated along one of the main historical routes between Patani and Saiburi (Kedah).

### *Conclusion*

Recently, historian Patrick Jory has put forward his own account of the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat in Pattani. He sums up his argument as follows:

The *Luang Pho Thuat*–Wat Chang Hai cult as we know it today, appears to be *directly related* to the policy of the Thai state to integrate Pattani and the surrounding region into the Thai-Buddhist heartland at a time of intense political uncertainty caused by the autonomy movement amongst the Pattani Malays provoked by the Thai government’s assimilationist policies – which was later influenced by the rise of Malay nationalism with the movement towards Malayan independence in British Malaya; and the outbreak of a major armed insurgency carried out by the Communist Party of Malaya, which added to the general lawlessness affecting southern Thailand. An old Chinese family in the region with a history of good relations with the Thai state and perhaps anxious to once again prove its loyalty to the nation and to a suspicious government at a time when the Chinese were being increasingly associated with the communist threat, transformed a locally popular monk of the Phathalung region into a symbol of Thai Buddhist authority over the border region of Pattani. The supernatural powers of *Luang Pho Thuat* had been called upon to join the security forces that the Thai government began to commit to the region in increasing numbers from the 1940s-50s (Jory 2004:36, my emphasis, except for Luang Phò Thuat’s name, which is italicised in the original).

For the most part I agree with this analysis. However, my approach differs in certain ways. While Jory portrays the character of state formation in the Pattani region as more or less constant during the era of the modern nation-state, I have argued that it was the rupture in the style of leadership associated with the coming to power of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat in the

late 1950s that provided the crucial political, social and cultural impetus for the development of the Luang Phò Thuat cult. It was, I argue, the particular emphasis placed on reinvesting the institutions of the monarchy and the Sangha as sacred institutions for the purpose of national integration that set the conditions for the promotion of Luang Phò Thuat as a particular kind of Buddhist figure. Furthermore, as the above quote suggests, Jory feels that the primary impetus for the formation of the Luang Phò Thuat cult came from the Khananurak family, and in particular through the efforts of Anan Khananurak himself. Although this may be historically 'correct', this is certainly not how the genesis of Luang Phò Thuat is remembered locally – not in the villages surrounding Wat Chang Hai – nor for that matter in the popular texts that circulate in the marketplace.

The question of the link between Luang Phò Thuat's emergence and the machinations of the Thai state must also be problematised. While there is clearly a connection between the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat and efforts at national integration, there is no 'smoking gun' as such for this process in the sense that there was no discernable *official policy* of promoting Luang Phò Thuat. Instead, the popularity of Luang Phò Thuat is something that emerged within the domain of 'popular culture'. The Luang Phò Thuat cult did not emerge through explicit pronouncements by the state. Instead, it was a multiplicity of diverse 'spontaneous' acts of devotion, often but not always on the part of state officials, that conferred a particular aura upon the saint.

Given that there is no official state policy to be drawn upon to support the assertion of a link between Luang Phò Thuat in the Thai state, one must rely instead on a variety of circumstantial evidence. Also, in investigating the 'state effect' produced by a variety of social interactions (Mitchell 1999), it is necessary to look beyond the official apparatuses of the state itself to consider the actions of various 'non-state' actors. Clearly, 'the state' and 'popular culture' should not be opposed. This is both in the sense that

elements of popular culture may profitably be viewed as extensions of state policy or state 'desire', and also because popular culture elements might be seen to profit from the charisma or 'magic' of the state itself (see Taussig 1997).

Likewise, the question of the authority which underlies the existence of Luang Phò Thuat must also be considered in this light. In this chapter I have demonstrated the importance of Ajan Thim's authority in terms of Theravada Buddhist ontology, but this is just one factor, albeit a crucial one. The social reality of Luang Phò Thuat in the present, the development of his cult, must also take into account the proliferation of his legend (of which Ajan Thim is a part) and other narratives, such as that of miracles associated with Luang Phò Thuat amulets, and the mere presence of Luang Phò Thuat in a wide variety of forms in contemporary popular culture. Furthermore, other impeccable sources of *bun-barami*, namely members of the royal family, have added their imprimatur to Luang Phò Thuat's existence. Examples include two giant statue-building projects in Hua Hin (both claiming to be producing the 'world's largest Luang Phò Thuat) in honour of the Queen and Crown Prince. These would seem to continue an association between the royal family, especially the Queen, and Luang Phò Thuat which has been demonstrated in this chapter. Both of these royals have allowed their own seals to appear on the Luang Phò Thuat images that were sold to raise money for these projects. Such validation conveyed in the conjoining of signs, images and authority adds powerful weight to the reality effect of Luang Phò Thuat. This sustaining power is mutual, of course, and the royalty also benefit from association with Luang Phò Thuat's similarly unimpeachable *bun-barami*. Stories about miraculous happenings associated with Luang Phò Thuat and his amulets circulate with his images in mutually sustaining circuits. These stories feedback in a way that retrospectively confirms the existence of Luang Phò Thuat and the hegemony of his origins: "The amulets

work, therefore Luang Phò Thuat must exist”, and specifically, “the amulets from Wat Chang Hai work, therefore Luang Phò Thuat Wat Chang Hai must exist”.

In this chapter I have primarily associated Luang Phò Thuat with the process of internal colonisation that has occurred in the far South of Thailand since the 1950s. However, the multiple circuits that sustain Luang Phò Thuat’s existence in contemporary Thailand also make his a complex and diverse figure. The next chapter explores one aspect of this diversity, namely the vicissitudes of the common belief that he is a *bodhisattva*. This ambiguities inherent in this designation, I argue, help to account for his popularity as well as the position he maintains between ‘Thai’ and ‘Chinese’ religious forms and identities.

## Chapter Six

### The *Dhamma* Ambassador: The Making of a Thai *Bodhisattva*

#### *The Procession of the Deities*

Every year in Hat Yai, coinciding with celebrations of Chinese New Year, one of the city's largest Chinese charitable foundations, the Munnithi Thong Sia Siang Tüng, conducts a ten-day and ten-night celebration of the anniversary of its foundation. Typical of many Chinese shrine festivals the aesthetics of "heat and noise" (Weller 1994) are expressed in their fullest. During the festival the Foundation compound is alive with activity. Each evening a Chinese opera plays on the street opposite the main shrine hall. Food stalls lining the adjacent streets do a roaring trade throughout, especially in the evenings. At designated times Foundation committee members don Mahayana-style robes and perform chanting ceremonies while beating gongs and other Chinese instruments. The Foundation demonstrates its accident rescue and ambulance services with bloody dioramas of car accident scenes. Pride of place is given to demonstrating the hydraulic 'Jaws of Life' and its ability to cut through the twisted car wreck. Throughout the celebrations, many visitors are attracted to the affair, including the poor who await charitable distribution of rice and other necessities. Most come to make offerings while enjoying the spectacle, circulating seemingly randomly throughout the entire precincts, placing joss-sticks and praying at all the shrines on the premises.

The images present within the shrine precincts are eclectic. The main shrine hall houses the Foundation's primary images, including the principal images (*phra prathan*) Tai Hong Jao Sü and Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao.<sup>212</sup> In other

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<sup>212</sup> The former is a Chinese monk while the latter is the Chinese goddess more commonly associated with Pattani.

parts of the Foundation premises, shrines dedicated to the Hindu gods Brahma and Ganesh can be found, while yet another area is dedicated to Theravada Buddhist images, including a shrine containing images of famous monks. Luang Phò Thuat occupies the most senior position with a smaller image of Ajan Thim sitting directly before him in the position of avatar. Images of one or two other monks, including Phò Than Khlai, flank Luang Phò Thuat.

The celebrations culminate in an event known as ‘the parade of the deities’ (*khabuan he phra*), where the sacred images of the Foundation are carried in procession through the streets of Hat Yai’s main business district.<sup>213</sup> Along this route business-owners set up street-side altars bearing a range of offerings and welcome the deities by detonating long chains of Chinese crackers. On the same evening an impressive, chaotic and well-attended firewalking (*lui fai*) ceremony takes place in the Foundation compound.

In both the street procession and the firewalking, most of the deities are carried on ritual palanquin (*kiao*), usually by four men.<sup>214</sup> These devices are commonly used in Chinese shrine rites in southern Thailand, and are especially associated with the Phuket and Trang Vegetarian Festivals. Unlike these festivals, the Procession of the Deities in Hat Yai does not feature spirit mediumship, nor the spectacular practices of self mortification for which the Vegetarian Festival has become infamous (Callahan 2003, E. Cohen 2001a, Hamilton 1999, 2004).<sup>215</sup> As a result, these palanquin-borne images provide the main interaction with the crowds lining the sides of the roads. The bearers race to street-side altars so that the deity they are bearing might be the first to receive the offering of crackers and the objects on the altars.

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<sup>213</sup> My observations are from attending these celebrations in February 2000.

<sup>214</sup> No females perform this role. There were some telling exceptions to this general rule of Chinese shrine rites during the Chinese Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai that I observed in 2001. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

<sup>215</sup> The Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai will be discussed in detail in chapter eight.



The event does not only feature the Foundation's own images. All of the city's shrines and joss houses are invited to participate. Most of these are folk Taoist shrines, although a range of other traditions are included. For example, the city's two large Mahayana Buddhist temples participate in the parade by including their own sacred images.<sup>216</sup> This has effectively established the parade as a major expression of the city's Chinese community and, given the overwhelming predominance of Thai of Chinese descent (*luk jin*) in Hat Yai's population, this event is also a significant expression of the city's civic identity.

All of the Foundation's 'deities' were included in the Procession of the Deities. The front section of the procession was made up of images too big to be carried on palanquin. Instead, these were mounted on the back of pickup trucks. The ordering of the images was significant. At the head was not Tai Hong Jao Sü but their main Buddha image, known as Luang Phò To. Thus although this was an essentially Chinese ceremony, the presence of the Thai state was still firmly inscribed with the presence of the King's insignia and the ordering principle that places the Buddha above all other deities (see discussion by Pattana 2005a). Next came the Foundation's Chinese deities on floats. The images of the revered Thai monks were also paraded on the back of pickups, led by Luang Phò Thuat.<sup>217</sup>

Foundation officials explained to me that the inclusion of non-Chinese images was essentially an accommodation for visiting 'Thai'. They presented

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<sup>216</sup> These are Wat Chü Chang and Wat Thawònam (Wat Thawòn), which belong to the 'Chinese sect' (*jin nikai*) and 'Vietnamese sect' (*anam nikai*) respectively. These two sects are officially recognised by the Thai state and incorporated within the wider structure of the Thai Sangha. The King retains sole authority to bestow ecclesiastical titles on monks from these sects. It should be noted that in contemporary Thailand the 'Vietnamese sect' is almost completely 'Sino-fied', with most of the monks these days being of Chinese descent.

<sup>217</sup> The Foundation has a shrine area devoted to these Thai monks. As well as the two mentioned above, there are also images of Phò Than Khlai from Nakhon Sri Thammarat and Luang Phò Yòt, a monk from Kò Yai in Songkhla province (not far from Wat Pha Kho). All the monks represented were therefore from the South.

this more as a gesture of hospitality rather than a direct expression of their own belief system.<sup>218</sup> And besides, they explained to me, Thai and Chinese religions (*satsana*) are essentially the same as they are both 'Buddhism'. However this explanation was problematised by the presence of statues of Luang Phò Thuat and other Thai monks in other sections of the procession not controlled by the Foundation but belonging to several of the visiting shrines. Most striking to see was the statues of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim borne on palanquin and manoeuvred under cascades of falling, exploding crackers, their bearers frenziedly bucking and heaving in an identical manner to those carrying Chinese deities. Similarly, several images of monks included in the firewalking ritual that evening. This was not merely the inclusion of images revered by inhabitants of Hat Yai for the sake of civic unity, but an inclusion in ritual practices that were not strictly speaking Buddhist but folk Taoist in character.<sup>219</sup> Images of Theravada Buddhist monks, especially Luang Phò Thuat, of whom there were several images, were included as apparently 'Sino-fied', even Taoist, deities.

I was most intrigued to see palanquin-borne statues of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim belonging to a group that called itself the *San Luang Phò Thuat lae Ajan Thim* (the shrine of Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim). The name was suggestive of a joss house and it was the first time I had seen Luang Phò Thuat as the centre of his own shrine cult rather than simply included within an already established institution.

Following the Procession of the Deities, I investigated this group further and discovered that it was not, strictly speaking, a Chinese shrine but a tattooing group connected directly with a lineage of tattooists based at Wat

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<sup>218</sup> I will have more to say about the position, or stance, of hospitality in such ritual occasions in the final chapter.

<sup>219</sup> As should already be clear, these categories are far from mutually exclusive in the Thai context. And, as has already been mentioned, Mahayana Buddhist rites were also incorporated into the Foundation's celebrations.

Chang Hai.<sup>220</sup> The group operates out of a tiny shop-front dwelling filled with statues of Luang Phò Thuat, Ajan Thim and several other prominent magical monks. It is a small and marginal group in many ways. It draws on practices commonly associated with other tattooers of sacred designs in Thailand, a folk-religious practice operating at the margins of mainstream Theravada Buddhism. Simultaneously, however, this group makes use of a composite of Chinese ritual practices, such as parading their 'deities' on palanquin and conducting fire-walking rites.

The Hat Yai branch of this lineage is led by a tattoo artist, Ajan Praphon.<sup>221</sup> Born in Hat Yai, Ajan Praphon is a man in his fifties who has been tattooing sacred designs since the mid-1970s. Ajan Praphon is a Sino-Thai and speaks Teochiu. He has a cluster of local devotees, mainly poor young men working within the local informal economy as motorcycle taxi drivers or similar. However, his main source of income is from ethnic Chinese devotees and customers who come predominantly from Malaysia and to a lesser extent from Singapore. During my first visit to his shrine he pointed out a number of photographs on the walls of people being tattooed by him: "Here *khon malaysia*, here *khon Singapore*, *khon Penang*," and so on.

The group has held the firewalking rites since 1991, both during the 'parade of the deities' and also in April, during Songkran (Thai New Year). These rites are timed to correspond with the annual lustration (*song nam*) rites held at Wat Chang Hai. Ajan Praphon characterises his own ceremony as a form of *song nam*, though they are centred on the firewalking. He has therefore engineered a geographical displacement of the Wat Chang Hai

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<sup>220</sup> See chapter five for a description of this tattooing lineage and some of its practices.

<sup>221</sup> Although I am using a pseudonym, it should be noted that the name he used directly connected him with Wat Chang Hai as a follower.

tradition, though with the innovation of adding Chinese-style firewalking rites.<sup>222</sup>

Praphon's motivation for starting the firewalking ritual was revealing, and is of importance for the argument in this chapter. When I asked him about his reasons for his establishing the rites, his response was "if the Chinese could do it, then the Thai could do it too". What did he mean? He explained that he had begun the firewalking in part to prove a point: that Luang Phò Thuat was every bit as *saksit* as the Chinese deities who dominated rites in the city. He decided Luang Phò Thuat should also participate in the firewalking rites organised in conjunction with the Procession of the Deities in order to demonstrate his power, something that had apparently been met with some initial reluctance from the organisers.

He told me that when he had asked to participate:

People [from the Foundation] commented that Luang Phò Thuat is Thai and that this place is for Chinese *phra* [deities] only. I asked them if Chinese *phra* can [participate], why not the Thai? He said, they are different styles (*khon la naeo kan*). And I said why? It's all *saksit*. Luang Phò Thuat is *saksit* isn't he? Why are you forbidding? Are you the abbot here? They were just being bullies (*nak leng*) ... I said I'll do it myself, and two years later I did it, I did a firewalking (*lui fai*) ceremony. I don't boast much about that day. I did it because of the power of Luang Phò Thuat.

This statement raises a couple of important points. First, Praphon uses the concept of '*saksit*' to create an equivalence between Thai and Chinese

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<sup>222</sup> At one point Ajan Praphon had actually tried to combine his firewalking rites with the Wat Chang Hai ceremonies. There was even an old poster on the wall of his small residence advertising this event, which was to have taken place several years earlier. When asked about this, Ajan Praphon muttered that it had been called off, though he did not volunteer a reason. I was never able to find out the 'real' reason for the cancellation of the rites, though I suspect that holding this extremely unorthodox form of worship of a Theravada Buddhist monk on the grounds of a monastery proved to be too controversial.

deities. Although notion of sacred power and efficacy derive from quite different notions, Phaphon's use of *saksit* testified to the possibility of their translatability. Second, the manner in which Phaphon emphasised notions of 'Thai' and 'Chinese' is also important. The form of the firewalking rites is Chinese but it is Luang Phò Thuat's *Thainess* that Ajan Phaphon emphasises. Indeed, inclusion of this Thai monk in the ceremony is virtually presented as a defence of national pride.

A closer look at the ceremonial practice and apparatuses used by Phaphon and his group show that while Chinese framework of the ceremony is retained, but filled with Thai content. The palanquin on which Luang Phò Thuat and Ajan Thim are borne are a good illustration of this (Figure 31 and Figure 32). Although they superficially resembled the Chinese palanquin, there were a number of important differences. Ajan Phaphon pointed these out to me, explaining what made them 'Thai': the palanquin were covered in flowers, bore peacock feathers, and the ends of the 'armrests' and 'backrest' bore elephant heads instead of the dragon heads normally found on such palanquin.<sup>223</sup> The multiple flower garlands placed around the necks of the monks also convey a distinctively Thai mode of honouring respected figures. Furthermore, the flags standing vertically along the back of the palanquin, normally representing the flags that Chinese warriors wore on their backs, were decorated not with Chinese figures but with the same mystical formulae (*yan*) that Thai tattooists make use of in their designs.

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<sup>223</sup> It should be noted that elephants are not only a commonly-used Thai symbol of power and royal authority, they are directly implicated in the Luang Phò Thuat narrative, especially the founding of Wat Chang Hai (see chapter five).



Figure 31. Luang Phò Thuat on ceremonial palanquin (*kiao*). Note the flowers, flags at rear, and golden elephant heads.



Figure 32. Ajan Thim on ceremonial palanquin. A peacock feather is visible, as well as parts of the yan on the flags at the rear.

In this chapter I deal with two interrelated issues. First, I consider the reasons for Luang Phò Thuat's popularity in Chinese contexts in urban centres of southern Thailand. I focus on the common notion that Luang Phò Thuat is a *bodhisattva* as a key factor in this popularity. I consider the roots of this designation of *bodhisattva*-hood in the history of Luang Phò Thuat which I have already outlined over the last two chapters and I suggest that this designation has both 'Thai' and 'Chinese' expressions. This leads into the second issue which I consider, namely the manner in which Luang Phò Thuat mediates between Thainess and Chineseness. Rather than Luang Phò Thuat simply 'becoming Chinese', or even representing a hybridisation of 'Thai' and 'Chinese' identities, I suggest instead that Luang Phò Thuat facilitates a mediation which leaves both categories intact. In order to express this notion, I make use of the metaphor of Luang Phò Thuat as a 'Dhamma Ambassador', which I suggest provides a useful way of understanding his role.

Before moving on to that discussion, I will first consider other examples of Luang Phò Thuat's inclusion in Chinese contexts in the South, and how this is conceptualised.

#### *A Thai Bodhisattva*

During my fieldwork it became clear that the inclusion of Luang Phò Thuat in the firewalking rites by Praphon's tattooing group was not an isolated case. In fact, Luang Phò Thuat features prominently in a number of Chinese contexts in Songkhla and Hat Yai. In some cases, such as that the Thong Sia Siang Tung Foundation, it could be as simple as including a shrine to Luang Phò Thuat and other Thai monks. In other cases, his amulets or statues might be distributed or sold during Chinese ceremonies. In yet other

examples, Luang Phò Thuat is more thoroughly integrated into ritual events, occupying a position similar to a Chinese deity.

For example, at the Poi Sian (Eight Immortals)<sup>224</sup> shrine on the outskirts of Hat Yai, Luang Phò Thuat has his own shrine in the main shrine hall.<sup>225</sup> The head spirit medium explained to me that the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat is invited to participate in particular ritual events in exactly the same way as Chinese deities. A request is made before his shrine and a pair of semi-circular 'moon sticks' are cast. If the result is affirmative (that is, one positive and one negative, indicating a balanced result) the deity has expressed its desire to be included in the rites. For example, during the 2000 Procession of the Deities, Luang Phò Thuat's answer had been affirmative and his image was among the Poi Sian shrine deities borne through the streets and carried over hot coals in the evening.

At the Thep Na Ja shrine, also recently established on the outskirts of Hat Yai, Luang Phò Thuat features even more prominently. Larger than life-sized statues of himself and Phò Than Khlai sit in prominent positions on the shrine grounds.<sup>226</sup> Rather than merely featuring as 'guests' at the shrine, they are incorporated into a pantheon of five deities who form the centre of worship there. These are known as the *thephajao ha phra ong* (The Five Heavenly Divinities) (Figure 33).

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<sup>224</sup> Note that all transliterations of Chinese expressions are based on how they are rendered in Thai. This may mean that they are not the same as standard Chinese transliterations.

<sup>225</sup> He is referred to there as Somdet Jao Pha Kho, suggesting an orientation towards Satingphra and Wat Pha Kho rather than Wat Chang Hai.

<sup>226</sup> Phò Than Khlai is the famous monk from Nakhon Sri Thammarat (see footnotes 217 and 227). The reason for this pairing has to do with the similarity of these two monks as *bodhisattva*-style figures, both deceased but still considered to possess spiritual efficacy in the present. This is discussed below. In the case of the Thep Na Ja shrine this probably also had to do with the fact that the shrine had moved from Nakhon Sri Thammarat, Phò Than Khlai's home province.





**Figure 33. The Five Heavenly Divinities of the Thep Na Ja shrine, Hat Yai. The red markings have been put there by spirit mediums. Although now located at the shrine in Hat Yai, the pictured cloth states that it belongs to the Na Ja shrine in Nakhon Sri Thammarat.**

This is illustrated by a sacred design which is prominently mounted of the wall inside the shrine hall. At the centre of the design is the shrine's patron deity, the warrior god Thep Na Ja Sa Thai Jü, "The God of the Southern Müang" (*thepajao haeng müang thaksin*). He is flanked by Luang Pu Thuat, "The God of Protection from Danger" (*thepajao khlaeokhlat plòtphai*), and Jao Mae Kuan Im, "The Goddess of Compassion" (*thepajao haeng khwam metta*), Phò Than Khlai (here referred to as "Luang Phò Khlai"), The Right-

Speaking God (*thepajao waja sit*),<sup>227</sup> and Phra Kang Òng Ia, “The God of Commerce” (*thepajao haeng kankha*).<sup>228</sup>

The shrine also features large statues of Luang Phò Thuat and Phò Than Khlai on its grounds. In 2001 the Na Ja shrine began advertising that it would build “the largest copper Luang Phò Thuat in southern Thailand”. When I interviewed the head medium of the shrine about his reasons for establishing this building project he was quite explicit about his desire to divert visitors from Wat Chang Hai. “If visitors are able to pay their respects to Luang Phò Thuat in Hat Yai there is no need for them to drive all the way down to Pattani to do it,” he explained.<sup>229</sup>

Luang Phò Thuat’s presence, and active worship, in Chinese shrines is not confined to Hat Yai shrines by any means. The Munnithi Mae Kò Niao<sup>230</sup> in Yala features life-sized statues of Luang Phò Thuat and Phò Than Khlai. A devotee of this organisation explained that both monks were installed in 1995 and have been included in processions around the city since that time. When I asked why they had been included in this way he responded that it is because they are *saksit* and have performed miracles (*aphinihan*). Clearly it is

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<sup>227</sup> This is difficult to translate. The words *waja sit*, literally mean something like “to have the right to speak” (the Thai word *sit* is derived from the Pali *Siddhi*, meaning accomplishment, success, prosperity). It was explained to me that Phò Than Khlai was renowned for his ability to predict the future. “As he spoke, so it was”, I was often told. In other words, there was a direct correspondence between his speech and reality. In this sense, discussions of Phò Than Khlai resembled those about Ajan Thim (as related in the previous chapter).

<sup>228</sup> Although not included in the pictured version of this cloth, replicas used in the 2001 Vegetarian Festival included these functional differentiations. During the rites multiple pieces of cloth bearing these five deities were placed on skewers piercing the bodies of spirit mediums, who performed firewalking ceremonies to bless these objects. These were later distributed to devotees and visitors to the shrine in exchange for donations. The involvement of the Thep Na Ja shrine in the Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai will be discussed further in the following chapter.

<sup>229</sup> He himself had moved to Hat Yai from Nakhon Sri Thammarat. Hat Yai in this case became the junction of a number more than one spatial movement of sacred power – his own and that of Luang Phò Thuat. This will be discussed further in chapter eight.

<sup>230</sup> I.e. Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao, most commonly associated with Pattani, but whose cult has spread at least to several surrounding cities. Her image is also venerated at the Foundation in Hat Yai discussed in this chapter.

the ‘magical’ qualities of particular monks which make them attractive for this mode of ritual inclusion in Chinese shrines.

More generally, Luang Phò Thuat is a very popular figure in the largely Sino-Thai urban centres of southern Thailand. Though historically associated primarily with branches of the state, such as the armed forces, and primarily providing invulnerability, Luang Phò Thuat has been wholeheartedly taken up by the Sino-Thai and appears in any number of commercial contexts as a prosperity-bringing figure. Sometimes very large and elaborate statues, posters or painted portraits of the monk, sometimes alone, sometimes grouped with other monks feature in stores and restaurants throughout the city. By far the largest store-based image I encountered was a larger-than-life statue of the saint featured in the front window of one of Hat Yai’s many amulet shops. It was labelled, *Phra Phothisat (bodhisattva) Luang Phò Thuat*. The owner of the store explained to me that he was a *bodhisattva* “like Kuan Im, only Thai”, a sentiment I often heard in conversations about Luang Phò Thuat. Here Luang Phò Thuat’s was explained as ontologically equivalent to a Chinese deity, but his Thainess was simultaneously emphasised.

At the centre of this double-movement is the notion of his status as a *bodhisattva*. In conversation after conversation about Luang Phò Thuat his status as a *bodhisattva* was raised as his defining quality, sometimes explicitly juxtaposed with the orthodox Theravadin ideal of the *arahant*. The distinction between the ideals of spiritual attainment of the *bodhisattva* and *arahant* has historically been one of the primary distinctions between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions. It is therefore surprising that a Theravada Buddhist monk should be viewed in this light. In order to provide background to this discussion of Luang Phò Thuat, I will now provide an overview of the *bodhisattva* concept as it has been expressed in Theravada and Mahayana traditions.

*The Varying Traditions of the Bodhisattva*

In both Theravada and Mahayana traditions, a *bodhisattva* is a Buddha-to-be, an individual on the path to Enlightenment. However, the two traditions differ on the interpretation and importance of this concept, and it is this difference of interpretation which has commonly been cited as the key factor which distinguishes them. In orthodox Theravada Buddhism, the concept of the *bodhisattva* is not so much an achieved status as a potential, or a destiny, with an always-yet-to-come quality. In the Pali scriptures, the term *bodhisattva* specifically refers to the incarnations of the historical Buddha, Gotama, in the lives preceding his final rebirth. The concept of the *bodhisattva* is also suggestive of the Buddha-to-come, Sri Ariya Mettraya, who will reinstall the Dhamma after it has completely disappeared from the world. As Keyes states, “[i]n contrast to Mahayana Buddhism, Theravāda Buddhism sanctions the belief in only two *Bodhisattvas*: Gotama Buddha, who taught the Dharma followed by Theravāda Buddhists today; and (Ariya) Maitreya or Mettaya, who is the Buddha to come” (Keyes 1977:288).

By contrast, the Mahayana and esoteric traditions have been characterised by a proliferation of Buddhas, *bodhisattvas* and other figures. Kitagawa notes that in the "Hinayana" (i.e. Theravada) tradition the Buddha and Mettraya are recognised as *bodhisattvas*, beings “destined for the enlightenment of Buddhahood”. In the Mahayana and esoteric traditions “Mettraya is a saviour side by side with other ‘celestial’ *bodhisattvas*, Buddhas and saviour figures” (Kitagawa 1988:12). “These ... ‘great beings’ became the subject of an elaborate iconography that emphasises their majesty, insight, and concern to save others” (*Encyclopaedia of Religion* 1987:265).

Related to this are the varying ideals of spiritual achievement within each tradition. Theravada Buddhism is routinely characterised as promoting the ideal of the *arahant*, the monk who achieves enlightenment and escapes the cycle of birth-death-rebirth (*samsara*). According to this understanding,

Theravada Buddhism assumes maximum distance between monk and layperson. This has led some to posit the existence of two separate but interlocked modes of practice within Theravada Buddhism, where the monk focuses on the goal of *Nibbana*, while the layperson must content herself with improving her *kammic* existence in order to produce an auspicious rebirth (e.g. Bunnag 1973).

In Thailand, orthodox Buddhism promotes the view that monks are primarily 'fields of merit' (*na bun*) rather than active agents. Power radiates outwards without a specific target, for example during chanting, and it is only specific technologies of capture, arranged and performed by the laity – such as wrapping objects to be invested with power with cord (*sai sin*) that passes through monks' hands, or pouring water into a small bowl during chanting (*kruat nam*) – that give this charisma a specific form – and hence direction. From a linguistic perspective, it is laypeople themselves, not monks, who 'make merit' (*tham bun*); monks merely provide one of the most privileged means of doing so.

Theravada Buddhism is generally referred to by Mahayanists as being 'Hinayana' or 'lesser vehicle' due to its apparent concern with individual salvation of a spiritual elite. The Mahayana, or 'capacious vehicle', emphasises the salvation of all and the compassionate action of various *bodhisattvas* – both "celestial" beings and living practitioners – who have vowed not to achieve enlightenment until other suffering beings have been saved. Thus Mahayana Buddhism promotes an ideology of compassionate action toward all beings. It is common for practitioners to take the vow of the *bodhisattva* and forsake their own salvation in order to aid other suffering beings.

I should emphasise that these are ideal type distinctions. The manner in which these models manifest in the world is somewhat more complicated. For example, Tambiah makes a distinction between "rationalist" and

“tantric” modes for the arahant in the Theravada tradition. The latter has a similar emphasis to the Mahayana *bodhisattva*, and is an expression of the “cosmic love” he feels for other beings. The ritual dispensation of charms and amulets can be considered to be part of the latter mode (Tambiah 1987:122). Moreover, Kamala Tiyavanich (1997, 2003) has argued that the maintenance of the strict distinction between monk and layperson which has in effect reduced the ‘proper’ role of monk to that of ritual specialist is in fact the product of modern state control of the Buddhist monkhood rather than a true expression of historical Theravada Buddhism. In reality, she argues, the ideal of the *bodhisattva* has been much more common in Theravada Buddhist contexts than is usually assumed, especially at the village level, where monks have worked for the benefit of local communities, provided healing and other services which fall outside a strict interpretation of the monastic discipline (*vinaya*). Such practices have been frowned upon by state authorities and purged in various attempts to ‘purify’ the order.

#### *A Thai Bodhisattva*

From the conversations I had about Luang Phò Thuat, it would indeed seem that he was attributed with the qualities of a Mahayana *bodhisattva*. The distinction between *arahant* and *bodhisattva* was a salient factor in many of the conversations I had about Luang Phò Thuat. Take, for example, this fieldnote excerpt of a conversation with two monks at Wat Chang Hai:

The distinction between the *bodhisattva* and *arahant* was made to me by Phramaha S., who stated categorically that while some people think of Luang Phò Thuat as an *arahant* and Ajan Thim as a *sotaphan*,<sup>231</sup> Luang Phò Thuat is really *phra photisat*. He said that Luang Phò Thuat is very similar to the Chinese *bodhisattva* Kuan Im because he is a deity who actively helps

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<sup>231</sup> Pali: *sotopanna* or “stream-enterer” – one who has reached the final stages on the path to achieving enlightenment and whose enlightenment is guaranteed, but who must yet be reborn several more times before reaching the status of *arahant*.

people who have problems (*kae khon thi mi panha*) and have faith in him (*khon thi mi satha*). The picture here is painted of a compassionate and, most importantly, *active* celestial being who exists in some sort of relationship to his devotees. Thus for this monk the contrast between *arahant* and *bodhisattva* stemmed less from their level of enlightenment and more from their active engagement in dealing with the suffering of others. The comparison with Kuan Im is telling as this explicitly places Luang Phò Thuat akin to a Mahayana Buddhist deity who actively intervenes in worldly affairs.

This monks seems to be quite aware of the implications of the notion of the ideal of the *arahant* which, if achieved, would imply that there was no spirit which could act on the world after the passing away of the monk. During the conversation the second monk speculated on the reason for the national decline in prominence of the popular northern monk Luang Pu Waen, who had died a number of years before.<sup>232</sup> He wondered aloud whether the reason for people no longer being interested in his images could mean that he had become an *arahant* and he was therefore no longer present to answer people's prayers. Phramaha S., who was more senior, discounted this notion and instead blamed this phenomenon on the overproduction of fake images of Waen. This had meant, he said, that people had generally been unable to tell the real images from the fakes and the cult of his images had therefore collapsed.

Similar points about the potential and consequences of Luang Phò Thuat's *bodhisattva* status to were succinctly expressed to me by Graham, a long-term Malaysian connoisseur of southern Thai Buddhism with whom I spoke on a number of occasions.<sup>233</sup> In his sixties now, he had been patronising Thai monks at a number of temples in Southern Thailand and

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<sup>232</sup> During the period of my fieldwork it was quite common to see discarded images of Luang Pu Waen placed under trees and in other out of the way places within temple grounds. This sacred refuse was testimony to the fact that (images of) an extremely popular national saint had for some reason fallen from popular favour at some time in the recent past.

<sup>233</sup> Although a pseudonym, this name reflects the fact that his real name was also anglicised.

Northern Malaysia for 30 years. The details of a conversation with him were recorded in this fieldnote:

Graham also made some comments about Luang Phò Thuat being a *bodhisattva*. He said this is unusual in the Theravada tradition because they have the tradition of the *arahant*. However, Luang Phò Thuat has been 'given the honour' of being considered a *bodhisattva*. He mentioned the sutra to Luang Phò Thuat - *namo phottisatto* ... etc - which he knows off by heart. He said that this shows that Luang Phò Thuat is considered to be a *bodhisattva*... For Graham, coming from a non-Theravada tradition, the designation of Luang Phò Thuat as a *bodhisattva* made him *superior* to other monks who have been found to be *arahant*. He also said that Luang Phò Thuat amulets are different from others in that if you wear one, he "will not entertain" you going to girly bars, gambling, etc. This is a direct result of Luang Phò Thuat being a *bodhisattva* and not a dead and departed *arahant*.

Iconography also provides clues to Luang Phò Thuat's ontological status. Generally speaking, Thai Buddhist monks are represented according to a rather staid aesthetic. Monks are generally pictured sitting in meditative poses, facing directly towards the viewer. Less commonly, monks might be shown performing other activities that demonstrate the level of their ascetic cultivation, such as wandering in *thudong* pose. In accordance with their role as 'fields of merit', they are depicted in such a way as to demonstrate spiritual attainment but without sort of activity directed towards the world. They are not generally 'dynamic' figures, unlike Mahayana deities or Hindu gods. There is, as a rule, little paraphernalia, such as tools or implements, which give a pictorial representation of the 'function' or skills of a particular figure. This lack of 'specialised function' on the part of Thai monks would seem to suggest that they are not part of a pantheon such as might be defined in structuralist terms as an ordered system of difference where each 'god' achieves his identity through being distinguished from other gods.

Ideally emptied of ego and intention, monks should radiate their excess merit (*bun-barami*) impartially. Conferring blessings should not be a function



of their own will or desire, which would imply attachment and therefore defilement (Pali: *kilesa*).<sup>234</sup> Even 'tantric' practices, such as making and dispensing amulets, are not supposed to demonstrate preference and monks I observed made a point of dispensing ritual objects to all comers, without any sense of distinction.

Images of Luang Phò Thuat generally follow the standard pattern for images of monks. However, a crucial feature of the iconography of Luang Phò Thuat images reflects his *bodhisattva* status. In a conversation with Ajan Praphon, I enquired as to what it was that made Luang Phò Thuat so worthy of respect. He pointed at one of the large statues of the monk positioned in his studio. "Look at that, not just any monk could do that!" he gesticulated emphatically. I didn't immediately register what he was talking about. Then I realised he was gesturing at the base of the statue, at the lotus blossom on which Luang Phò Thuat was sitting. Up until that point I had not made much of this feature of Luang Phò Thuat images, which regularly portray him sitting on the lotus (e.g. Figure 24, Figure 34, Figure 36). Once sensitised to this feature, I began to notice it all the time. Not only was Luang Phò Thuat often portrayed sitting on a lotus blossom, other monks almost never were.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> A similar reasoning is presented to justify the fact that the majority of Theravada monks are not vegetarian. Even though killing animals for food is prohibited to monks, to refuse meat when offered would imply aversion on the part of monks and therefore would be an unacceptable expression of the monk's own desire. The only time a monk is justified in refusing to eat meat offered to him is when he believes the animal has been specifically killed to feed him. Corresponding to the logic outlined here, Mahayana monks and other practitioners are much more commonly vegetarian, as the *bodhisattva* ideal implies world-oriented moral action rather an individual attempt to evacuate oneself of all desire.

<sup>235</sup> The main exceptions to this rule, in my experience, were Somdet To, who has a status similar to that of Luang Phò Thuat and is often seen to be a *bodhisattva*, and Phò Than Khlai, who also has a similar status and is worshipped in a similar way. By this I mean that he is also often in Chinese contexts, as is Luang Phò Thuat, and is commonly 'paired' with Luang Phò Thuat in Chinese contexts.

The presence of the lotus blossom confers a particular ontological status. In Buddhist iconography the lotus is a symbol of purity and thus “becomes the bearer of the most eminent figures of Buddhism as well as of the little reborn souls of the *bodhisattvas* of the Pure Lands” (Gaulier and Jera-Bezaed 1987:49). In traditional Theravada Buddhist contexts it is normal only to see images of the Buddha on the lotus blossom.

Some images of Luang Phò Thuat also betray a more Mahayana-like aesthetic (Figure 34). Compare with a typical representation of the Mahayana *bodhisattva*, Kuan Im (Figure 35). In this image of Luang Phò Thuat, digital technology has allowed the juxtaposition of a number of elements.<sup>236</sup> He is given a golden aura. He is placed upon a lotus blossom and a crystal ball is placed in his meditative hands. Looking closely, one can see that the crystal ball has been further digitally integrated with an image of the Earth. The caption attached to the image reads “opening the world form” (*pang poet lok*), itself suggesting an active intervention in worldly affairs by the monk. The placement on the lotus blossom is particularly indicative of Luang Phò Thuat’s status as a *bodhisattva*. There are a number of striking similarities with the Mahayana image: the bright, colourful rendering, the lotus, the presence of ‘tools’ or other objects held by the ‘deity’ suggestive of specific activity or agency.

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<sup>236</sup> Obviously the use of digital technology to reproduce photo-realistic images of Luang Phò in a wide variety of contexts is a very interesting phenomenon that deserves further study. I intend to pursue this topic in future writing.

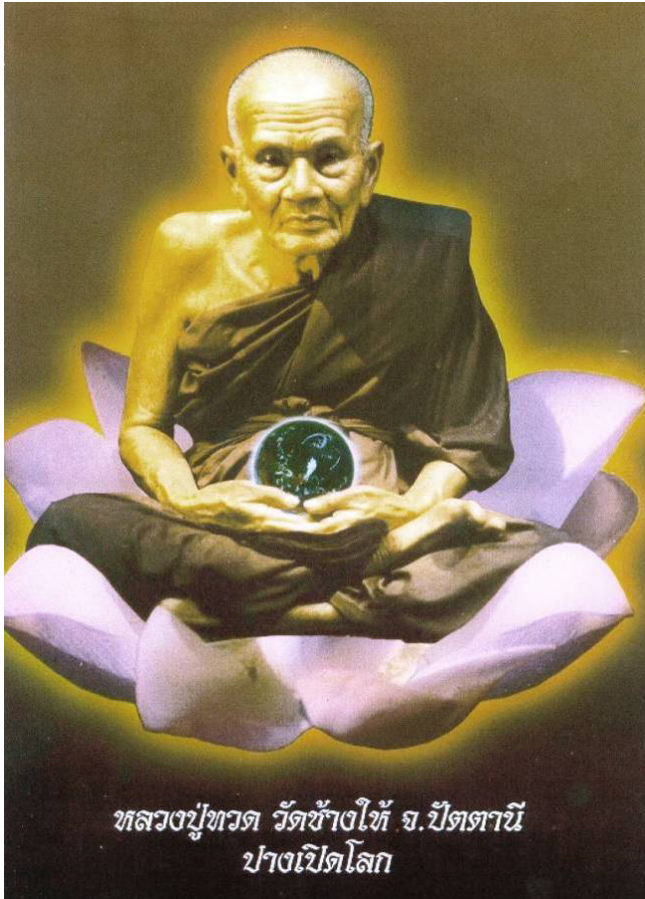


Figure 34. Luang Pu Thuat “opens the world”. Source: Obtained from a Sino-Thai shop owner in Trang. The writing reads: “Luang Pu Thuat, Wat Chang Hai, Pattani. Posture of Opening the World”.

Figure 35. The bodhisattva Jao Mae Kuan Im.



The status of Luang Phò Thuat as a *bodhisattva* is far from unambiguous, or uncontested. Not everyone one speaks to in Thailand will confirm Luang Phò Thuat as a *bodhisattva*. Many will refer to him as an *arahant*, while others will simply say that he is 'enlightened' (*samret laeo*), without going into detail about what sort of being he is. But even to the extent that he is referred to as a *bodhisattva*, the ambiguity does not disappear. Much depends on understandings of what exactly a *bodhisattva* is. As I have stated, the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions make use of this concept, but its meaning is quite different. I argue that this varying status is partially the product of, and partially the reason for, increased 'Chinese' patronage and worship of Luang Phò Thuat. However, rather than simply having become 'Chinese', it is the ontological ambiguity of Luang Phò Thuat connected to the notion that he is a *bodhisattva* that is key here. Thus, instead of this designation conveying an ontological consistency upon him, I suggest that the existence of the notion within different Buddhist traditions means that he can be 'ontologised' in differing ways, in different contexts, and to different ends. Furthermore, the *bodhisattva* status of Luang Phò Thuat does not simply represent a process of 'Mahayanisation', nor is it a new notion. Instead, the *bodhisattva* concept has been present 'from the beginning'.

#### *From Future Buddha to Celestial Bodhisattva*

In chapter four I discussed the designation of Luang Phò Thuat as future Buddha, Sri Ariya Mettraya, in relationship to struggle over political power in Theravada Buddhist polities. I noted that historically in Theravada Buddhist societies those claiming *bodhisattva* status tended to be political actors seeking to justify their claims to worldly power. The term therefore has millennial overtones, and is a status claimed by those wishing to replace

the corrupt social order with a pure order guided by Buddhist principles, or by individuals who wish to legitimate their claims to power against those of the incumbent ruler. I also noted that the *bodhisattva* concept is closely related to that of *phu mi bun* ('persons with merit'), rare individuals who are considered to have such enormous stores of accumulated positive karma which may be "translated into the improvement of this-worldly conditions of those who are linked with them" (Keyes 1977:288). As I argued, the use of this title and the local belief that Somdet Jao Pha Kho was none other than Sri Ariya Mettaya, the future Buddha, is also quite likely to have expressed both a nostalgia for an idealised past and nascent millennial sentiments of the local population.

In the 1950s, when Anan Khananurak was researching the history of Luang Phò Thuat Yiap Nam Thale Jüt he retained the notion that the saint was considered to be the *bodhisattva* in his version of the hagiography. Corresponding to this, the sacred formula or sutra (*khatha*) of Luang Phò Thuat,<sup>237</sup> ostensibly formulated by Ajan Thim, makes explicit the *bodhisattva* status of the saint. Furthermore, the first images of Luang Phò Thuat constructed by Ajan Thim (although the extent of Nai Anan's own input into the original design is unknown), the famous 1954 amulets, portray the monk sitting upon a lotus blossom (Figure 36).

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<sup>237</sup> I.e. *namo phōttisāto ākhantīmāya itthiphakawā*.



**Figure 36. 2497BE (1954) Luang Phò Thuat amulet, featuring the lotus blossom. Believed to be constructed by Ajan Thim based upon his visions, this amulet design has become the most influential prototype for all future amulets. Although there is a great deal of variation in images produced of Luang Phò Thuat since the 1950s, I would argue that this design remains the archetypal image.**

It is unclear to what extent Nai Anan's own Sino-Thai heritage influenced his initial interpretations. Likewise, it is not clear whether Ajan Thim was emphasising a 'Theravada' or 'Mahayana' interpretation of Luang Phò Thuat's ontological status in his formulation of the *khatha* or his initial amulet design. What is certain, however, is that he was treated as a living spirit capable of interacting with individuals in the present. This was in accordance with the concept of 'Thuat' in southern Thailand, of which 'Luang Phò Thuat' is a sub-category, who is considered to be an active, ancestral spirit. I would argue that the indigenous concept of 'Thuat' meshed seamlessly with the *bodhisattva* concept to produce a saviour spirit who was amenable to multiple interpretations. It was in this multifaceted quality that much of his appeal lay.

Thus Luang Phò Thuat expressed both 'Theravada' notions of the *bodhisattva* as a 'person with merit' and political ruler, but also as an interventionist ancestral spirit, or 'Thuat'. The 'Mahayanist' potential inherent in these designation would then appear to have been a central factor

in his being taken up by one of Thailand's most prominent spiritualist movements of the 1960s.

*The President of the Spirit World*

Luang Phò Thuat became one of the foundational figures in the Bangkok-based movement known as Samnak Pu Sawan ('Foundation of Heavenly Grandfathers'), or Huppha Sawan ('Heavenly Valley'), an organisation centred on the worship of a pantheon of celestial *bodhisattva* figures.<sup>238</sup>

This organisation was founded in 1966 by Suchart Kosolkitiwong, the son of poor Chinese migrants.<sup>239</sup> The movement came to national prominence in the 1970s and 80s as a defender of the Thai nation against the combined ills of communism and moral decline. Despite the Chinese background of its founder, and Mahayana-influenced modes of religious practice, including the worship of a pantheon of celestial *bodhisattvas* and an emphasis on societal moral renewal by means of chanting, the movement was a vehement defender of the Thai nation-state. The actual spiritual figures worshipped, therefore, were characterised by their Thainess. However, the movement was to be relatively short lived as a national force and "despite strong backing from certain highly placed military leaders, the cult was all but suppressed" (Keyes, Hardacre, and Kendall 1994:10). What brought this movement into an eventual disrepute was the presumptuous nature of Suchart's defence of the nation. It was, amongst other things, Suchart's temerity to advise the King, to provide him with unsolicited

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<sup>238</sup> For detailed studies of this movement, see Yagi (1988) and Jackson (1988).

<sup>239</sup> The group was first named as Samnak Pu Sawan, changing to Samnak Hupphasawan, or Hupphasawan, in the 1970s.

advice, and eventually to request that the King abdicate to take up the office of Prime Minister that brought this movement down.

Wijeyewardene states that Suchart first came to prominence when “[h]e claimed to be possessed by two monks, famous in Thai history, one an adviser to King Mongkut, and the other a Supreme Patriarch of the Kingdom of Ayutthia” (Wijeyewardene 1986:23). He is here referring to Somdet Phuthajan To and Luang Phò Thuat respectively.<sup>240</sup> Indeed, Luang Phò Thuat, his amulets and *khatha* feature prominently in the Samnak Pu Sawan foundation myth and he comes to be viewed as the spiritual founder himself. As related by Stengs (2003:207-8), Suchart’s engagement with the spirit world began with an encounter with Luang Phò Thuat when, in 1960, at the age of seventeen, Suchart was given an amulet of the monk by a Chinese businessman. Although initially indifferent to the amulet, at some point Suchart decided to test its magical power and he went to see a monk about it. The monk taught him the Luang Phò Thuat *khatha*.<sup>241</sup> When chanting this formula Suchart was hit in the face by a strong light and lost consciousness. When he regained consciousness, friends who had accompanied him told him that he had been possessed by the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat.<sup>242</sup> At first Suchart did not believe this and continued to test the amulet by reciting the *khatha* until finally “... the Holy Spirit of Phra Bodhisattva Luang Poo Thuat ... really possessed Mr Suchart’s body and said, ‘This man wants to test me so I will take him as my medium’ (Prasert 1995, cited in Stengs 2003:208). Although working as a medium for a time, Suchart was reluctant to perform

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<sup>240</sup> Although the notion that the latter was the Supreme Patriarch is a detail only sometimes included in Luang Phò Thuat myth, and not a historical fact as Wijeyewardene’s gloss suggests.

<sup>241</sup> Stengs does not state if this was the *khatha* formulated by Ajan Thim, although it almost certainly was.

<sup>242</sup> Stengs uses the name Luang Pu Thuat throughout, reflecting the preference of the Samnak Pu Sawan.



this kind of work and attempted to escape the spirit world by fleeing to Laos. He was, however, again possessed by the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat and he was convinced to return to Thailand. In an interesting detail, Suchart was unable to re-cross the border back into Thailand due to the deteriorating security situation at the time. At this point Suchart vowed that if Luang Phò Thuat helped him safely re-enter Thailand he would accept his role as the spirit's medium. He then crossed the border with ease.

Once back in Thailand, he served as a conscript soldier in 1964-5. It was in this period that the spirit of Luang Phò Thuat started to express his worries about the political developments of the time. According to the monk's spirit, the political situation in the country was very bad, and the human world was in need for help from the spirit world. The spirit of Luang Pu Thuat then requested Suchart to found the *Samnak Pu Sawan*, or in the organisation's own rendering in English, 'the House of the Divine Sages on Earth' (Stengs 2003:208).

The Samnak Pu Sawan was established with the goal of restoring stability to Thailand in the era of communist insurgency and national uncertainty. Such dangers were associated with moral decline that had brought about a 'dark age' (*kali yuk*), a notion closely associated with Buddhist conceptions of the millennium in which the decline of the teachings of the previous Buddha necessitates the intervention of Sri Ariya Mettaya, the Buddha-to-come. The organisation was increasingly modelled on the United Nations, though in the spirit world. Leading this organisation of spirits were Luang Phò Thuat as President, Somdet To as General Director, and Thao Maha Chinna Panchara, whom Stengs refers to as a 'Brahmin god' (Stengs 2003:213), with Suchart acting as a medium for all three of these *bodhisattvas*. Like the United Nations, Suchart and the Samnak Pu Sawan came to have global ambitions. In 1973 Suchart founded the 'Office of the World Peace Envoy', with the task of combating communism and spreading

peace globally (Stengs 2003:215). Stengs notes the use of the United Nations-like terminology such as ‘envoy’ (*thut*). As I will discuss below, this is not the only time that Luang Phò Thuat has been associated with the role of an ambassador.

### *A Dhamma Ambassador*

Sometimes insights come late. Post fieldwork, I have a conversation with a Thai student at my university. He is a devout Buddhist, an activist, and knowledgeable about the hagiography of Luang Phò Thuat. We have discussed Luang Phò Thuat on a number of occasions. In one discussion I broach the subject of the political role of Luang Phò Thuat in southern Thailand, about the presence of the Thai state in Pattani. I wonder if he will think I am showing disrespect by suggesting that Luang Phò Thuat could be anything other than a world-renouncing, and therefore apolitical, ascetic. However, this student immediately endorsed the notion that Luang Phò Thuat might have a political role in the region, but not in a way I had been expecting. Perhaps Luang Phò Thuat was a ‘Dhamma Ambassador’ (*thamma thut*), he suggested, who had appeared in that region to heal the divisions that were causing so much strife.<sup>243</sup> This role was apparent in both his original manifestation as Somdet Jao Pha Kho, and also in the present. Until that time, I had been focused on Luang Phò Thuat’s role as a guardian and protector of boundaries, this interpretation suggested the ability to overcome them. It was the restorative, integrative power of the saint, his ability to manifest loving-kindness to heal societal ruptures that was emphasised here.

The first thing that struck me about this characterisation was that the expression ‘dhamma ambassador’ was identical to the program instigated by

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<sup>243</sup> We were discussing this in the context of the outbreak of violence in the Patani region that began in January 2004.

the Thai military to use the Buddhist monks to help secure the peripheral areas of the nation-state in the fight against communism. Begun in 1962, this program represented the unprecedented politicisation of the Sangha.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, the student linked Luang Phò Thuat's karmic destiny with the goal of a peaceful and integrated South. Perhaps, he suggested, the *reason* Luang Phò Thuat was present in the South was to heal the division between Buddhists and Muslims, both during his lifetime and now.<sup>245</sup>

I take up this salutary metaphor of Luang Phò Thuat as a kind of 'ambassador' because the notion conveys a sense of being both invested with the authority of the state combined with the ability to cross boundaries with relative freedom. Not only does an ambassador move across boundaries, he is also capable of communicating and even producing rapprochement across borders. Thus, I suggest Luang Phò Thuat is not simply a defender of boundaries – whether personal or collective – but instead provides a privileged point for the controlled crossing of these boundaries. Instead of any possible role he might have in mediating Buddhist-Muslim relations in the South, however, I concentrate here on the highly ambiguous borderline between being 'Thai' and being 'Chinese' in contemporary southern Thailand.

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<sup>244</sup> Was it purely coincidence that the same year that the production of Luang Phò Thuat amulets became widespread in the South? As argued in the previous chapter, the emergence of Luang Phò Thuat in the South occurred more or less at the same time as the state was promoting the *thamma thut* and *thamma jarik* programs in the peripheral regions of the nation. However, in the Muslim-dominated South, I would argue, the main goal was not only the conversion of local populations or the promotion of Central Thai Buddhism over competing local traditions, but rather the production of the lower South as a *Buddhist space* over which the Thai Kingdom has a historical claim. Thus the imperative to connect the Pattani legend of Than Lanka to the kingdom of Ayutthaya and the re-production of buddhalogical space, the rediscovery of pathways, reinvesting the landscape with significance. At the same time, Luang Phò Thuat is implicated in another dedifferentiation; the production of the notion of an undifferentiated South populated by a people known as 'Southerners'.

<sup>245</sup> This might be considered an expression of "socio-karma" (Walters 2003).

This boundary-crossing quality also has a temporal quality. Luang Phò Thuat may also be viewed as mediating between old and new, between the old purified Sangha order and all that it implies and new realities Thai people are being confronted with – the drive to ‘modernise’ and development-oriented models imposed by successive regimes since the 1950s. Luang Phò Thuat, as both idealised representative of an idealised past and also coeval with the present by being an active force, provides a way of dealing with contemporary changes confronting people. He has been associated with ideals of modernity and the fully-fledged nation-state clearly in his positioning as the ‘President’ of the United Nations (the epitome of high modernity as the peaceful coexistence of a community of nations) of the spirit world.

This argument would suggest that the use of a figure like Luang Phò Thuat is not merely to *maintain*, shore up and reassert, spatial and temporal boundaries,<sup>246</sup> but also to allow for a *controlled* transgression or straddling of such boundaries. He provides a mechanism for ‘Thai ways of being Chinese’ or ‘Chinese ways of being Thai’ at the same time as asserting the iconicity of past and present.

Such complex, and personal manifestations of national identity are not confined to Thai and Chinese. Sathian and Dorairajoo (2002) provide an example that problematises the assumption that ethnic solidarity is primary and more fundamental than national identification in the case of Thai-Malay *tom yam* cooks working in Malaysia. These migrants would ascribe their proficiency at cooking *tom yam* to their Thainess, despite the fact that they never cooked it (or anything else) at home and despite the fact that Thai food was not part of their diet in rural southern Thailand. The authors state that:

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<sup>246</sup> For example, as argued by Morgan (2005:54) with regard to sacred images.

It was as if national identity (being Thai) translated itself into a powerful cooking ability and transposed on the body of the individual. Young men working across the border are not only asserting their Thai identity to lay claim to high-paying jobs as *tom yam* cooks, but they are being made conscious of their Thai identity as well (Sathian and Dorairajoo 2002:87).

In a sense Luang Phò Thuat can be similarly located at the nexus of multiple overlapping 'regimes of value', multiply embedded in wider networks, within which a variety of slippages can and do take place (c.f. Myers 2001:6).

Indeed, there is a paradox in the position of Luang Phò Thuat, as both a Theravada Buddhist monk and also a transcendent spirit. He is both of the Sangha, and can therefore stand for the power of the Thai state, but at the same time is a spirit and therefore may participate in the critique of the contemporary Sangha. As oft reported by those studying the rise of urban spirit mediumship in Thailand (e.g. Pattana 1999b, White 1999), the rise of the worship of spirits in Thailand is consciously portrayed in terms of Buddhist eschatology, as filling the breach left by a Sangha no longer capable of sacralising society. Luang Phò Thuat comes to stand for the Sangha of an idealised past but is at the same time a contemporary spiritual force. Old and new, as Chinese and Thai, are similarly sutured.

What I am arguing then is that it is precisely Luang Phò Thuat's straddling of conceptual boundaries – between Theravada and Mahayana, state-supported and popular, Thai and Chinese, traditional and modern – that enables him to mediate and in a sense transcend these categories. Different modes of identification are able to exist in an ever-changing compromise formation. To further complicate this situation, these relationships do not occur within a closed dyadic system between a migrant group and host population within the bounds of a nation-state. Rather, they

open up onto wider transnational contexts, where ritual actors in southern Thailand negotiate both within the discursive terrain of the nation-state and in a way that takes into account the desires of a transnational audience. While perhaps not unique to southern Thailand, I argue that these interactions are more concentrated and intense because of the unique configuration of factors: a relatively wealthy Chinese population in neighbouring Malaysia and Singapore, a large Chinese descent group in urban centres in southern Thailand with a distinct history and also longstanding historical connections between these two groups, a large discrepancy in freedom of (ritual) expression between southern Thailand and its neighbours. I will explore these dynamics in particular contexts in the chapters to follow.

# **PART III**

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THE TRANSNATIONAL SACRED





## Chapter Seven

### Devoted Tourism: The Transnational Sacred in Southern Thailand

On 9th of the 9th, 1999 (CE), a day of alliterative auspiciousness for Chinese and Thai alike, there was boom in activities, such as weddings, purchase of lottery tickets, and Y2K tests, designed to take advantage of this day's properties (*Bangkok Post* 10 September, 1999). In Bangkok, more than 2,000 Chinese from Taiwan, Macau, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore took part in a ceremony at one of Thailand's most famous and popular shrines, the image of the Hindu god Brahma (*than thao mahaphrom*) outside the Erawan Hyatt Hotel. The purpose of the ceremonies was to 'open the eyes' of (that is, sacralise) a replica of the Erawan Brahma image before it was to be taken to Taiwan to be installed there (*Bangkok Post* 7 September, 1999). The main sponsor behind this ritual was a Taiwanese man who was cured of a kidney disease after he prayed at the Erawan Brahma several years beforehand. This image joined a growing population of Erawan Brahma replicas that have been exported around the world along the channels of the Chinese diaspora. The Hindu god has been 'Buddhafied' by the overseas Chinese, who most commonly refer to the image as the 'Four Faced Buddha'. Replicas of the Erawan Brahma can now be found in Singapore, Macau, Hong Kong, outside houses in Penang and outside Chinese-owned shopping centres in Canada. Despite this exporting of replicas, the sponsor of the above ritual is reported to have said that he believes tourism to Bangkok will benefit, because many Chinese around the world wish to pray at the original image.

A further illustration of the connection between this shrine and tourism occurred when on 21 March 2006, the statue of Brahma was unexpectedly destroyed by a man characterised as 'mentally ill' and 'deranged' in the

mainstream press. Amid the flurry of discussion of the event, there was concern about the impact on tourism. Prakrit Shinamourpong, vice president of Thai Hotels Association, estimated that the destruction could cost Thailand one million tourists per year (*The Nation* 22 March 2006).<sup>247</sup> When the Brahma statue was repaired by the Fine Arts Department, ethnic Chinese from all over Asia travelled to Bangkok to participate, including groups from Hong Kong who chartered flights (*Taipei Times* 22 May 2006).



**Figure 37. An artist's impression of a possible future development at Wat Khao Takiab, a Buddhist monastery in Hua Hin, southern central Thailand. Thanks to the monastery's abbot, who gave permission to take this photograph of the picture.**

Late in the year 2000 the abbot of a temple in Hua Hin, on the upper peninsula some few hours south of Bangkok, told me of his plans to build 'hotel style accommodation' for foreign residents, mainly Chinese and Japanese, on the grounds of his temple. Although his temple is visited every day by busloads of Chinese tourists from Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong who come to admire ocean views while receiving blessings from the Thai monks and praying to a large image of the Chinese goddess of mercy, Kuan Im, the accommodation he was referring to was not for the

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<sup>247</sup> The popularity of Brahma with Singaporean Chinese has also been noted by scholars such as Jackson (2004b) and Yee (1996).

living, but for the dead. The abbot was confident that soaring real-estate prices in such places as Singapore and Taiwan would encourage Chinese people there to bury at least part of the remains of their loved ones offshore. His temple, he believed, offered the appropriate levels of auspiciousness (he himself is an expert at *feng shui*, he told me) at a fraction of the cost of burial in the home countries. The abbot expected that the revenue generated by his 'spirit hotels' would allow him to develop his temple in ways that would make it even more attractive to Chinese tourists. To illustrate this he showed me diagrams of a plan to construct gigantic golden Chinese dragons that would 'swim' in the ocean, completely ringing the island on which the temple is situated (Figure 37). Just off the tip of the island, connected by a short bridge, an enormous golden dome would house an image of Brahma. Large images of *bodhisattvas* Kuan Im and Luang Phò Thuat, the latter touted as the largest in the world,<sup>248</sup> were already under construction and proving to be popular pilgrimage sites among domestic and international tourists alike. The character of the temple, including statues of dinosaurs and other animals had led one observer already to characterise the monastery precincts as akin to a 'Buddhist theme park' (Hamilton 1994). It would appear more recent developments and plans only confirm the further extension of this character.

Although he has not yet set this plan to build spirit hotels in motion, there is some reason to believe that his project would receive interest. During my fieldwork, I had found several cases where Malaysian and

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<sup>248</sup> Simultaneously another monastery in Prachuap Khiri Khan province, Wat Huai Mongkhol, was also building a statue of Luang Phò Thuat which was also claimed as the biggest in the world. This one has been completed (I have no information regarding the statue at Wat Khao Takiab) and is still being touted as the world's largest (Details can be found at: <http://www.mots.go.th/prachuapkhirikhan/hua%20hin/thuad.htm>).

Singaporean Chinese had interned at least part of the remains of relatives in temples in southern Thailand.<sup>249</sup>

These two anecdotes illustrate two main themes that I address in this chapter. Both show Thailand's embeddedness in the process of what can be termed 'religious transnationalism', involving the trafficking of charisma and sanctity. This process is intimately tied to patterns of Chinese tourism to and in Thailand. Using the language of economics – which is not completely inappropriate in this context – Thailand could be said to be a 'net exporter' of sacred power and objects, as well as a wide variety of ritual services.

Also illustrated are the sorts of adaptations and transformations that are effected through these transnational connections and flows. Hindu gods have become Buddhas, and many monks have adapted themselves and their temples to the spiritual and aesthetic tastes and demands of their Chinese devotees. In the process they have also been able to establish extensive networks of followers within the Chinese diaspora of East and Southeast Asia and beyond. The examples also suggest that 'globalising' processes are not driven by large centralised institutions or companies. The trade in sanctity does not spread outwards from Thailand uniformly; it flows through the informal webs and interlocking networks of Thai ritual specialists, Thai and Sino-Thai traders and tour guides, and the wider Chinese diaspora. Furthermore, the specificities of geography, local history and particular dynamics of tourism and trade in different parts of Thailand all play a role in shaping the sorts of relationships and networks that develop between Thai-based ritual specialists and their foreign Chinese patrons.

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<sup>249</sup> Preliminary research on this topic suggests that there are a number of reasons for adopting this strategy. Sometimes the internment of ashes was the result of a long-standing master-disciple relationship between a foreign Chinese and a southern Thai religious figure; sometimes it was due to transnational kinship ties; in other cases it was a sort of return to the homeland for individuals who had been born in southern Thailand but moved abroad. In all cases the auspiciousness of the actual internment site, usually based on the perceived abilities of the controlling religious figure, was a significant factor.

The interest in sacred sites, objects, and individuals in Thailand is multifaceted and is not limited to any one specific religious tradition. This reflects the inherent pluralism and diversity in both the Thai and overseas Chinese popular religious systems. Theravada Buddhist monks and images feature significantly in this transnational religious complex. However, the religious tourism and cross-border patronage also involve the full gamut of popular religious forms to be found in Thailand. Chinese shrines and festivals; spirit mediums of both the Chinese and Thai traditions; folk Brahmans; tattooists of sacred symbols believed to convey invulnerability; horoscope readers; *manora* performers; and traders in sacred objects all feature in this form of tourism. As the previous chapter's discussion of Luang Phò Thuat showed, these various traditions should not be treated as completely separate entities. The relationship between them is complex: there is intense competition amongst purveyors of sanctity, luck, and auspiciousness but at the same time there is cooperation, overlap, and blending. This occurs not only at the level of concrete religious forms and practices, but, I argue, also at a more abstract level as the presence of all these traditions combines to produce a generalised sense of southern Thailand as a zone of religious and spiritual potential.

In this chapter, therefore, I discuss 'religious tourism' and 'cross-border patronage' and draw on examples from a number of the above-mentioned traditions to consider the strategies used to incorporate the sacred as one aspect of an overall tourism-focussed economy. This is not to suggest, however, that each of these traditions is configured identically in the context of the cross-border trade in sanctity. Instead, this chapter will discuss 'religious tourism' in southern Thailand in general terms in order to set up a number of themes that will be explored through the use of ethnographic examples in the next two chapters. These are namely the overlapping and intertwined issues of Chineseness, the state, hybridity, authenticity and

participation. In the next chapter, I expand the themes raised in this chapter by narrowing the focus to the city of Hat Yai. I consider the specific ways that a variety of Chinese religious forms, and manifestations of Chineseness more generally, have been utilised and adapted to a cross-border dynamic. In chapter nine, I provide an account of a particular Theravada Buddhist robe-offering ceremony in rural Songkhla province which has come to be dominated by Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese. In both cases I explore the abovementioned problematics to develop a more nuanced sense of the relationship between the sacred, the border zone and the complex interplay of sameness and difference that produces the conditions of possibility of cross-border religious exchanges.

#### *From National to Transnational Religious Circuits*

Religious life in Thailand has generally been understood as a nationally-bound phenomenon. This applies as much to the institutional structures of religion as to the circuits and circulations of religious objects and religiously-motivated movements of people. This notion has two main features. First, as already argued in this thesis, there has been the tendency to accept relatively unquestioningly the categories and ordering principles of the Thai state, meaning that state-sanctioned Theravada Buddhism has generally been accepted as the legitimate representation of 'Thai religion'. Many of the assumptions about Thai religion taken on in scholarship, including the ideal relationship between monk and lay person, the role of the monk, and the centrality of a unified monkhood (Sangha), have been critiqued is not so much representative of 'Thai' religion so much as 'State' Buddhism (this point is strongly argued, for example, in Kamala 1997).

Corresponding to the adoption of the Thai state's categories and hierarchical principles, the literature on popular religion has tended to

reinforce a sense that the circulation of sacred images and pilgrimage in Thailand is a nationally-bound phenomenon. Analysis of religious phenomena typically ends at the nation's borders. For example, the seminal work on the subject of pilgrimage, patronage and the circulation of sacred objects, Stanley Tambiah's *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (1984), presents a model that is fundamentally based on the dimensions of the nation-state. Patronage radiates from urban centres, in particular Bangkok, in exchange for charisma drawn from the periphery, usually in the form of amulets in the image of various ascetic 'forest monks' (*phra pa*). The structure of this argument follows from his model of the "radial" nature of the modern Thai state, which is "centre-oriented" and "centre-dominated" (Tambiah 1976). "Urban constellations do not have so much interlocking relationships with one another, but rather are directly oriented to the national metropolis that engages them in discrete dyadic relations" (Tambiah 1976:273). The hinterlands of each province relate to the provincial capital radially and the capitals in turn relate radially to Bangkok.

This model is useful for understanding the manner in which patterns of exchange of sacred object have bound centre and periphery over the last half century. However, the increasing pervasiveness of transnational patronage necessitates a rethinking of nationally-bound models. During my fieldwork, it became apparent that a national frame was insufficient for my analysis of the patterns of patronage and circulation of sacred objects in southern Thailand. The involvement of Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese in religious life in the South is extremely pervasive and cannot be understood as a mere epiphenomenon. In my experience, most prominent forms of religious life in the southern border regions almost always have some Malaysian or Singaporean Chinese involvement and in some cases they would not exist at all if it were not for Malayo-Singaporean involvement. A Hat Yai-based spirit medium in the Chinese tradition, whose own shrine

benefited significantly from the participation of ethnic Chinese devotees from Malaysia, commented in an interview that “[If] Thai temples<sup>250</sup> in Hat Yai are very well furnished and supported, it’s because of Malaysian support, Malaysian money.” This is an obvious exaggeration but it does reflect the extent to which foreign patronage is central to the religious scene in the far South. It also represents a fairly accurate rule of thumb. Generally speaking, it is true that if a monastery or shrine appears to be quite wealthy, chances are that there is some Singaporean or Malaysian patronage involved. It is therefore not surprising that there is a common perception that the Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore – with their superior wealth and reputations for generosity – are willing and able to spend much larger sums of money on religious devotion than the locals. This attitude was also reflected by many Malaysian and Singaporean devotees whom I interviewed in southern Thailand. These individuals often characterised their involvement in southern Thai religious life as making up for a lack on the part of the local population. Religious patronage in these cases was characterised as a kind of cross-border charitable intervention (as will be demonstrated in examples in both the following chapters).

The transnational nature of religious interactions in the far South problematises the radial model of pilgrimage and patronage without necessarily completely invalidating it. As an alternative, I argue that religious figures in the South should be understood as embedded within multiple relationships and negotiating multiple orientations, towards the centre of the nation-state in certain respects while being oriented in many cases south of the border in others. In the case of Theravada Buddhist monks, for example, the existence of the national monastic hierarchy remains extremely important. Monks in the South are oriented towards Bangkok for

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<sup>250</sup> He used the word *wat* here. He was not only referring to the shrines of Chinese mediums, or *sarn jao*.



their education, the dispensing of ecclesiastical titles, official recognition of their sanctuary (*samnak*) or monastery (*wat*), and so on. However, they may simultaneously derive the majority of their lay support from outside Thailand and even spend the majority of their time in Malaysia or Singapore when invited to perform rituals by their devotees. Perhaps one way of understanding this would be make use of Tambiah's terminology to suggest that monks in this position may be 'centre-dominated' but they are not necessarily 'centre-oriented'.

There is also a great deal of variability between different relationships of patronage. While general patterns are evident, the sorts of networks that individual charismatic monks develop are also highly individual, and each one attests to a unique history of patronage. Certain temples remain essentially village temples, others have strong ties to wealthy patrons in nearby urban centres or Bangkok, others trace their lineages to the forest masters of northeastern Thailand, others rely on patronage from Thai supporters based in the West, and yet others cater to the tastes of ethnic Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore. Most commonly there is a complex combination of two or more of the above patterns. Thai monks tend to be inclusive in terms of who they allow to patronise them, and even those who rely on foreign patronage could not do without the support of local people in the everyday running of their temples.<sup>251</sup>

Other ritual specialists in southern Thailand, such as Chinese spirit mediums, do not have recourse to the same state-sanctioned national hierarchy as Buddhist monks. However, the notion of multiple orientations is useful here, too, as these specialists must negotiate national discourses about spirituality, authenticity, Chineseness and so on, while simultaneously catering to the spiritual desires of their foreign devotees, who are not

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<sup>251</sup> The complexities of these kinds of relationships will be explored in more detail in chapter nine.

necessarily embedded within these discourses. Thus, while interactions between Chinese mediums and their Chinese patrons might be the expression of a cultural continuity that traverses the boundary of the nation-state, the border and the interplays of sameness and difference it produces may be more salient than it would first appear.

Part of the reason for the intensity of cross-border religious interaction in the South is geographical. The far South of Thailand is the most distant region of the country from the centre. Singapore is closer to the far South than Bangkok and urban centres in Malaysia, such as Penang and Ipoh, are only a few hours drive from the border. Furthermore, with certain prominent exceptions, Bangkok-based patronage more often radiates towards the North and Northeast of the country wherein the vast bulk of the country's forest masters reside. This is reflected in the fact that virtually all the major works on the cults of saints and the trade in sacred objects only ever mention the South in passing (the most prominent examples in English are Kamala 1997, Tambiah 1984, 1987, Taylor 1993b).

Many Malaysian and Singaporean men, particularly the ethnic Chinese, see in Thailand a zone of permissiveness which allows them to escape from the strictures of their home countries, whether it be from conservative Islam in Malaysia or the hyper-regulation of Singapore (Askew 2002, Askew and Cohen 2004). Thai border towns of Betong, Sadao and Sungai Kolok, as well as southern Thailand's 'commercial capital', Hat Yai, attract large numbers of Malaysian and Singaporean men who come to drink, gamble and buy commercial sex. Some are essentially cross-border commuters, working in Malaysia and crossing into Thailand virtually every evening (Askew 2002, Askew and Cohen 2004). Ironically perhaps, tourism based on commercial sex and other illicit activities has close parallels with 'religious tourism'. As with sex tourism, it is the 'permissiveness' of many Thai religious specialists and their willingness to adapt to the desires of their foreign patrons, which

contribute to the sense that southern Thailand can produce religious possibilities that are unavailable in Muslim-dominated Malaysia or highly-structured Singapore.<sup>252</sup>

Recognition of the religious dimension of tourism has led Hat Yai's Municipal Council to become involved in the production of sacred objects for tourist consumption. In a major development project, the Council has built large statues of Brahma, Kuan Im, and the Buddha in the city's municipal park. As I will discuss in the next chapter, this building project represents attempts by the Council to re-brand the city in a way that broadens its appeal specifically to ethnic Chinese tourists.

#### *Alternative Tourisms in the South*

Generally, when one thinks about tourism in southern Thailand the most common images that come to mind are deserted white-sand beaches, crystal clear waters, palm trees, exotic smiling women, and other signifiers of a tropical paradise. Corresponding to this, the predominant imagination of tourism to southern Thailand fits neatly within the triad of "sand, sea and sex" that Valene Smith (1989:3) argues characterises the dominant logic of mass charter tourism. The empty beach, signifier of the absence of culture (see, for example Wiss 2006), provides the illusion of an empty terrain ripe for the inscription of tourist desire. This is borne out in Western imaginings of the South in novels such as *The Beach* (Garland 1997) and *Platform*

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<sup>252</sup> This issue will be explored in relationship to the Chinese 'Vegetarian Festival', or the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, in Hat Yai in the next chapter. See also Maud (2005).

(Houellebecq 2002).<sup>253</sup> Smith's triad reflects the predominance of Westerners in mass tourism, and the corresponding focus given to the activities and assumptions of Westerners in tourism studies. Indeed, Smith argues that the West is the only economic base to produce mass charter tourism (1989:14). This may have still been true when Smith made this statement. Western tourists certainly visit the South for these reasons, especially Phuket and the islands of Kò Samui and Kò Phangan, while travelling to the North of the country in search of 'culture' (E. Cohen 2001b). However, increases in affluence and leisure time in Southeast Asia that have accompanied the post-war development, but more particularly during the economic upswing that began in the 1980s, led to the increasing significance of domestic and intra-regional tourism (Leong 1997:74). Nevertheless, the assumption that tourism occurs across the North-South and East-West poles still dominate discussions of travel (Kaur and Hutnyk 1999:1) much of which is still written from the position of the white Western male (Housee 1999:137).

The northern, or upper, South is still dominated by Western tourism although tourism from East Asia – Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China – has become increasingly significant in recent years (e.g. Chan and Wee 2006, E. Cohen 2001a).<sup>254</sup> By contrast, tourism in the lower South has long been dominated by visitors from Malaysia and, to a lesser extent, Singapore. Western tourism in this region has never been very significant, and the hub of tourism in this area, Hat Yai, is used by

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<sup>253</sup> Interestingly, both novels present southern Thailand as a potential paradise, but also inherently dangerous. In both cases an Eden-like paradise becomes the site of extreme violence. In *The Beach* the idyllic empty beach is menaced by drug runners, while in *Platform* the beach as a zone of freedom from all sexual inhibitions becomes a bloodbath when it is overrun by Islamic terrorists. This theme of a tropical paradise for Westerners becoming a site of death and destruction has been uncannily echoed in the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005, the first attack occurring only months after *Platform* was published.

<sup>254</sup> A sign of this changing scholarly focus is demonstrated by the recent conference "'Of Asian Origin': Rethinking Tourism in Contemporary Asia", held at the National University of Singapore, 7-9 September 2006.

Westerners mainly as a stop-over point on trips between Malaysia and other parts of Thailand. Perhaps for this reason, ethnic Chinese tourism, and tourism to the lower South more generally, has only recently received scholarly attention (most prominently, Askew 2002, 2005, Askew and Cohen 2004).

The proximity to the border with Malaysia means that visits to the lower South is also predominantly land-based, and can involve frequent short term trips, sometimes even on a daily basis as a form of cross-border 'commuter' tourism. Askew refers to this mode of travel as "border tourism" (Askew 2002). Also, the fact that many visitors can bring their own vehicles means that they can be relatively independent of tourism infrastructure, thus producing the possibility for a high level of diversity in patterns of tourist travel and activities.

These tourist markets do not merely imitate Western patterns, although they may share many characteristics. In the case of the lower South, the two largest groups of foreign tourists are ethnic Malay Muslims, and ethnic Chinese, who are predominantly, nominally at least, Buddhists. In this study it is only the latter group that are dealt with as it is they who dominate the patronage of religious sites and figures in southern Thailand. However, this is not to suggest that Malay Muslims do not also participate in these patterns to some degree. There are plenty of studies on inter-ethnic and inter-religious exchange in the South to suggest that cross-border versions of these interactions would be unsurprising (some examples include Burr 1975, Golomb 1984, Golomb 1985a, Horstmann 2004, Nishii 1999, 2000, 2002a, 2002b).

One significant point of differentiation between Chinese and Western patterns of tourism is the position of the sacred. While some Westerners may come to southern Thailand for 'spiritual' reasons, especially backpackers interested in attending meditation retreats such as those at Suan Mokkh in

Surat Thani, the above-mentioned sun, sand and sex triad still largely holds true. In the case of Chinese tourism, however, this triad would be profitably replaced with 'shopping, sex and the sacred'.<sup>255</sup> Particularly striking is the fact that an emphasis on the sacred is not only a feature of individual spiritual seekers, but of charter-style tourism is well. Furthermore, while spiritually-searching Westerners may be interested in finding exemplary spiritual guidance, meditation teachers and so on, Chinese visitors to southern Thailand are overwhelmingly interested in directly accessing sources of sacred power in a manner that could be described as 'magical'; for the most part they do not seek out particular masters to access their teachings or to gain Enlightenment through signification.<sup>256</sup> Such sources of power or auspiciousness include sites, objects or individuals that have achieved a reputation for sanctity in a transnational context.

Despite the growing significance of these forms of tourism, there has been very little mention of the role played by foreign Chinese in the development of religious forms within Thailand. Munier (1998:173) briefly mentions that Jao Phò Khao Yai on Si Chang island is attracting Chinese worshippers from around the region. Yee (1996) has done the only study to my knowledge that deals with the popularity of Thai amulets in Singapore but she does not explore the effects this is having within Thailand itself. More recently, significant work on this topic has been done by Erik Cohen and Marc Askew (see Askew 2002, 2005, Askew and Cohen 2004, E. Cohen 2001a). Askew's work in particular has been concerned with the contrasts and parallels between sex tourism and shrine tourism.

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<sup>255</sup> Askew himself uses the expression "sex and the sacred" in a recent publication (Askew 2005).

<sup>256</sup> This fact, I argue, allows for high levels of ambiguity



**Figure 38** Ethnic Chinese tourist paying respects in front of a small version of the Kuan Im statue, Hat Yai Municipal Park.



**Figure 39** Ethnic Chinese tourists at the Brahma shrine, Hat Yai Municipal Park.

*Characteristics of Religious Tourism in the South*

Chinese religious tourism in southern Thailand follows a pattern familiar to observers of Chinese tourism more generally. In many ways these patterns are quite similar to what Robert Weller has characterised as “*mélange* tourism” (Weller 2006:95) in that it combines different activities that would be considered both ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ from a Western point of view. In the South of Thailand this means that patterns of religious patronage are intimately connected with the tourist industry. For example, the tour agencies based in Hat Yai offer minibus day-trips to a range of sacred destinations, often combined with several other leisure activities, such as a visit to Samila Beach, a seafood lunch and a visit to the Museum of Southern Thai Culture on the island of Kò Yò. Popular sacred destinations include temples and other sites associated Luang Phò Thuat, especially Wat Pha Kho and Wat Chang Hai, the shrine of the Chinese goddess Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao in Pattani city, an elephant head-shaped rock on the island of Kò Yò reputed to reveal lottery numbers when doused with holy water, and a cave shrine Kuan Im in a cave temple near Padang Besar.<sup>257</sup> Typically tourists stay in Hat Yai, where the majority of hotels and other tourist infrastructure is located, and make day-trips that often include visits to sacred locations

Despite the sacred nature of these sites, by and large tourists ‘consume’ them in light-hearted manner, emphasising ‘fun’ and ‘enjoyment’ in my conversations with them. For the most part these participants did not seem to feel the need for more engaged or serious relationship with a source of power. There were others who sought out precisely this more enduring kind

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<sup>257</sup> It should be emphasised that this research was carried out prior to the outbreak of violence in the Pattani region in 2004. This violence has almost certainly had a negative impact on tourism to the sacred sites within this zone. Whether this has resulted in an increase in visits to sacred sites in safer areas, such as on the Satingphra Peninsula, would require further research to determine.



of relationship though, often in response to some sort of life crisis. This theme will be further developed in chapter eight.

Although the remaining chapters of this thesis focus primarily on the religious dimension of tourism, this does not imply that they are the main determinant of cross-border tourism. As the term *mélange* tourism suggests, accessing the sacred is not the only, or even primary, goal for most tourists. Therefore the religious aspects of tourism need to be viewed in conjunction with, and in most cases as a supplement to, other leisure activities.

**Figure 40. Shrine attendant prepares a chain of Chinese crackers for ethnic Chinese tourists at the Brahma shrine, Hat Yai Municipal Park.**



However, the concept of 'religious tourism' is only partially satisfactory, as cross-border religious exchanges vary greatly in character, duration, and intensity. Relationships vary from the fleeting and highly commercialised, to more long-term and devotional manifestations. In some cases I encountered, cross-border devotional relationships had been sustained for 20, or even 30, years. Often contact is established within a more

touristic context, but for one reason or another, this may develop into a more sustained relationship. Furthermore, it is possible for individuals to move in and out of these roles on a single journey, a fact that is especially true of the *mélange* tourism described above. These two notions may be retained for heuristic purposes, if only because they reflect distinctions being made by people in the scene itself, as demonstrated by Graham's comments above about visitors being solely interested in the 'power' of individual 'supermen'. In this I echo Kaur and Hutnyk (1999:1), who argue the different forms of travel, such as pilgrimage, tourism, or adventure, should not be too rigidly demarcated from each other.

It is worth noting that the spiritual element of Chinese tourism can also have a negative impact. This was demonstrated in the wake of the Boxing Day tsunami which hit the West Coast of peninsular Thailand at the end of 2004. The provinces of Phuket and Phangnga were principally affected. Although tourism from all nations was negatively impacted upon by this disaster, Chinese tourism was particularly hard hit. There were numerous factors underlying this, including a rising interest among Chinese tourists in destinations outside Southeast Asia, and of course the fear that the event would be repeated. However, a significant reason for the decline was based upon a reluctance to visit sites associated with inauspicious, and especially violent, deaths. This has prompted local Chinese shrines in Phuket to perform ghost clearing rites in order to allay the fears of potential Chinese visitors (*Sydney Morning Herald* 23 August 2005).<sup>258</sup> An illustration such as this also reveals the volatility of tourism, which is highly responsive to fluctuations in currency values and political climate (Smith 1989:8).

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<sup>258</sup> Of course, the Herald could only include such a story within its 'Strange but True' section, underlining its own modernist assumptions about what constitutes legitimate religion and what belongs within the realm of modernity's other: the weird and wonderful.

Economies that depend in large part upon tourism are extremely vulnerable to fluctuations of this kind.<sup>259</sup>

The fact that cross-border religious patronage can involve the movement of large amounts of capital is not officially highlighted. For example, when monks or other religious specialists are questioned as to their reasons for nurturing cross-border relationships with devotees they do not generally cite the desire to bring money into the country. Occasionally, however, this is made explicit. One such example can be found in a booklet produced to honour the elderly and revered southern Thai monk, Luang Pu Thòng of Wat Pa Kò, on the occasion of installing the foundation stones of the monastery's ordination hall (*fang luk nimit*).<sup>260</sup> As is common in such publications, this booklet included a short biography as well as a list of his achievements over his long monastic career. Interestingly, one of these achievements was the fact that he had boosted the local economy through his involvement with Malaysian and Singaporean devotees. In essence, he was being extolled for strengthening Thailand's position in the cross-border balance of trade. According to this way of thinking, the monk's charisma is an export commodity.

### *Branding Sanctity*

As might be expected in a religious marketplace where a large number of sources of charisma compete for prominence, there are many attempts on

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<sup>259</sup> This has been dramatically demonstrated in the case of the bombings in Bali in October 2002 and 2005.

<sup>260</sup> Though the transliteration of the name is superficially similar, this monastery should not be confused with Wat Pha Kho. Luang Pu Thòng is another charismatic monk who is also closely linked with the trade of Luang Phò Thuat images in the South. Following his death, Luang Pu Thòng's supporters, many of whom are Malaysian Chinese, began referring to him as 'Than Thuat Thòng'. This choice of names implies that Luang Pu Thòng's spirit remains as an active force, while at the same time associating him further with Luang Phò Thuat.

the part of the purveyors of sacred sites, objects and personalities to mark themselves as distinctive in some way. This would appear to be a particularly important strategy when the religious icon in question is substantively 'the same' as that found in other locations. A good example is Luang Phò Thuat. As has been demonstrated, the regional character of Luang Phò Thuat, and the fact that he has become the charismatic figure par excellence in southern Thailand, has meant that his images are now reproduced at a wide number of locations and are associated with a range of monasteries and, sometimes, with Chinese shrines. Though many monasteries produce rather generic Luang Phò Thuat images, generally based on the original amulets developed by Ajan Thim at Wat Chang Hai, a number have attempted to make variations that mark them as distinctive.

Some examples include versions of Luang Phò Thuat amulets embedded in crystal balls, produced by Wat Pha Kho. These no doubt make reference to the magical crystal ball that featured so prominently in the Satingphra version of the Luang Phò Thuat hagiography. Another example is the images produced by Wat Tham Talòt in Sabayoi district of Songkhla province (discussed in Chapter 5). The Luang Phò Thuat images produced at this monastery are generally inscribed with a small stupa image, located on the monk's outer robe (*jiwòn*). When questioned about this, the monks and other locals associated with the monastery were explicit with their reasons. They would point to the hillside above the monastery, upon which stands the ancient and partially ruined stupa supposedly built by Than Langka (Luang Phò Thuat), and state that the images were made that way so that people knew where they came from. As both these examples suggest, location – as something specific and distinctive – is inscribed into the objects themselves. This is not done primarily for the sake of the 'locals' themselves – i.e. those who already know the local stories and who read the 'texts' revealed in the landscape itself – but in order to create a sense of distinction

within a much wider discursive field. This is a strategy used when dealing with abstract, and highly mobile populations of potential patrons who have no necessary connection to one place or another.

Locations themselves are also branded through association with something exceptional or unique. In some cases, such as Wat Pha Kho or Wat Chang Hai, the source of power is historically grounded, though perhaps reworked to accommodate the tourist market. In other cases, a site may be made distinctive by the addition of a unique feature. This often involves the production of a statue that is exceptional in some way, for example by being the largest of its kind. The two 'world's largest' Luang Phò Thuat statues produced in the vicinity of Hua Hin fall into this category,<sup>261</sup> as do other 'world's largest' Luang Phò Thuat statues to be found in Songkhla province (Figure 68).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, even Chinese shrines may attempt to compete for prominence in this way. The Thép Na Ja shrine in Hat Yai, having first produced what it announced as the 'largest statue of Na Ja in Thailand', moved on to building a giant image of Luang Phò Thuat. Unable to compete with the other gigantic images in terms of size alone, the statue was promoted as, 'the largest *copper* Luang Phò Thuat statue in the world'. Similarly, the Hat Yai Municipal Park statue-building program has been characterised by the same kind of exceptionalism. The Kuan Im statue is promoted as the 'largest in Thailand', while the Buddha statue is advertised as the 'largest standing Buddha image in southern Thailand'.

Such attempts at creating distinction should not be viewed only in relationship to cross-border tourism. These trends are also a product of the thriving marketplace of charisma within Thailand itself, where the

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<sup>261</sup> Although their association with members of the Royal family (one statue bears the insignia of the Queen, the other of the Crown Prince) illustrate that it would be far too simplistic to consider their construction only in terms of tourism.

increasingly abstract and spatially dispersed character of the market means that individual sources of charisma – whether they be individuals, images or sites – need to find new ways of standing out from the crowd.



Figure 41. A roadside billboard outside a monastery in Satingphra advertising the ‘largest Luang Phò Thuat statue in southern Thailand’. This was not, in fact, the largest statue at the time. The abbot clarified to me that it had been the largest in 1962 when it was built. The English translation also contains a number of discrepancies from the Thai, stating that it is a ‘Buddha image’, that Luang Phò Thuat ‘walked on water’ rather than making saltwater fresh, and that the image was constructed in 1961 (BE 2505 is 1962).

### *The Sinification of the Landscape*

The prevalence of foreign ethnic Chinese in religious tourism has meant a pressure to ‘Sinify’ various aspects of the experience, and of the locations visited themselves.<sup>262</sup> Not only confined to already ‘Chinese’ locations and traditions, the strong influence of foreign Chinese on the physical environment can also be seen in Theravada Buddhist monasteries. This may be as simple as the installation of images popular with Chinese visitors, or the facilitation of Chinese practices, such as letting off firecrackers. A good example is Wat Hat Yai Nai, the most popular Buddhist monastery tourist attraction in Hat Yai proper. Although its main attraction is a reclining

<sup>262</sup> Here I draw on Marc Askew, who has used the notion of ‘Sinification’ (pers. comm).

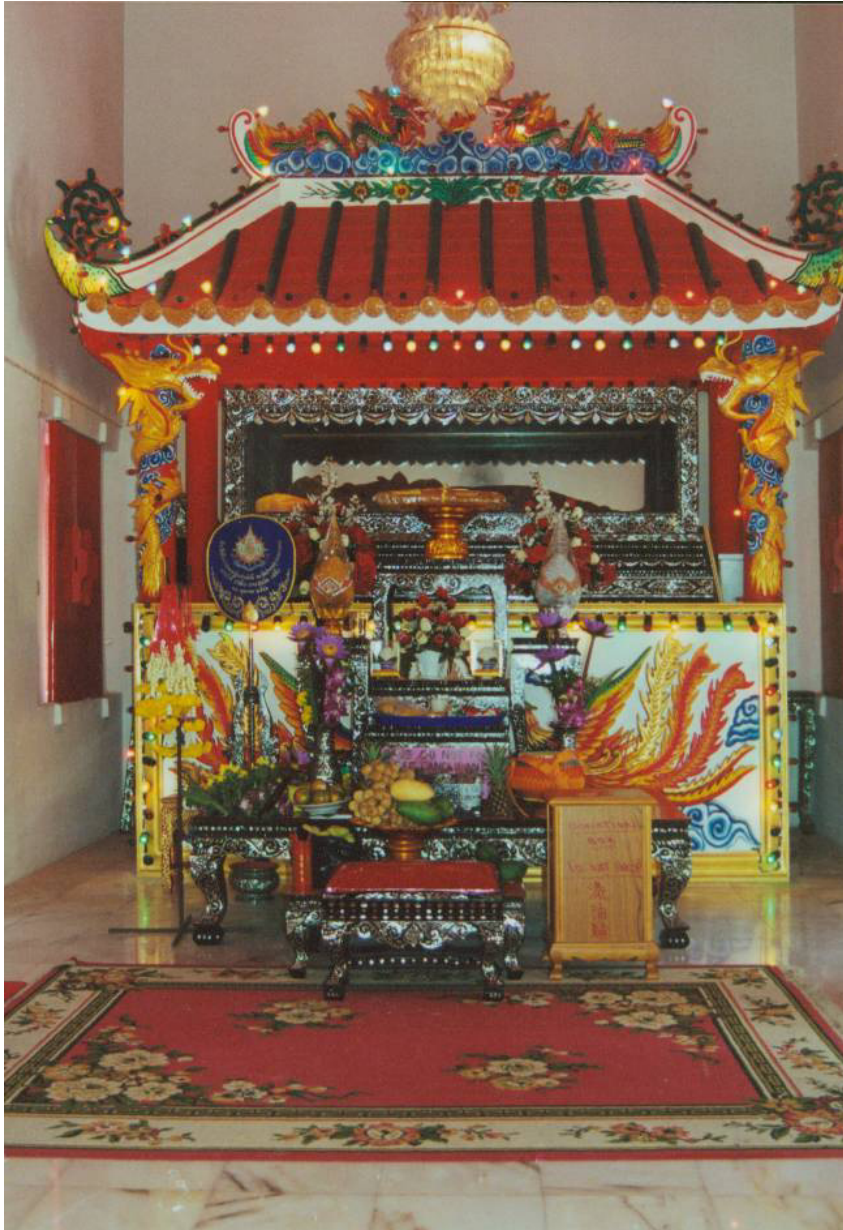
Buddha image promoted as the 'third biggest in Thailand', shrines to Brahma as well as a number of Taoist statues have been set up specifically for the tourists. The monk I spoke to about this characterised the setting up of the shrines within the trope of hospitality; the Abbot of the monastery had these images installed primarily for the convenience of the Chinese visitors.

More significantly, Chinese influences may have an impact on the very architecture of the monastery itself. The structure of Theravada Buddhist temples and the events which take place in them are importantly connected to the sense of orthodoxy and unity within the Theravada Buddhist polity, and especially within Thai royal temples, which Gray refers to as "potent visual texts and models of religious orthodoxy" (Gray 1991:45), their architectural design and the ritual practices performed within them being administered by the Department of Religious Affairs. Thus the emergence of Chinese architectural styles within Theravada Buddhist temples should not be regarded as a trivial occurrence, although, it is true, the existence of Chinese forms within Buddhist temples in the far South of Thailand is hardly new, as demonstrated by the Chinese elements incorporated into centuries-old monasteries in Songkhla, such as Wat Machimawat (Wat Klang) and Wat Suwankhiri.

While these Chinese influences were evidence of the Chineseness of the former rulers of cities such as Songkhla, current 'Sinification' of Thai religious forms is much more diverse, and often closely connected with the influence of foreigners (Figure 42 and Figure 43). They are no longer necessarily evidence of the Chinese heritage of local elite dynasties but of a diffuse population of foreign Chinese with both the money and desire to invest in local religious constructions and practices.

The effects of Sinifying religious form can have a profound effect on architecture and practices, often introducing clashing aesthetics and priorities. This will be discussed in detail in chapter nine, when I deal with a

Theravada Buddhist robe offering ceremony which has been significantly transformed through the participation of foreign Chinese.



**Figure 42.** The glass cabinet housing the remains of renowned southern monk Than Thuat Thòng. A mixture of religious architectural styles and aesthetics is evident. Although the glass-sided coffin inlaid with mother of pearl is typically Thai, the surrounding structure is very much Chinese.



Critique and contestation of these influences can also be found, though not always expressed in overt terms. Often this critique is directed at the apparent overt commoditisation of religious forms which sacred tourism appears to produce. At other times it is the apparent damage to local cultural forms that is focused on. Santikaro Bhikkhu, a Western Theravada activist monk in the tradition of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu commented on the activities of Chinese tourists and their apparent influence on the character of Wat Pha Kho while visiting there on the Thammayatra Buddhist walk.<sup>263</sup>

The Dhamma-Yatra reached Kao Yai (Big Island) via Wat Pako, a famous shrine associated with the leading, and perhaps legendary, saint of the South, Luang Poo Tuad. We reached there on a Sunday morning (30th) and it was crawling with Malaysian tourists, complete with firecracker bursts. It was clear this place was more interested in making money than teaching Dhamma, let alone the objectives of the Dhamma-Yatra. The Abbot didn't really want us there, since we brought in no income, so we were glad to move on early the next morning (Santikaro Bhikkhu 2000).

In another example of overt resistance to the influence of foreign Chinese, the abbot of one of Kò Yò's monasteries explicitly rejected the many overtures of Malaysian visitors who wished to construct Chinese images and also construct Chinese graves within the monastery's precincts.<sup>264</sup> He explained his reluctance to follow such a path in terms of his role as the guardian of local cultural forms. The monastery existed for the local community, he explained to me, and not for foreigners. If he was to allow Chinese objects to be built at his monastery this would have an alienating

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<sup>263</sup> This walk has been conducted over several years in the vicinity of Songkhla Lake and is designed to raise awareness of environmental degradation in the area. I took part in this walk for about five days in 2000. The event as a form of Buddhist activism has been covered in detail by Theodore Mayer (2005).

<sup>264</sup> Another example of the phenomenon of cross-border burial.

effect on the residents of his village. Notably, this abbot was also a defender of local traditional architectural forms and had stockpiled amounts of the famous Kò Yò pottery roof tiles that were no longer being produced. His efforts had won him a prize, granted by the Crown Princess, for upholding traditional heritage.



**Figure 43. Constructions at Wat Laem Sai on the island of Kò Yò. The large golden Buddha is named Somdet Jao Kò Yò. The other three pagodas contain images of Brahma, Earthstore Bodhisattva and Kuan Im. The building project was funded by foreign ethnic Chinese patrons of the monastery.**

### *Travel and the State*

As Peter Phipps (1999:76) has noted, states tend to maintain an ambiguous relationship with travel. The movement of tourists across the state's borders is authorised and therefore supposedly unproblematic in terms of its regulatory ambitions. More than this, tourists are desired travellers and are actively encouraged to cross the nation's borders. However, this movement of bodies and commodities can have potentially destabilising effects.

National boundaries are usually negatively conceptualised. That is, they are primarily thought of in terms of their restrictive and regulatory qualities, that they exist primarily to restrict and control the movement of bodies and objects, as evidenced, for example in attempts to control the movements of asylum seekers (Kaur and Hutnyk 1999:3). The movements and flows themselves, however, are usually assumed to be 'primordial', as anterior to the boundaries and restrictions that attempt to control them. Over the next two chapters I discuss the *productive*, rather than merely restrictive, qualities of national boundaries. That is, I consider the manner in which the existence of national entities and the sense of difference produced between them generate tourist desire and produce tourist flows. In chapter eight, I consider this dynamic in relationship to Chinese shrine festivals, and Chineseness more generally.

The role of the state in producing certain acceptable forms of culture and an official national image for tourist consumption is often left unacknowledged by scholars:

The state represents the repressed in tourism. Tourists are seldom aware of the agency of the state in structuring the images and the experiences of travel. Travel is perceived as a phenomenology of space and an encounter with the 'other' and is seldom thought to be an encounter between individuals and the state of a society-state relationship. Nevertheless, the state lurks as an invisible presence in tourism. By providing infrastructural support for services, a state can determine the direction of growth of a tourist industry, and it can shape the package of images that have a cultural impact on the experience of travel (Leong 1997:71).

Leong notes that the official imagery produced by nation-states tends to be politically correct and wholesome (Leong 1997:72). There is also considerable overlap in the imagery used for tourism and for nationalism.

Jory makes a similar point about touristic representations reflecting orthodox understandings of the national self when he states that: “The TAT’s promotion of Thai culture also conveniently fitted in with military-influenced pronouncements about national culture aimed at ensuring national security” (Jory 1999b:482).

As I have argued in this thesis, it is important to move beyond a unitary sense of the state and its effects. Clearly the ‘state’ involved in the promotion of tourism could be viewed at a number of levels. The designs and strategies of national apparatuses, such as the TAT mesh – and perhaps come into conflict – with municipal ambitions and even the actions of individuals or ‘non-government’ organisations. States produce discourses aimed at generating tourist desire, they also underpin the socio-economic contours, the differing regimes of value, which make moving across their boundaries a desirable activity. The state – or rather its various manifestations – operate not only according to the messages it produces but through the disciplinary strategies that striate social space differently from its neighbours and therefore grant it some sort of identity in difference.

Tourism discourse as official state discourse is bound to the project of enlightened modernity. Religion, where it features in official state representations, is of the secular variety, purged of its magical dimension. Buddhism features prominently in tourist promotions of Thailand as “a place of beautiful order and orderly beauty” (R. C. Morris 1997:60); they emphasise the exotic beauty of Thai temples and rituals but not their spiritual power. In religious terms Thailand is marketed as ‘spiritual’, but not ‘magical’.<sup>265</sup> Such representations correspond to modernist understandings of Buddhism as a rational and even ‘scientific’ body of teachings that should be freed of any animist or magical ‘accretions’. This way of constructing Buddhism can be

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<sup>265</sup> Certainly the sacred dimension of promoting tourism does not feature in official TAT discourses about promoting tourism, e.g. Tourism Authority of Thailand (2004).

dated back to the reign of Rama IV and his attempts to prove the scientific credentials of Buddhism in his dialogue with Western missionaries. Then as now this psychological and secular understanding of religion was necessary for membership in a community of modern nation-states. But Rama IV retained a number of 'magical' rituals used in statecraft, and in present-day Thailand magical practices continue to thrive though always somewhat at odds with official understandings.

Ironically perhaps, tourism which is directed at commercial sex and other illicit activities, such as gambling, has close parallels and links to religious tourism in this respect. Obviously, the illegal nature of prostitution and gambling means that a respectable nation-state cannot openly advertise these, although much dominant tourism imagery at least hints at the sexual availability of Thai women. Religious tourism, while not illegal, shares an uneasy relationship with the dominant public tourism discourses. The reasons for this, I argue, are related to the apparent atavism of many of these practices that undermine dominant understandings of Thai modernity produced by bureaucrats. Furthermore, the religious practices that emerge from cross-border interactions, especially those that involve Theravada Buddhist monks, sit uneasily with official Buddhism and its role as a national integrator and political legitimator. The manner in which Thailand markets itself as a tourist destination to an international market does not generally contain a sacred element, although 'secular' images of Buddhism are frequently found. It would appear that overt marketing campaigns, especially those that are produced at a national level for a generalised international market, must also take place within the boundaries of modernist understandings of culture. While religious power may sometimes be hinted at in official tourist imagery produced by, for example, the TAT or municipal councils, it is rarely explicitly evoked in such religious discourses.

Instead, the production of sacred sites for tourist consumption will often be overlaid with alternative, and/or officially palatable, imagery.

Even events increasingly known for their 'atavistic' spectacle and 'magical' qualities, such as the Vegetarian Festival, are generally promoted to the international market by state bodies such as the TAT as cultural festivals, downplaying their magical qualities and the self-mortifying activities of spirit mediums.<sup>266</sup> The following chapter, which deals with the Chinese Vegetarian Festival, shows that there are also certain disjunctures between the kind of (Chinese) religiosity expressed by the country's burgeoning Sino-Thai middle classes and that which is offered for tourist consumption.

#### *Conclusion: The Sanctity of Translocal Places*

Appadurai (1996:192) discusses the "translocality" of tourist destinations, which in a sense belonged to the nation-state in which they are located but, through a variety of connections, also extend beyond it. In southern Thailand, the building of religious buildings, icons and so on must also be thought of as translocal in this sense rather than simply standing in any straightforward sense for symbols for local communities.

The phenomenon of religious tourism raises the issues of the production of the sacred in such translocal places, and the translocal nature of the production of sanctity. As this chapter has suggested, this involves overlapping productions of space and sanctity of a variety of actors acting within local, municipal, national and transnational scales. These interactions

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<sup>266</sup> A good example of this kind of representational practice can be found at the TAT's website, where the Vegetarian Festival is listed under the category of "happiness events" (<http://www.tourismthailand.org>). Thai tourist representations for the domestic market likewise play up the 'moderate ascetic' and 'cultural' aspects of the Festival and downplay its more extreme aspects. (E.g. [http://www.phuket.go.th/www\\_phuketGoTh/travel/festival\\_th\\_001.htm](http://www.phuket.go.th/www_phuketGoTh/travel/festival_th_001.htm)).

implicate religious traditions, the production of pleasure, ethnic and national identifications and a range of other factors.

I now narrow the focus specifically to Hat Yai to consider the translocal dimension of the production of the sacred in more detail. The next chapter will focus the building of religious statues in Hat Yai's Municipal Park, as well as the 'relocation' of the Vegetarian Festival to Hat Yai, as responses to cross-border factors.





## **Chapter Eight**

### **Monuments, Mediums & the Municipality: Constructing Chineseness and Sacred Space in Hat Yai**

“No need to go to Phuket, no need to go to Trang.” A PA laden pickup repeatedly blared out this message as it followed a parade of palanquin-borne deities and spirit mediums through the streets of Hat Yai during the 2001 Vegetarian Festival, a ritual event which has long been practised by the Chinese of peninsular Southeast Asia but has in recent years been gaining wider popularity. The procession was organised by the Thep Na Ja shrine and run by a native of Phuket who had moved to Hat Yai several years before. It featured the kinds of spectacular self-mortification and other ‘superhuman’ feats performed by spirit mediums that have become the notorious hallmarks of the Vegetarian Festivals held in Phuket and Trang. Hat Yai, despite its overwhelmingly Chinese population and character, has no such long association with the Festival. In fact such spectacular public displays can only be traced back a few years. Nonetheless, the PA announcement listed the full gamut of ritual performances that would take place: bladed-bridge and ladder climbing, bathing in boiling oil, walking on hot coals, piercing and other forms of self-mortification. While such performances are inherently ‘theatrical’ in nature, they are also aspects of worship. This announcement thus promised more than an upcoming spectacle; it also announced a new location for the authentic worship of the Nine Emperor Gods, the deities at the centre of the Festival. Such activity set Hat Yai in direct competition with the established Festivals of Phuket and Trang, promising a complete and authentic transplantation of the Festival experience, both sensory and sacred, to this new location.

In recent years the Municipal Council (*khana thesamontri*) of Hat Yai has also embarked upon its own project of sacred production. Since the late 1980s it has commissioned the building of a number of statues in the city's municipal park. Unlike the statues usually erected by secular councils, these are explicitly religious in nature. The Hindu god Brahma, the Chinese *bodhisattva* Kuan Im, and an enormous standing Buddha have been built on the steep, densely wooded hills of the park, which runs along one edge of the city. They command impressive views of the city and surrounding countryside and have become significant tourist attractions. Daily mini-buses run by local tour companies ply the steep roads up to the statues, bringing small groups of usually Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans. Typical of tourist attractions, the statues function as iconic markers of place, in front of which tourists can be photographed as evidence of having 'been there and done that'. However, they have also been built as authentic sacred objects.

Both of these examples demonstrate the manner in which the sacred is being produced in Hat Yai. Both are instances of the intersection of local, national and transnational elements in the production of hybrid spaces. They are located *in* Hat Yai but blend a range of influences – discourses, flows, materials, technologies, capital, knowledges and practices – from much wider fields.<sup>267</sup> They also cannot be understood solely in terms of the embeddedness of Hat Yai within the Thai nation-state as a peripheral centre, but rather must be viewed in terms of the city's role as a node or junction linking streams of various kinds of transnational cultural flow. Central to both examples is the production of 'Chineseness', or at least that which

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<sup>267</sup> The focus of my study therefore differs somewhat from other studies the focus on similar questions at nearby locations. For example, Joel Kahn (1997) argues that restorations to the old city of Georgetown, Penang were not done primarily for the purpose of appealing to the tourist gaze.

appeals to particularly 'Chinese' tastes, and the manner in which this production is also tied to the positioning of Hat Yai as a particular kind of tourist destination. Various parties seek to draw upon the city's peculiar qualities as 'Chinese' but also its pervasive permissiveness and openness to innovation.

### *Hat Yai: Frontier City*

Only sixty kilometres from the border with Malaysia's northern state of Kedah, Hat Yai is Thailand's third largest city after Chiang Mai, and it is routinely labelled the commercial centre of southern Thailand. It is also a significant centre of education, due mainly to the presence of Prince of Songkhla University's (PSU) largest campus. However, it is the commercial status of Hat Yai which is most significant for the city's economy, and therefore character. The skyline is dominated by high-rise hotels, the streets in the centre of town are lined with vendors selling fake brand name products, Chinese restaurants, karaoke bars, night clubs, department stores, markets, shopping malls, 'ancient' massage parlours, gold shops and amulet dealers maintain a lively trade. Proximity to the border and the importance of cross-border trade have resulted in the city having a certain 'frontier town' quality, dependent to a significant degree on the informal sector: the sex trade, gambling, and smuggling. As one local expressed it to me: "*hat yai pen müang thüan*" (Hat Yai is a wild/illegal/smuggling town).<sup>268</sup>

Rosalind Morris (2000a) has characterised the northern Thai capital of Chiang Mai as an imagined "place of origins", of significance not only for local inhabitants but also for the national imaginary. If Chiang Mai exists in

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<sup>268</sup> The expression *müang thüan* is something of an oxymoron, as the terms express a fundamental Thai distinction between civilised (*ban müang*) and uncivilised (*pa thüan*) space (see Darlington 2003:130-3). This oxymoron captures nicely the sense that Hat Yai is not 'civilised' spatially in a typical Thai sense.

the Thai imaginary through its fetishised pastness, as “the moral and historical antecedent to the Bangkokian capital” (R. C. Morris 2000a:6), Hat Yai would appear to be diametrically opposed, geographically, temporally, and symbolically. The city’s history has apparently generated very little interest from scholars or Hat Yai’s inhabitants itself. One of the few sources of historical information about Hat Yai, the *Encyclopaedia of Southern Thai Culture* appears to struggle to say anything of interest about the city in terms of distinctive landmarks etc which would attest to some sort of historical depth. For want of anything else to describe, the entry in the *Encyclopaedia* lists several of the more prominent department stores located in the city. Perhaps one reason for this overall lack of historiographic interest is because the city’s past is dominated by Chinese merchants rather than statesmen. These have given their names to the streets in central business district,<sup>269</sup> or to establish centres of exchange, such as the Kim Yong markets. Only recently have the histories of Chinese merchant dynasties begun to interest local historians (examples include Suleman 2002, Suthiwong 2001),<sup>270</sup> and there have been some signs that historians are also beginning to take more of an interest in Hat Yai’s past.<sup>271</sup>

The city’s status as a commercial centre is mainly due to its proximity to the border with Malaysia, but more importantly its status as a junction. The fortunes of the city are intimately connected with those of the railway. From

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<sup>269</sup> Even these generally only make use of Thai versions of names. Most important are the three Niphat Uthit streets, known locally as simply *Sai* 1-3. One could speculate that while Chinese names are acceptable for centres of trade, public infrastructure is quite another matter.

<sup>270</sup> The most significant work done on southern Thai Chinese dynasties by a foreign historian is certainly that of Jennifer Cushman (especially 1991).

<sup>271</sup> In fact, some of the more interesting and informative writing in English about the history of the city has been produced by amateur railway enthusiasts. Much of the more general information is more or less a by-product of their initial investigations into the fortunes of the railway (e.g. <http://www.angkor.com/2bangkok/2bangkok/forum> is a good source of such information).

being a tiny village of no particular significance at the turn of the twentieth century, Hat Yai rose to prominence as a result of becoming the site of Thailand's southernmost railway junction in 1922.<sup>272</sup> Although the railway also originally ran to Songkhla city itself it was essentially a spur line due to its location at the end of the peninsular. Hat Yai became the junction along which most through traffic travelled. Eventually the line to Songkhla was closed. Hat Yai continued to expand as a commercial centre, while Songkhla's primary function became that of an administrative and educational centre. The story of Hat Yai's dominance also reflects the railways growing significance vis-a-vis the sea as a medium of trade.

This functional split between administrative and commercial centres has profoundly influenced Hat Yai's character. It has developed almost exclusively as a commercial centre right from the beginning, with no overlaying of older political structures and ordering of space. Furthermore, the fact that Hat Yai is not a provincial capital means that there has been no imperative to produce this kind of spatial order, as was the case in cities like Yala when its city pillar was 'refurbished' in 1962.<sup>273</sup> Bangkok's symbolic centre is formed around the cluster of the city pillar (*lak müang*), Royal Palace, temple of the Emerald Buddha and provincial capitals tend to reproduce this centripetal ordering of space (see Tambiah 1976).<sup>274</sup> Hat Yai has no such symbolic centre. There is no city pillar and commercial centres such as hotels and shopping centres become the de facto centres – with the street between the Central Sukhontha department store/hotel and Lee

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<sup>272</sup> Hat Yai became a district in 1935, was upgraded to a municipality (*thesaban müang*) in 1949, and to a city in 1995 (*thesaban nakhon*).

<sup>273</sup> As outlined in chapter five.

<sup>274</sup> As noted in chapter five, part of the renewed push towards state-building in the 1960s involved the refurbishment or construction of just such monuments in provincial capitals.

Gardens shopping centre/hotel serving as the de facto 'town square'.<sup>275</sup> The only area of truly public space is the Municipal Park, which is located at the periphery of the city rather than at its centre and celebrations of public festivals and holidays – Songkran, Loi Krathong, Royal birthdays etc – find their primary official expression there.

Given these factors it is not surprising that Hat Yai is a very Chinese city. Thais from other parts of the country who have visited Hat Yai for the first time have been known to comment that the city is more Chinese than Thai.<sup>276</sup> However, Hat Yai's Chineseness is not simply a reflection of the identity of its inhabitants. The city very literally *trades* on its Chineseness; it is something that is consciously produced to a certain extent. It is produced in the matrix of a particular tourist desire. It is therefore necessary briefly to consider some of the points made about tourism in the previous chapter.

#### *Hat Yai's Tourism*

As outlined in the previous chapter, by far the largest group of foreign tourists who visit Hat Yai come from Malaysia, followed by Singapore (Appendix 1). The city is always flooded with activity at the end of each month, when salaries in Malaysia are paid. Malaysian and Singaporean tourists visit Hat Yai primarily for shopping – in particular for cheap brand-name clothing – and for the possibilities opened up by Thailand's relative

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<sup>275</sup> Alternatively, as mentioned in chapter six, Chinese foundations may also come to take on such centrality at particular times. Interestingly, there are many occasions on which Chinese firms take on a state- or government-like role in the management of Hat Yai. A telling example of this occurred in flooding that hit Hat Yai in 2000, during my fieldwork, in which *businesses* in the city provided many of the essential 'public' services necessary to deal with the flooding. At the time there were criticisms of the local council failing to act sufficiently in the crisis. I heard comments by local people that business was doing more to help victims than the council.

<sup>276</sup> An observation made by Annette Hamilton (personal communication).

permissiveness in a number of domains, such commercial sex, gambling, and, I argue, religious expression (Askew and Cohen 2004).

It is a common local perception that the majority of foreign tourists to Hat Yai are ethnic Chinese. On several occasions I heard locals state that around '90%' of tourists were Chinese and that relatively few Malays or Indians visited there. I would say that ethnic Malay tourism to Hat Yai is more significant than such assertions would suggest.<sup>277</sup> However, the amount of Chinese tourism to the city is certainly disproportionately high given that ethnic Chinese only make up about 30% of Malaysia's population. In any case, many of the policies undertaken by the Hat Yai municipality and the local Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) office reflect a desire to promote a particularly Chinese brand of tourism in the area. In an interview the Director of the local TAT office explained that they were attempting to expand the range of nationalities that visited Hat Yai to make the city less reliant on tourists from Malaysia due to the growing perception among the local business owners that the city's economy depended too heavily on this single market.<sup>278</sup> Interestingly, they were focussing their attentions specifically on Chinese tourists, especially those from Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China.<sup>279</sup> When I questioned him about this he answered that Hat Yai has all the things that Chinese want: Chinese food, shopping, Chinese language and so on. He didn't mention commercial sex, gambling

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<sup>277</sup> This view was also expressed by anthropologists Andrew Cornish, who had also done fieldwork in the area (personal communication).

<sup>278</sup> This followed an incident in 1998 when the Malaysian government suddenly limited the amount of Malaysian currency that could be legally taken out of the country to 1,000 Ringgit (about \$A400). For an entire month business in Hat Yai was dead before things started to normalise. This made a lot of business owners realise that they had all their eggs in one basket and that diversifying would be a good idea.

<sup>279</sup> As an example of this dominant mentality, following severe flooding in Hat Yai in 2000, a campaign to promote the damaged tourism industry focussed on Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan by promoting the Chinese New Year celebrations in the city (Bangkok Post 10 December 2000).

or access to an informal market of smuggled goods. However, he also displayed a certain amount of ambivalence about the role of religion and sacred sites in promoting tourism in Hat Yai and the region in general, preferring to draw attention to more secular or purely 'cultural' activities such as mountain bike competitions or food festivals. The Assistant Director, whom I also interviewed briefly, was not so reticent and readily admitted that a number of sites in the region were important tourist attractions, especially those associated with Luang Phò Thuat – Wat Pha Kho and Wat Chang Hai (though the latter was administered by a different branch of the TAT). While Hat Yai features as the primary base for tourists, day trips to such locations draw them away from the city and into other economies. The Municipal Council, much more fully invested in promoting the Hat Yai's own economy, has been more concerned to hold tourists within the city's bounds for as long as possible. Finding things for tourists to do locally increases the time, and therefore money, they spend in the city rather than elsewhere. It is in this context that the statue-building project in the Municipal Park has been undertaken.

I refer to this project of statue building, with a certain amount of irony, as 'civic religion' (c.f. F. E. Reynolds 1978a, 1978b, Taylor 2001). In this case the term denotes, not so much to denote a religious tradition that is formative of communal identity, but rather the strategic use of religious iconography and sacred objects by a municipal administration for a variety of purposes, the foremost of which is to rebrand the city in response to tourist desire. Although some appeals are made to national and civic identity to justify and promote the building of the statues (e.g. Figure 46), the primary motivation for the construction of these images has more to do with encouraging the flow of tourists and capital into Hat Yai than with affirming a collective local identity. However, the construction of such potent and prominent religious symbols does not occur within a dyadic relationship



between the municipality and foreign tourists. They represent the mobilisation of patriotic sentiments as well as the full legitimating function of the Thai Sangha, and partake of renewed interactions between Southeast Asia and Chinese and the homeland of China itself.

*'Civic Religion' in Hat Yai*

The Hat Yai Municipal Council began building religious statues in the Municipal Park in the late 1980s. The Brahma was the first to be built in 1989, followed by the statue of the Chinese bodhisattva Kuan Im, which was inaugurated and sanctified in 1997. The building of the Buddha has been delayed: he was planned to be completed by the end of 1999 – in celebration of the king's 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday, but was only just nearing completion in June 2002.

Although not all the statues are Chinese in origin, the selection of images is designed to appeal to foreign Chinese tastes. The popularity of Brahma among Southeast Asian Chinese has already been discussed. Furthermore, there has been an ever-expanding proliferation of supplementary Chinese images in the vicinity of the Kuan Im statue that also point to the 'Sinification' of the Municipal Park's landscape. Inside and the spacious pedestal on which the large statue was built are now situated colourful images of the Eight Immortals of Chinese mythology. There was also a three metre tall image of the Chinese hero and deity, Kuan U.<sup>280</sup> Near the main pedestal is a shop selling all sorts of Chinese and Thai devotional objects, such as amulets, small statues, tapes of devotional music and monastic chants, mirrors with images of monks engraved on them, Chinese

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<sup>280</sup> Rendered as GuanYu or Kuan Yew in Mandarin, a hero from the famous Chinese folk tale, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and is commonly worshipped at Chinese temples in the area. In China, he has been incorporated as a deity into both Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism and is particularly popular amongst the Cantonese.

and Thai souvenirs and so on. Inside this store is another smaller statue of Kuan Im, covered with a thick layer of gold leaf, which people also kneel before and pray at. Most recently, more prominent Chinese images have been constructed to 'decorate' a pathway which leads from the Kuan Im statue to the top of the same hill, where the standing Buddha has been built. These include an enormous golden dragon's head, mouth open wide, that functions as a gateway to the path (Figure 49), as well as a colourful statue of Hotei, the Chinese version of Sri Ariya Mettraya (Figure 50).

Worship, albeit usually conducted in a jocular, light-hearted way, is an integral part of the visit.<sup>281</sup> At the Brahma statue tourists offer incense on all four sides of the god, let off rolls of Chinese crackers, ring large bells and sometimes make offerings of elephants with their name and address engraved on them. At the Kuan Im statue tourists usually first make offerings of flowers, candles and incense at the main statue, and then come down, wander around underneath and finally visit the shop, where they kneel down and pray to the smaller image of Kuan Im, cast staves to tell their fortune and then browse about for souvenirs.

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<sup>281</sup> As Weller (1994) notes is quite typical of Chinese folk religious practices and should not necessarily be read as the product of a superficial tourist experience.



**Figure 44. One of the hundreds of elephants surrounding the Brahma shrine donated by Malaysians and Singaporeans surrounding in the Municipal Park.**



**Figure 45. Concrete benches located inside the Kuan Im pavilion. These were donated to help pay for construction of the various statues within the Municipal Park. Most were donated by Malaysians and Singaporeans.**

Figure 46. Cover of a booklet produced to promote a major ceremony in the construction of the standing Buddha in 2001. This ceremony involved the internment of Buddha relics inside the statue in addition to the final assembly of the image. The picture of the Buddha has been superimposed on the Hat Yai cityscape as viewed from the Municipal Park hilltop. This montage thus seeks to connect the building of the image with the city itself.



Figure 47. Municipal advertising placard featuring the main three statues at the Municipal Park. The text wishes travellers a pleasant journey. Note the composition of the montage, which places Kuan Im higher than the Buddha and also makes her appear larger. In reality, the Buddha statue is a great deal larger than the one of Kuan Im.

The statues do not merely remain in the park but form part of the council's attempts to brand itself. In the year 2000, the above image (Figure 47) appeared on municipal signboards spread around the city. These boards usually contain civic announcements or advertisements. The image of the three figures is accompanied by a message wishing travellers a pleasant journey and the logo of the municipal council. They have been given glowing auras, suggestive of their transcendental power. The montage upsets the usual hierarchy of images in Thailand, which would normally require the Buddha to have the highest position. Instead, Kuan Im in the superior position and is presented as larger than the Buddha. The signboards message is also explicitly directed at travellers, although the fact that it is only written in Thai would suggest that it is the domestic tourists who are being addressed. Nevertheless, the presentation of these billboards in public by the Municipality clearly associates these statues with the city and its official image for all who view them.

The building of the Kuan Im statue provides a striking example of the strategies deployed in these constructions, which blend national sentiments with a concentration of spiritual energy and even nostalgic sentiments for the Chinese homeland that encompasses the transnational in the local.<sup>282</sup> At about 10 metres tall, the white statue of Kuan Im is said by Hat Yai municipal authorities to be the largest image of the *bodhisattva* in Thailand.<sup>283</sup> Although a Chinese statue, the building of the statue is discursively framed as a patriotic gesture. The ostensible reason for building the statue was to honour the king of Thailand on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee of his coronation. The full power of the Thai Sangha was also poured into the consecration of this

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<sup>282</sup> Most of the information about the building of the statue is taken from the official booklet, which was printed by Hat Yai municipality (Hat Yai Municipal Council npd).

<sup>283</sup> It should be noted that this claim is often made and is not necessarily true. The statue building scene is also changing so quickly that such claims also tend to become invalidated almost as they are made.

statue. The process of consecrating the main statue involved a wide array of monks from both the Thai Theravada and Chinese Mahayana traditions.<sup>284</sup> In addition, sacred items were blessed or inscribed with mystic symbols by a range of nationally prominent monks, including the supreme patriarch of the Thai Sangha himself, other members of the Ecclesiastical Council (*sangkharat*), and a range of famous 'magical monks' (*keji ajan*) from around the country. All in all literally hundreds of monks performed chanting and other ceremonies in order to invest the image of Kuan Im with power and merit.

Explicit connections were also made back to the Chinese homeland. The Kuan Im statue was built with the cooperation of the Chinese consul, and therefore the Chinese government. The image is made from 'white jade' (*yok khao*), which was brought from Hupei province in the PRC and was carved by Chinese artisans who were brought to Hat Yai for that express purpose. Local businesses and Chinese charitable foundations also supported the construction. The Siang Tueng Foundation (discussed in chapter six) was particularly prominent, providing the image of its principal deity for certain consecration ceremonies on the site of the statue.

Much of the funding for this project was derived from donations by mainly ethnic Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore. Although difficult to quantify, there is plenty of evidence of this support surrounding the statue. There are, for example, dozens, perhaps hundreds, of concrete benches both inside and outside the statue's pedestal, and lining the sides of the pathway leading up to the hilltop Brahma shrine (Figure 45). Each of these bears the name of the individual or family who donated it. The vast majority of these bear Chinese or English characters and almost always refer to Malaysians or Singaporeans.

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<sup>284</sup> Although not Theravadin, the Mahayana monks still operate within the structure of the Thai Sangha.



**Figure 48. ‘White jade’ statue of Kuan Im with attendants, located in the Hat Yai Municipal Park.**

**Figure 49. Dragon head gate at the beginning of the pathway leading from the Kuan Im statue up to the standing Buddha at the top of the hill.**



**Figure 50. Chinese-style, ‘Hotei’, usually considered to be a representation of Sri Ariya Mettraya, constructed above the dragon head, on the pathway leading up to the large standing Buddha.**

In order to learn more about the statue building project, I interviewed the then Mayor of Hat Yai, Khreng Suwannawong, about the statue-building project. Nai Khreng spoke about his own faith in Jao Mae Kuan Im and he attributed her divine power to saving him from injury or death in a car accident. At least in part, he presented the building of the statue of Kuan Im was an act of personal devotion. He was, however, quite explicit about the reasons for building the statues in the park. Hat Yai lacks much Western tourism because it lacks the sea, beaches and beautiful nature of other locations, such as Phuket or Chiang Mai. Most tourists who come to Hat Yai are Asians, are interested in relaxation though don't have the same attraction to nature for its own sake. His vision was to develop the Park in order that it would become a more relaxing place for tourists, and the primary way to enhance or amplify 'nature' was to build statues which were not only viewed as sacred, but more importantly seen to be *efficacious*. This is why Brahma was built first, because of the general perception – 'since ancient times' – that this god could bring about improvements in people's lives. Visiting the gods is a strategy for relaxation and stress relief. Nai Khreng therefore presents a view of nature as something that needs a particular kind of amplification to provide the appropriate appeal to attract 'Asian' tourists.

This sense was reinforced during one of my visits to the Kuan Im statue when I met by chance a senior official from the municipality who was involved in the construction of the site. I introduced myself as a student who was collecting information about Buddhism in the area and he showed me around the site. He was keen to tell me about his work there. The official showed a clear awareness of the process by which a mundane material is transformed into fetishised object: "Look at concrete", he said and kicked at the ground demonstratively. "It's nothing. Nobody would respect that. But turn it into a statue, sprinkle it with holy water – and people come to pray to it." For this official all the rituals were a necessary part of the process of



attracting the tourists. The sacredness of the statues was just another drawcard, another feature among many – the view, the proximity to the city – which gave these statues a comparative advantage over other attractions – sacred or profane – in the area.<sup>285</sup>

During the course of the conversation he gestured towards the smaller Kuan Im statue and commented on the thick layer of gold leaf with which it was covered. The attaching of gold leaf to images is one Thai devotional practices that Chinese visitors have readily adopted.<sup>286</sup> While the other offerings are either quickly consumed or cleared away by attendants, the gold leaf gradually accumulates on the surface of the image over a period of time, and over time provides a testimony to the popularity and efficacy of the image. In this gradual accretion over time, the accumulation of gold leaf historicises the object; “the whole process of ... progressive empowerment of images through daily worship involves a continual burdening of the surface with traces of ... devotion” (Pinney 2001:169). However, the official stated with unsettling frankness that one of the young labourers working there had been instructed to attach gold leaf to the statue in order to give the impression that many people had already made offerings to it – and by implication that their prayers had also been answered.

It would appear that the statues are a sort of religious *prêt-à-porter*: objects without history, or with simulated histories that are made ready for immediate consumption. Rather than the sacredness of an object being produced as an accretion of historical relations, a gradual accumulation of interactions between humans and the object and accompanying discourses,

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<sup>285</sup> This would appear to be a concrete example (no pun intended) of Leong’s statement that “commodification obscures the gap between living ethnic traditions and the official versions of those traditions” (Leong 1997:85).

<sup>286</sup> In Thailand, this is a common method of making vocational offerings to images considered to possess power (*khwam saksit*). It is generally done in conjunction with making other votive offerings, such as offering flowers, candles and incense.

such as stories of miracles being performed and boons being granted, this process is simulated to give the object the appearance of sanctity before it has been exposed to the vicissitudes of history. The sacred object has become a function of a system of signs. Its possibilities have already been mapped out and, in premeditated fashion, predetermined, prearranged. Or, in other words, the 'real' process by which the sacredness of an object gradually accumulates has now been replaced by "its operational double ... that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all of its vicissitudes" (Baudrillard 1994:2).

But this approach to the authenticity of the image, which focuses on signs and therefore promotes a semantic 'reading', in no way invalidates the 'corporeal' response to the images, the "poetics of materiality and corporeality around the images" (Pinney 2001:169) implied by the act of 'clothing' the image in gold leaf. In other words, the tourists who visit the statues in the park do not approach them (only) as aesthetic objects, although it is clear that there is an aesthetic component to their appeal, nor are they overly concerned with the authorship of the images. This reflects Pinney's important point that it is not only the agency of the original 'authors' of an image that produces its sanctity, but also the agency of its everyday worshippers (Pinney 2001:171). That the origin is 'simulated' should not imply that all subsequent engagement is inauthentic.

I return now to the Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai to explore further this ambiguity of authorship and authenticity, in which ritual objects and events are intentionally produced for tourists but also become validated in the process of worship.

*The 'Vegetarian Festival'*

The Vegetarian Festival, or the 'festival of eating *je'*,<sup>287</sup> is a prominent example of folk Taoism that was brought to the Malay peninsular by migrants from south-eastern China. The festival can be traced back to temples in Fujian province associated with "secret Taoist magical practices ... special dance movements, secret signs on the hand, and other esoteric meanings" (Hamilton 1999:9). It takes place during the first nine days of the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar and represents a common tradition of the Hokkien Chinese along the Malay Peninsula. Thus it is widely practiced in Malaysia and Singapore, where it is known as the 'Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods' (Hokkien: *kiu ong ia*) (Cheu 1988, 1996, Heinze 1981).<sup>288</sup> The name refers to high level Chinese deities associated with the seven visible and two invisible stars of the Big Dipper who are invited from the sea to oversee the ritual proceedings, and are seen off at the end of the festival.<sup>289</sup>

Generally considered to be too powerful to be represented in statue form, the presence of the Nine Emperor Gods at the festival is conveyed indirectly, for example through nine lanterns that are kept alight during the nine days of the festival. Their spirit is also said to be contained in the ashes kept in certain urns (and the transfer of ashes from shrine to shrine has created a lineage which stretches back to Fujian province via the oldest shrines on the Malay Peninsula). These gods are venerated in a variety of ways, and the festival features processions in which the gods are carried

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<sup>287</sup> *Je* is a local version of the Mandarin *chai* and refers to a particular mode of vegetarianism in which not only excludes the consumption of meat, fish, eggs and dairy products, but also five kinds of vegetables, including garlic and onions, which have a strong smell and are considered to be harmful to the body (Cohen 2001:28-9).

<sup>288</sup> Heinze (1981) refers to this festival in Singapore as the 'Festival of the Nine Imperial Gods'.

<sup>289</sup> A fuller version of this discussion can be found in Maud (2005).

through the towns, hidden inside palanquins and accompanied by a wide range of devotees and spirit mediums possessed by lesser deities, in order to bring prosperity to the community as a whole. At these times, local residents set up altars in front of their homes and businesses in order to propitiate and receive blessings from the Emperor Gods and other deities.

The generally accepted points of origin of the Vegetarian Festival in Thailand are the provinces of Phuket and Trang, where it has been celebrated for at least a century by the Hokkien Chinese community (E. Cohen 2001a:1).<sup>290</sup> Here the festival has historically been concerned with purification and renewal of both the individual participants and the local Chinese community as a whole (E. Cohen 2001a). Participants maintain ritual purity during the festival by wearing white, abstaining from eating meat, killing animals, having sex, and drinking alcohol, and they also make offerings to the Nine Emperor Gods throughout the duration of the festival. However, despite the importance of these practices of purification by abstinence, the festival in Phuket and Trang is probably most widely known for images of excess: the spectacular and often gruesome ritual practices performed by spirit mediums, who pierce their cheeks and other parts of the body with a wide range of objects, who beat themselves and cut their tongues with axes and swords, and who climb blade-ladders, bath in boiling oil and walk on red-hot coals.

Since the late 1980s, the festival's visibility throughout Thailand has risen. This has involved the development of the festival in Phuket, and to a lesser extent Trang, into major tourist attractions, while at the same time the festival has greatly increased in prominence in other parts of the country,

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<sup>290</sup> In the year 2000, the Festival in Phuket officially celebrated its centenary (Thai Farmers Research Center 2000). However, conventional opinion in Phuket generally states that the festival was first practised on the island in 1825 (E. Cohen 2001a:50).

most notably Bangkok.<sup>291</sup> Although in the early stages of the Festival's expansion, unofficial media such as video cassettes played a significant role in circulating images of the Festival beyond the control of the state-controlled broadcasters (Hamilton 2002), more recently the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has actively taken a role in promoting the festival, though images produced by official state bodies tend to differ markedly from informally produced ones (Figure 51) in that they tend to downplay the Festival's more 'atavistic' elements. In the years 2000 and 2001 it has been estimated that the festival generated around 3 billion baht and 2.7 billion baht (US\$66 million and US\$60 million) respectively, eighty percent of which can be attributed to foreign, mostly Chinese, visitors (Thai Farmers Research Center 2000, 2001).

In Phuket, and to a lesser extent Trang, growing touristification and corporate sponsorship of the festival has led to criticisms that the festival is becoming commercialised and that shrines are placing too much emphasis on the astounding and spectacular practices, especially the processions and activities of spirit mediums, who are pierced with ever more 'bizarre' objects (see Cohen 2001 for a detailed discussion of these debates). By contrast, in Bangkok and elsewhere in Thailand the 'extreme' aspects of the festival have largely been rejected, while those that emphasise a level of personal asceticism on the part of the general participants have been taken up with great enthusiasm. Indeed, vegetarianism itself, rather than the worship of the Nine Emperor Gods, has become the primary mode by which people take part in the Vegetarian Festival, with hotels, restaurants, and now even fast food chains like Burger King and Chester's Grill providing special vegetarian dishes that meet the appropriate dietary requirements of the festival. Cohen notes the trend toward eating *je* in Thai society, particularly Bangkok which

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<sup>291</sup> One estimate suggested that fully three-quarters of Bangkok's population took part in the festival in one form or another in 2001. *The Nation*, 16 October 2001, cited in Stengs (2002:4).

“is not necessarily a consequence of a greater devotion to the Nine Emperor Gods” (E. Cohen 2001a:30). Rather, “vegetarianism became trendy even as the attendance at the shrines during the festival declined” (E. Cohen 2001a:30). He also notes that the trend towards eating *je* during the festival has spread well beyond the boundaries of those who identify as Chinese and into the general Thai population. Thus it would seem that, for the most part, the uptake of the festival in Bangkok has been divorced from its original cosmological significance, and unpalatable practices of mortification – and arguably its highly marked ‘Chineseness’. I would argue that this process reflects a general ambivalence among middle-class Thais towards the extreme practices associated with the festival as practised in Phuket and Trang.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Such sentiments might be seen to be expressed in the widespread fascination with the case of the spirit medium Chuchad, who in 1997 revealed on national television that his more than twenty year career was based on charlatanry, and called on all mediums to renounce their own fakery (R. C. Morris 2000b:456).

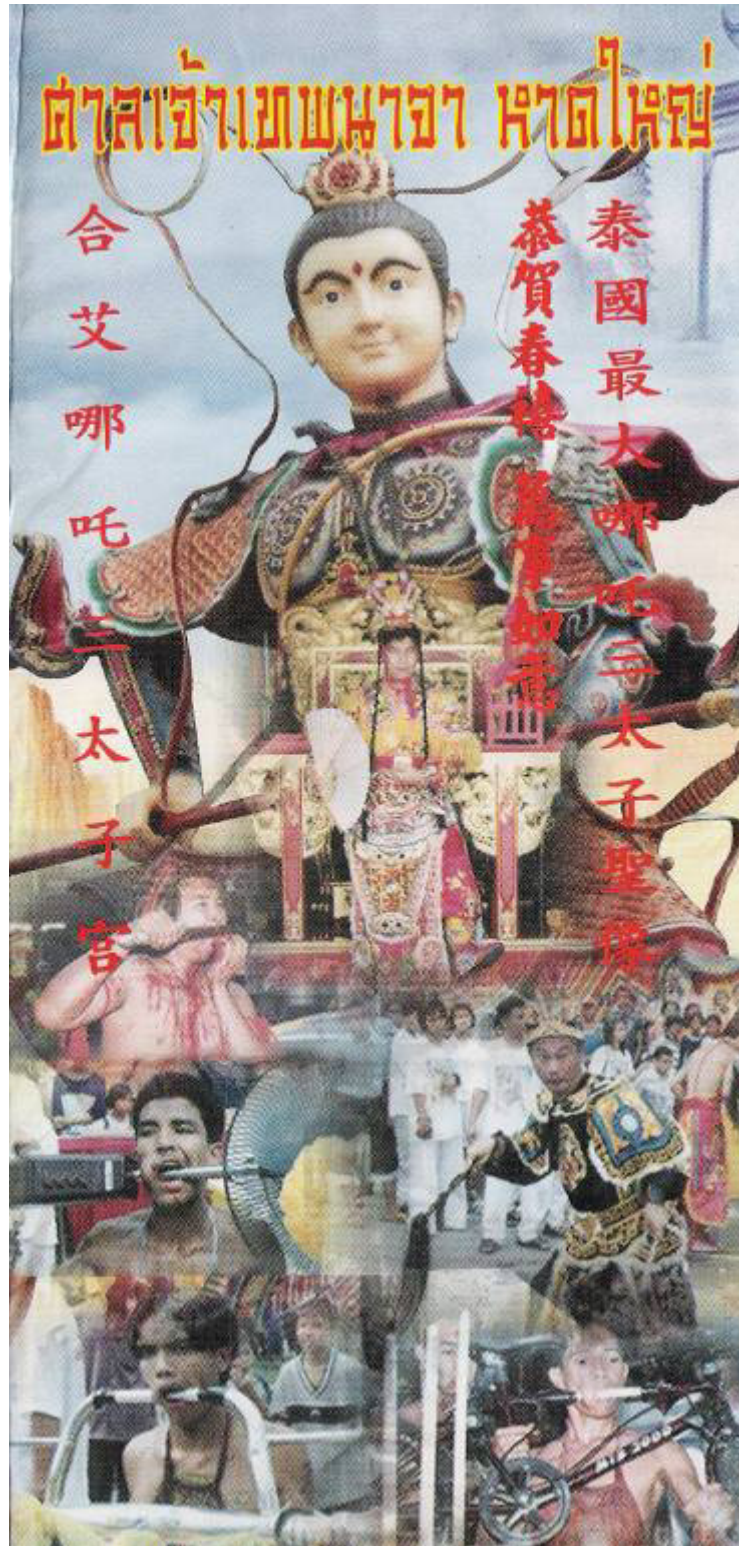


Figure 51. Cover of a flyer produced by the Thep Na Ja shrine making use of photographs of its mediums taken during the 2001 Vegetarian Festival. The main purpose of this flyer was to promote, and attract donations for, the construction of the ‘largest copper Luang Phò Thuat statue in southern Thailand’ (see chapter six).

*The Festival in Hat Yai*

Although the Vegetarian Festival is not widely associated with Hat Yai, in recent years it has emerged as a highly visible ritual occasion which transforms the central districts of the city with spectacular displays of Chinese religiosity. At the same time as these spectacular performances are growing in visibility, the Hat Yai festival is also developing in a mode in which an emphasis is placed on vegetarianism and other forms of 'personal asceticism' of the lay participants in the festival. On the one hand, Mahayana Buddhist temples such as Wat Thawòn represent the 'moderate ascetic' mode of practice which participates in emerging, nationally-bound constructions of Sino-Thai identity in which Chineseness can be expressed in a manner that can be reconciled with Theravada Buddhism. On the other hand, several Taoist shrines which emphasise spectacular performances of spirit mediums, are much more oriented towards a transnational audience.

There is no doubt that the second mode of practice – i.e. that which is based in Chinese shrines and places emphasis on the performances of spirit mediums – is on the rise in Hat Yai. All of the three Chinese shrines at which I conducted research – Thep Na Ja, Poi Sian and Chai Sing Ia – were expanding the scope of their operations. All the shrines had just moved, or were about to move, from tiny shop-front style residences in the centre of town to more 'palatial' settings on the outskirts. These new shrines had the space that would enable the performances such as fire-walking or blade-ladder climbing. This trend towards expansion appears to be quite recent. As an example, the Chai Sing Ia shrine had been operating in a tiny town house in a narrow lane for sixteen years. However, in 2001 the shrine was about to move into a newly-built temple construction on a large block of land. According to the owner, this would allow the shrine to perform larger rites, such as firewalking and blade-ladder climbing as a tourist attraction – something that space had not allowed up until then. In another case, the



principle medium and owner of the Poi Sian shrine had been practising for around twenty years from a small roadside shrine. One or two years earlier, patronage from his Malaysian supporters had allowed him to move his shrine to a large block of land on the outskirts of town. His shrine has also recently begun performing spectacular public rituals.

Clearly, shrine owners who are promoting the Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai are attempting to tap into already existing dynamics and tourist flows. In particular they are tapping into long-standing dynamics which exist between southern Thailand and neighbouring countries in which ritual specialists and charismatic individuals, sites and objects from a number of traditions are sought out, visited and propitiated by ethnic Chinese with omnivorous spiritual tastes. Thus, I would argue that the growth of the Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai, while it plays on the linkages and shared understandings that exist between 'Chinese' on both sides of the border must be viewed in the context of broader trends in which a wide variety of sources of sanctity are utilised to promote pilgrimage and 'sacred tourism' on the part of Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans.

However, although trying to appeal to tourists and other foreign visitors, the mediums who run the shrines that are promoting the Vegetarian Festival are adamant about the authenticity of their practices. Shrines assert their authenticity through emphasising connections to the 'original' Nine Emperor Gods shrines in Phuket or Trang. The main symbol of this connection is ash (*khi thup*) which is taken from the incense urns of one of the 'original' shrines and installed at the new one, thereby legitimating the shrine as an appropriate place to worship the Nine Emperor Gods. Members of the shrines in Hat Yai were emphatic that this was necessary to perform a genuine ceremony worshipping the Nine Emperor Gods, asserting that only shrines that were within the lineage of Nine Emperor Gods shrines could claim authenticity. While there is no general consensus on the identity of the

'original' shrine in Thailand, all the Hat Yai shrines that I visited traced their lineages to shrines in either Phuket or Trang. The connection to the authentic 'point of origin' is not necessarily direct, however, and may pass from one shrine to another. For example, the Thep Na Ja traces its lineage through his shrine in Nakhon Sri Thammarat back to the Bang Niao shrine in Phuket, while the Chai Sing Ia traces its lineage back to Trang. None of the shrines that I encountered trace their lineages across national boundaries, back to temples in Malaysia or Singapore, in the way that some Singaporean shrines have traced their lineages to Penang (Heinze 1981:155-6).<sup>293</sup>

The fact that most of the shrines that worship the Nine Emperor Gods are moving or have moved to the outskirts of town means that the different modes of practice of the Vegetarian Festival can be spatially differentiated. The centre of town is dominated by the Mahayana temples, which emphasises personal asceticism and vegetarianism in their performance of Vegetarian Festival rites. The periphery is dominated by the shrines that worship the Nine Emperor Gods and cater for a transnational patronage. However, these shrines organise incursions into the centre of town for many of their ritual activities, including the procession of the Nine Emperor Gods through the streets of the city, and ritual activities such as blade-ladder climbing and hot oil bathing. Those responsible for organising these events were almost universal in their reasons for doing this: they wanted to hold these events in areas frequented by Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans in order to increase the profile of the Vegetarian Festival in general and to generate patronage for their shrines.

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<sup>293</sup> This emphasis on lineage can be contrasted with Wat Thawòn, which as a Mahayana Buddhist temple does not participate in genealogical tradition of the Taoist shrines. There are also no links made to originary temples elsewhere in Thailand or in China through indexical symbols such as ashes. The tradition as it is found at Wat Thawòn is in this sense 'despatialised', not employing the concrete symbols that link place to place but instead making use of the universal teachings of the Buddha.

It is also the case that many shrine owners and committee members, themselves sometimes spirit mediums, temple employees and financial backers are often not local to Hat Yai. For example, the owner of the Thep Na Ja shrine, a spirit medium, recently moved from Nakhon Sri Thammarat, bringing many supporters with him. The Chai Sing Ia shrine is run by a spirit medium originally from Trang and large numbers of the people who celebrate the Vegetarian Festival at his shrine are originally from Trang or Phuket.<sup>294</sup> When interviewed about their reasons for moving to Hat Yai, these shrine owners cited stated that as the Vegetarian Festival is not well-established in Hat Yai, the possibilities for expansion are greater than in Phuket and Trang, where the more established shrines dominate. Furthermore, the shrine owners believed that the opportunities for gaining support from Malaysian and Singaporean devotees in Hat Yai was high because of the tourist infrastructure which meant that a large number of Malaysian and Singaporean tourists were always available for 'conversion'.

*Public spectacles in the streets of Hat Yai*

The Thep Na Ja shrine is one of the newest and most active participants in the Vegetarian Festival. The shrine owner and head spirit medium, who channels the spirit of Na Ja, is originally from Phuket, then moved location to Nakhon Sri Thammarat, where he continues to run a shrine and where he celebrated the Vegetarian Festival for several years. He too moved to Hat Yai because the opportunities for making connections with Malaysian and Singaporean devotees were much greater there. Initially residing in a small shopfront shrine, he was able to establish much larger premises on the

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<sup>294</sup> Spirit mediums do not always run these shrines. But in the examples in Hat Yai where the shrines had a relatively small following, a medium was often also the head of the shrine, though made decisions in conjunction with one or more devotees/financial backers.

outskirts of the city next to the Municipal Park due to the financial support from one man from Kuala Lumpur, who donated 3 million Baht (300,000 ringgit; over US\$65,000) to the temple in return for the Na Ja's help in procuring winning lottery numbers.

Although 2001 was the first time this shrine took part in the festival in Hat Yai, photos in the shrine hall revealed that a well-rehearsed 'show' had already been developed in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, the most dramatic of which was a theatrical street procession. In this parade, the gods of the temple are taken out of the shrine and paraded around the town on the backs of pickup trucks, ostensibly to bring good fortune to the residents of the town. I say ostensibly here because unlike in Phuket and Trang, where such parades are well integrated into the community, the processions in Hat Yai received only passing public interest. It is worth contrasting these two very different ceremonial contexts. In Phuket and Trang crowds of locals and visitors await the parades of pierced and unpierced mediums, statues of deities, and especially the palanquins bearing the Nine Emperor Gods. Shop-owners and other residents set up altars bearing a variety of offerings for the gods in front of the shops and residences, and prepare enormous chains of Chinese crackers to be let off over passing deities. Such processions are therefore characterised by a great deal of community participation and interaction between lay participants, spirit mediums and other sources of sacred power. They affirm a sense of the town and local residents acting together as a collectivity, local businesses and homes are blessed, and thus it is not only individuals but the community as a whole that is subject to blessings, purification and renewal in these events.

However, this was not the case when I observed the Thep Na Ja procession in Hat Yai in 2001. On this occasion the majority of people there appeared to have no idea that the parade is coming and no preparations had been made to welcome or receive the gods. It was not possible to construe

that the community *as a whole* was in any sense participating in this event. Nevertheless, the spectacular nature of the parade successfully drew quite a crowd of onlookers – a mixture of locals and tourists. Thus, initially at least, residents and tourists alike act as spectators, not participating in the ritual event.<sup>295</sup>

The images on display were an eclectic mix of Taoist, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist, and Hindu. They included Chinese gods such as Thep Na Ja and Jao Mae Kuan Im, the Hindu god Brahma, and interestingly the images of Luang Phò Thuat and Phò Than Khlai. Following these, there came a dozen or so spectacularly pierced mediums. Objects used to pierce parts of the mediums' bodies were in some cases were bizarre and extreme. They included a bicycle, a bumper bar from a pickup, a 3-4 metre piece of PVC, two mediums with five plastic rings filled with different coloured liquids (making them look vaguely like the Olympic symbol), another had a teapot spout through his cheek, another an electric fan on a stand. There were other mediums with more 'traditional' piercings too, such as spears and 'general's heads'.<sup>296</sup> In one case a medium had a long spear through his cheek which bore the logo of a soy milk manufacturer at both ends, turning the medium into a walking billboard (Figure 54). Not all the mediums were pierced, however. Some were merely in trance, and there were others who performed other acts of self-mortification such as tongue-cutting.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> It should be made clear that some residents of Hat Yai participate in the Festival in the sense that they wear white during the whole time and follow the ascetic regimes participation entails. However, on the outside the particular shrines celebrating the Festival or the narrow precincts surrounding the Mahayana Buddhist temples where vegetarian food is sold, the majority of Hat Yai residents and visitors are not involved more than casually in the proceedings.

<sup>296</sup> General's Head: A narrow spike with a small head attached at one end.

<sup>297</sup> It is worth asking whether all individuals in trance should be called 'mediums'. It is true that a number of participants enter trance states without obviously displaying the characteristics of a particular deity. Whether these individuals are considered to be possessed or merely in trance is a possible question for future research.

At the end of the procession there was a float upon which the chief spirit medium, who was also the owner of the shrine, rode dressed in an elaborate red and gold silk costume, complete with brightly feathered headpiece. He was accompanied by one middle-aged layman in white. Both of them were distributing *saksit* (magically charged) objects – yellow and red thread, small plastic statues of Na Ja in plastic cases, and *pha yan* (small pieces of cloth bearing arcane symbols) – to the onlookers (Figure 58). Spectators – Thai and foreign tourists – stood on the footpaths and stared. Some held hands with palms together to receive blessings from the passing deities (Figure 56 & Figure 57), while others were visibly disgusted by the piercings, with their hands over mouths, staring. Many moved up to the float of Thep Na Ja and tried to get their hands on some of the objects that were being given away. People often seemed delighted to receive these objects and would return to their companions brandishing their prizes and smiling broadly. At times there were literally crowds of keen onlookers competing for objects, and things got quite frenetic. At one point a female tourist was knocked to the ground and had to be helped up by her neighbours.

Shrine assistants circulated through the crowd and collected donations in red boxes. Their white T-shirts were stencilled with a colourful image of Na Ja on the front, and the symbol of their main sponsor, Coca-Cola, on the back. “Enjoy!” it admonished the spectators. The parade halted in front of the Central Department Store, opposite McDonald’s and Sizzler, and there, framed by American corporate logos, the show continued. The mediums lined up for the benefit of those who wanted to take photos, in stark contrast to the days in which mediums forbade photographs of themselves. In fact, it appeared that the temple assistants had been given instructions to *encourage* photography. On several occasions assistants gestured to me – one of the few Westerners there – that I should come in close and take photos. Earlier

on, during the procession at least one medium posed for me to photograph him. He then had additional 'general's heads' pushed through his arm, apparently adding to the spectacle for my benefit (Figure 53).

An altar was set up with the Chinese gods Kuan Im and Kuan U on it, as well as the remaining small sacred trinkets. The mediums then proceeded one by one to select objects from the table and throw them to the substantial crowd which had gathered on the steps of the Central department store. Some people approached the chief medium and asked for blessings, hands in prayer gesture. They received magical items. Most onlookers appeared to take the event seriously. Some Malaysian and Singaporean tourists reached for their wallets to make donations, others held their hands in prayer gesture in the hope of receiving a blessed object from the mediums (Figure 52).

The final part of the show involved the head medium, having distributed many of the magical items, removing the piercing objects from lesser mediums. This was a theatrical performance during which the head medium used a couple of hastily placed tables as a stage. He removed the piercing objects from the minor mediums with theatrical flair. Apparently exhausted, the lesser mediums gathered around the floats and waited to leave. They usually had a piece of yellow paper pressed against their cheeks. Some smoked cigarettes, with smoke escaping from the wound in the cheek. Several of the mediums appeared to be in shock, shivering quite severely despite the warm temperature. The performance finished, all participants were quickly whisked away back to the shrine on the backs of pickups, leaving the crowd to disperse back into the surrounding department stores, restaurants, hotels, karaoke clubs and massage parlours that dominate the area.

A couple of evenings later the Poi Sian (Eight Immortals) shrine, which has been celebrating the Vegetarian Festival in Hat Yai for just three years, organised a blade-ladder climbing ritual in front of the Odeon department

store, just around the corner from where the Thep Na Ja mediums ended their procession. As with the Thep Na Ja procession, this event attracted large crowds of mostly Malaysian and Singaporean tourists, some of whom waited for hours for the performance to begin. In this case, the ritual equipment again became a framework on which corporate logos could be draped. A large banner and innumerable smaller cards advertising Ma Ma Noodles covered the ladder apparatus. Attendants with Ma Ma logos stencilled on their T-shirts prepared for the ritual, attaching the sharpened knife-blade rungs to the at least ten metre high ladder. Presumably this was because Ma Ma noodles were supporting the shrine financially.

This of course raises the issue of corporate sponsorship of the Vegetarian Festival and shrines that participate in it. During my fieldwork I had the opportunity to interview corporate representatives of companies like Ma Ma and Vitamilk, another prominent sponsor in Hat Yai (for example, see Figure 54). Annette Hamilton has also encountered Ma Ma logos in connection with the Festival in Trang (pers. comm.). In each case the representative himself was involved in a devotional relationship with the main spirit medium of the shrine in question. This was the case even for a multi-national corporation like Coca-Cola, whose local distributor, the Hat Thip company, often sponsored Chinese shrines and religious events. The nature of these relationships challenges some of the assumptions we might make about the nature of corporate sponsorship in such a religious domain. For one thing, corporate sponsorship and the devotional religious aspects do not necessarily exclude each other, and the specificity of the devotional relationship means that particular companies are bound to one shrine or another rather than being able to sponsor the Festival as a whole. It also suggests that the reasons companies end up sponsoring particular shrines might have as much to do with the faith of a particular well-positioned employee as with a broader corporate marketing strategy.



When all was ready, the mediums arrived from their shrine at the outskirts of town in a convoy of pickups, quickly entered trances at the temporary altar that had been set up, climbed the ladder, performed self mutilations with swords, axes and other objects, and walked over thorny branches. As in the Thep Na Ja procession the audience alternated between mere spectatorship and becoming involved in the action. Blessings were sought from mediums and, at the end ritual, objects such as flags and *phayyan*, which had been sacralised by being carried over the ladder, were sold for 99 baht a piece. A Malaysian devotee who was taking part commented to me that to purchase such flags at a similar ritual in Malaysia would certainly cost more than three times as much. By being there, he gained this experience of ritual at bargain rates.

#### *Characteristics of Foreign Participation*

The examples of the street processions and blade-ladder climbing displays above showed the spontaneous manner in which foreign Chinese onlookers easily slipped between the roles of spectator and participant, thus blurring the distinction between observer and devotee, tourist and pilgrim. Such a dynamic of participation already challenges the notion that such ritual performances in Hat Yai can be written off as mere examples of 'staged authenticity' (MacCannell 1989) that exist solely for the benefit of an objectifying 'tourist gaze' (Urry 1990). However, this notion is further problematised by the fact that many of the shrine attendants, organisers, wealthy patrons and even some of the spirit mediums are in fact Chinese from Singapore and Malaysia. Thus the festival in Hat Yai differentiates itself significantly from Phuket and Trang: while the other festivals are best conceived of as local traditions that have attracted transnational interest in recent years, the festival in Hat Yai, or at least certain aspects of it, is *emerging*

*precisely in a translocal and transnational nexus.* The participation of Malaysians and Singaporeans is not just a recent addition to an already established event; their activities are crucial to the very existence of these events. In the case of the Thep Na Ja shrine, their celebrations in 2001 would not be possible if it hadn't been for the huge donation from a Malaysian patron. The Poi Sian shrine, on the other hand, does not have one major patron but rather a large number of Malaysian devotee/patrons who participate in every aspect of the festival. According to the chief medium and owner, the shrine is actually devoted to the Eight Immortals and not the Nine Emperor Gods at all. However, the desire of the Malaysian devotees to celebrate the Vegetarian Festival was such that he acquiesced, even though performing an extra set of rituals was extremely exhausting for him, he explained.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> This seems like quite an unusual innovation. However, more information would be required to get a better sense of how common or uncommon this sort of mixing of focus is.



**Figure 52.** Head medium of the Thep Na Ja shrine blesses a Thai child as the crowd looks on.



**Figure 53.** (above) A spirit medium poses in front of the anthropologist to have additional ‘general’s heads’ inserted by an assistant.



**Figure 54.** (left) Spirit medium from the Thep Na Ja shrine ‘advertising’ Vitamilk, a soy milk product. Other mediums have lined up in the background. Statues of Kuan U, Luang Phò Thuat and Phò Than Khlai are visible in the background.

**Figure 55.** Riding on the back of the pickup, a Singaporean medium of the monkey god, Heng Jia, accompanies an image of Brahma during the Thep Na Ja procession. Despite the presence of two gods on the vehicle the attitude of the lay devotees is decidedly casual.





**Figure 56. Chinese tourists in front of one of the spectacularly pierced spirit mediums from the Thep Na Ja shrine. The man in blue on the left is holding ritual flags that he received from a medium.**

**Figure 57. Tourists observing the Thep Na Ja shrine procession.**



**Figure 58. Head medium of the Thep Na Ja shrine and a senior lay devotee distribute sacred trinkets from the back of a pickup.**



**Figure 59.** Malaysian Chinese devotees of the Poi Sian shrine, dressed in white and observing ritual purity during the Festival, making preparations early on the morning of the street parade.



**Figure 60.** Malaysian Chinese devotees of the Poi Sian have the honour of carrying the palanquin of the Nine Emperor Gods through the streets of Hat Yai.

Thus it is the Malaysian devotees who are the driving force behind the shrine's participation in the festival of the Poi Sian shrine. The Malaysians run many aspects of the shrine's business during the festival and are involved in virtually every aspect besides the spirit mediumship and menial tasks such as cooking and cleaning. They manned the temple and collected donations, doled out vegetarian food to visitors (although they didn't cook it, Thais did this), and performed daily rites to venerate the Nine Emperor Gods and other deities (Figure 59). During the street procession that this shrine performed, it was Malaysian men exclusively who carried the palanquin containing the Nine Emperor Gods (Figure 60), and on the final evening of the festival they participated in the fire-walking (*lui fai*) rites, carrying various deities and other sacred objects across the red-hot coals in order to purify both the objects and themselves.

In many cases, the Malaysian supporters have very regular contact with the shrines in Hat Yai, travelling many times a year to visit, worship, make donations or help temple developments in one form or another. For example, one female devotee from Ipoh said she visited the Poi Sian shrine at least monthly, saying that it only took her four hours by car to make the journey. Such frequent and sustained patterns of visiting across national borders closely resembles border tourism (Askew 2002), though I found no examples of devotees who travelled across the border on a daily basis, as Askew did.

The business networks of some Malaysian devotees were also relevant to the manner in which the festival is evolving. One supporter of the Poi Sian shrine is a travel agent from KL and has thus been able to tap into the lucrative flow of tourists on their way to attend the Vegetarian Festival in Phuket and Trang. During the festival in 2001, more than fifty tour buses, direct from Kuala Lumpur or Ipoh, crept their way up the narrow dirt road to the Poi Sian shrine each morning and disgorged their occupants, who had

a vegetarian breakfast and propitiated the shrine's various images before reboarding to be taken into Hat Yai, or on to Trang or Phuket. In such ways the Poi Sian shrine managed to 'intercept' tourists on their way to the more established centres of the festival.

For many of the foreign devotees I spoke to the financial differences between Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand provided a significant reason for patronising shrines in Hat Yai and taking part in the Vegetarian Festival there. The growing popularity of the Festival both in Malaysia and Thailand is also increasing the expense for participants. Informants told me that in Ampang, near Kuala Lumpur, where the festival is extremely popular with devotees, who are put up in hotel-like accommodation during their stay, the cost of taking part in the festival can be prohibitive. This appears to be one reason why many Malaysians find travelling to Hat Yai to perform rituals at the Vegetarian Festival a tempting alternative. Generally speaking, these participants were not rich in their own countries and it is likely they could achieve a higher level of relative prestige in Thailand than they could in their home countries. However, the relative wealth of Malaysia and Singapore also means that participants from these countries can obtain a higher status and more central role in the ritual proceedings than would otherwise be available to them. One woman from Ipoh, Malaysia who takes part in the Vegetarian Festival at the Poi Sian shrine proudly pointed to the donation of 163,000 baht (approximately AUD\$6,250 at that time) on the donor list and said that her husband had made it. She explained that their participation is necessary: "Hat Yai people are poor, she said, so they cannot donate so much money".

One participant, Mr Wong, a Chinese man from Kuala Lumpur, gave his reasons for why Malaysians and Singaporeans were interested in travelling to Thailand to participate in rituals. He said the Thai ceremony is inexpensive and has a sense of religious freedom in Thailand, while Chinese

crackers, extreme piercings, blade ladders, and so on are tightly controlled in Kuala Lumpur. In other words, in Thailand, the 'same' ritual experience was seen to be more 'traditional', more spectacular, and better value for money. Statements of this kind are quite common and support the notion that Thailand's relative permissiveness in comparison to Muslim dominated Malaysia and authoritarian, highly-regulated Singapore, is a significant motivating factor in cross border tourism and pilgrimage.<sup>299</sup>

This sense of freedom can also be found in the openness to innovation of many of the shrines, and particularly the greater role given to women than is traditionally the case in Singapore and Malaysia. For example, while women in Malaysia are not allowed to take part in the fire-walking and some other rites in Malaysia because of their perceived 'impurity' (Cheu 1988), the Thep Na Ja and Poi Sian shrines were both willing to allow women to take part. For example, women were not excluded from firewalking and were instead 'walked across' the coals by mediums. In perhaps the most surprising innovation, the Thep Na Ja shrine actually gave its female devotees the privilege of removing the Nine Emperor Gods from their room at the end of the festival and bearing the palanquin onto the back of a pickup truck and thence to the sea.

This is not to say that women are routinely included in such aspects of Chinese rites in Thailand as a matter of course. On the contrary, established rites such as those at the Siang Tueng Foundation did not involve women in firewalking and other such purificatory rites, nor do I recall any women taking part in the famous firewalking of the Jao Mae Lim Ko Niao celebrations in Pattani. Rather, my argument is that certain religious entrepreneurs who are attempting to increase their patronage are more accommodating of such innovations.

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<sup>299</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Askew (2002).



However, another common way transnational participants characterise their reasons for patronising shrines in Hat Yai and participating in the Vegetarian Festival does not involve affirming difference at all but simply vouching for the sacred power of the charismatic spirit medium who runs the shrine. One Singaporean man said he was guided to the Thep Na Ja shrine by a series of coincidences but when he saw the chief medium his eyes were filled with a brilliant light and he knew he was in the presence of a powerful figure. Or the generous donor from Malaysia who donated three million baht to the Thep Na Ja and became the major benefactor of the shrine, did so because of a lottery win which convinced him of the power of the head medium to bring him good luck. Other devotees cited help with financial, health and personal problems as bases of their devotion. Or, in Mr Wong's words as he tried to put his feelings in terms I could understand, "It's like the X-files, la.<sup>300</sup> At first you don't believe, then [you experience the power of the medium] and you have to believe".

Given that such relationships are taking place in a transnational context, and one in which there is a widespread dynamic of ethnic Chinese seeking sources of sacred power on the other side of a national boundary, it is worth asking if the presence of the border itself, the concrete manifestation which produces disjunctures between states, has any role in this process. Louis Golomb has noted the powerful productive force that ethnic boundaries can produce, that allow members of one ethnic group to be perceived as powerful healers or ritual specialists by virtue of their otherness. In the case of Kelantan in northern Malaysia, he has shown how the ethnic Thais have been able to creatively adapt ethnic differences to create a niche as 'brokers of morality', providing ritual services for, in particular, the ethnic Chinese (Golomb 1978). In the case of southern Thailand, he has shown how ethnic

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<sup>300</sup> An emphatic particle used in Singaporean and Malaysian English which expresses mood but does not necessarily convey any meaning.

boundaries help to enhance the power of ritual healers (Golomb 1984). These observations lead me to suggest that perhaps a national boundary can function in a similar way, so that the cross-cutting of an ostensibly singular ethnic group by a national boundary can also create a tantalising sense of power in otherness which can be exploited by a variety of actors. Thus, ironically perhaps, it is actually the 'Thainess' of the spirit mediums and the ritual proceedings they oversee, the fact that they emerge in a Thai context and make use of a particularly Thai way of managing ethnicity and the sacred, that allow transnational participants to experience these events as powerful, and inherently authentic.

In a further irony, however, that very 'Thai' mode of expressing Chineseness is itself somewhat at odds with the dominant mode of expressing Sino-Thai identity in contemporary Thai society. As the discussion of alternate modes of practice suggests, the manner in which Chineseness is expressed is further permuted by the distinction between an emergent Sino-Thai middle-class aesthetic and the production of a more spectacular aesthetic for international consumption. Thus, neither Thainess nor Chineseness, nor even Thai modes of expressing Chineseness, should be understood as unitary.

#### *Conclusion: Translocality and Opportunity*

The statue-building and Vegetarian Festival examples discussed above share a number of characteristics. They both involve forms of religious entrepreneurship, on the part of the Municipality on the one hand and individual shrines and their mediums on the other. They both demonstrate the importation or relocation of a number of materials, practices, expertise, etc from other locations, often designed to function as a substitute for the 'original' elsewhere. They are designed to draw potential devotees or

tourists to Hat Yai in preference to other locations and thus set themselves up in explicit or implicit competition with them. As the Thep Na Ja PA continually announced “No need to go to Phuket, no need to go to Trang”. Both examples involve connections made to mainland China as a place of ultimate origins, there was a physical transposition of materials – ash and ‘white jade’ – connecting them with this place of origins. And in both cases the crucial investment of capital, and in some cases labour too, was made by Chinese participants from Malaysia and Singapore.

In none of these cases were ‘origins’ from within Hat Yai itself brought into the equation. Instead, what Hat Yai provided was a quintessentially ‘translocal’ space characteristic of many tourist destinations (Appadurai 1996), which in some senses belonged to the nation-state in which they are located but, through a variety of connections, also extend beyond it. In southern Thailand, the building of religious buildings, icons and so on must also be thought of as translocal in this sense. Rather than simply standing in any straightforward sense for symbols for local communities.

Movement to an area of opportunity is coming from both sides; the ritual specialists see in Hat Yai a zone of greater opportunity compared to more established areas of ritual production (Wat Chang Hai, Phuket, etc) while at the same time relatively marginalised Chinese from Malaysia are able to take much more central roles as important patrons than they would otherwise be able to back home. Furthermore, Hat Yai functions as a site of possibility due to the ease with which activities can be organised, free from the constraints of local authoritarianisms and ethnic politics.

In the final chapter of this thesis I will consider another example of transnational religious interaction, this time to consider the dynamics at play when ethnic Chinese participants come to dominate a local Theravada Buddhist ceremony.



## Chapter Nine

# On the Limits of Hybridity: Foreign Chinese Participation in a Theravada Buddhist Ceremony in Songkhla

It is still very early in the morning when the first guests start to arrive. Cars with Malaysian number plates begin to pull into the temple grounds and park on the pavers between the *bot* and the main *wihan* (shrine hall) where the ceremonies are to take place. The visitors are almost all Chinese. They generally move into the hall to pay their respects to the monastery's abbot, Luang Phò Phan, and do the rounds of the monastery's main images – the Buddha set up on a shrine outside the hall, the two-metre-plus statue of Luang Phò Thuat, and the shrine outside with the images of Jao Mae Kuan Im, and the monastery's former abbot, Luang Phò Liang. Their mode of worship gives them away as Chinese: straight-legged and stiff, they clasp their joss-sticks between their fingers in a sort of double fist, quite unlike the *wai* of the Thais; holding their arms out perpendicular from their bodies and bent at the elbows, and with repeated shallow bowing, hinged at the waist, they pay their respects. This done, the visitors generally move inside and purchase – or perhaps 'rent' is a better term – the monastic robes that they will later offer to the monks. An enterprising Thai woman, Daeng, a resident of the United States but former local and long-time devotee of Luang Phò Phan, and her family are doing a roaring trade in these. They have returned from the USA for the ceremony and are selling the robes for 500 baht a piece. The Chinese visitors write their names and addresses on labels on the front of the plastic-wrapped robes. For example: 'Foo Mook Chin & Family, Singapore'. An impressive pile quickly forms on a large table to the side of the *wihan*.

Luang Phò Phan sits inside the *wihan* on his low dais with other senior monks who are visiting for the occasion. Included in their numbers is the head monk of the Thai Sangha in Kedah, Malaysia, and Dr Thawi, a monk from Phatthalung who has achieved something of a celebrity status south of the border. I am told he has written a book popular with Malaysian devotees called *Have Bowl, Will Travel*.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> I was never able to find this book, however, despite a number of searches. The title references the classic TV program *The Paladin's* catch phrase "have gun, will travel".

Outside a large tour bus, and then another, arrives. More Chinese devotees disembark and make their way through the various vendors who have set up their stalls directly to the *wihan* to pay their respects. By now there are several hundred foreign visitors present and already things are starting to get noisy. There is a festive air and young men have started letting off long chains of crackers over near the Kuan Im shrine hall. There are increasingly frequent eruptions of hideously loud sound and the visitors clutch their ears, smiling. Judging by their laughter and excitement, this seems to be a great novelty for many of them. Many of the locals clutch their ears too, but they tend to wince rather than smile.

This is an edited excerpt from a fieldnote, regarding the 1999 Kathina, or robe-offering, (*thòt kathin*) ceremonies at Wat Sai Khao, an outwardly unremarkable if prosperous, monastery set amid emerald rice paddies and rubber tree plantation covered hills in Songkhla province, about a half hour drive from either Hat Yai or Songkhla city. What does distinguish Wat Sai Khao from surrounding monasteries, however, is the construction of an elaborate meditation centre on a nearby hillside and the number of foreigners that come to visit the monastery's head monk, Luang Phò Phan. There is a constant stream of such visitors throughout the year, and Luang Phò Phan is invited to perform ritual services in Malaysia and Singapore on a regular basis. It is during the Kathina ceremony, however, that the extent of his patronage network becomes apparent.

Kathina ceremonies are held at monasteries across Thailand in the lunar month following the end of the Buddhist lent (*phansa*). Wat Sai Khao is no exception. What *is* exceptional about this ceremony is the participation of patrons from Malaysia and Singapore, numbering in the hundreds, the overwhelming majority of whom are ethnic Chinese. The ever-increasing involvement of these foreign participants over the years has had a great impact on the form and character of the Kathina ceremony at Wat Sai Khao, which is now characterised by its apparent hybridity, combining 'Thai' and

'Chinese' ritual forms and aesthetics into a peculiar, and sometimes uneasy, cultural composite.

The first time I attended the Kathina ceremony I was very surprised by what I found. I had visited the monastery once before because I had been told that there was a Kuan Im shrine there and my initial research question was focused on Mahayana Buddhism and its interactions with Theravada Buddhism in the region. At that time I had met Luang Phò Phan and he had given me an invitation to the Kathina ceremony written in Thai, English, and Chinese. This was my first inkling that there would be some foreign participation at the ceremony and so I decided to attend, more out of curiosity than because I thought it would be a major feature of my research. The extent of foreign Chinese participation and its obvious influence on the ritual proceedings and very atmosphere of the event was therefore completely unexpected. This was also one of my earliest indications that an understanding of Chinese-Thai religious interactions would need to be broadened beyond a nation-state migrant group model.

My initial reactions to the event were mixed, hovering somewhere between fascination and dismay. At the time, the presence of the tour buses – signifiers of the package tour – had a great impact on my interpretation of the kind of event I was witnessing. I initially imagined these visitors as taking part in a sort of 'Buddhist tourism', with all the negative connotation of superficiality and commercialisation that this suggested to me. Likewise, I was disturbed by the manner in which the Chinese had completely taken over the event, imposing their own ritual sensibilities – the aesthetics of "heat and noise" (Weller 1994) that characterise popular Chinese religious events – and forms onto a Theravada Buddhist framework. In addition to the ubiquitous crackers were lion dances with their overpowering percussion accompaniment, Chinese deities to be worshipped, and Chinese food for lunch. Even the manner of arrival, circulating around all the monastery

shrines and making offerings of incense is quite typical of Chinese folk religious festivals (see Weller 1994). Furthermore, and adding to the sense of superficiality and commoditisation, was the apparent simulation of a 'normal' Thai Kathina for the sole benefit of the visitors.

However, after attending the same event again two years later I was able to develop a more nuanced sense of interethnic, and international, dynamics at work. As it turned out, the population and visitors, and their relationships to the monastery and motivations were not nearly as uniform as they at first seemed. Corresponding to this, the commoditisation and 'touristification' of the ceremony were also not as prevalent and thoroughgoing as I had at first thought. I was to discover that there is no tourist enterprise behind the coaches. They were instead chartered by groups of the devotees themselves, a number of whom had been attending for decades. The most active of the long-term devotees had spent months recruiting participants within their networks, organising groups of more than a hundred in some cases. Much smaller groups made up of families, pairs of friends and even individuals also attended. Many of those attending also brought proxy donations from friends and acquaintances who were unable to make the trip.

The unquestionable impact of the Chinese during the day's proceedings raises the question of how it was accommodated or resisted, if at all, by the local participants. The second purpose of the following discussion is therefore to consider this dimension of the event. Has it meant that the event has lost significance for local people? Or have strategies been developed to cope with the influx of foreign participants?

Before discussing the specifics of the Kathina ceremony at Wat Sai Khao I will briefly outline its significance in Thai society and history more generally.



### *History and Structure of the Kathina Ceremony*

The Kathina, or robe-offering, ritual has a long history. In Siam it is said to date back to at least the 13th century AD (Wells 1975), and ultimately to the time of the Buddha himself when new robes were offered to monks at the ends of the rains retreat. One of the most important events in the ritual calendar, the ceremony is performed only once per year at any given Thai monastery, during the lunar month following the end of the rains retreat (*wan ók phansa*). It thus officially marks the end of the period of heightened religiosity associated with the Lenten season (Terwiel 1994:163, 76). It is seen to be a happy and celebratory ceremony, associated with transgressive, carnivalesque behaviours such as cross-dressing and dancing. The royal Kathina are the most important such ceremonies in the country and the king himself, as the kingdom's highest ranking layman, traditionally offers robes at nine royally sponsored temples each year. The royal Kathina are the highest profile rituals but virtually every temple in the country performs the ceremony. Sponsorship of a Kathina ceremony is considered one of the most potent means of making merit. Terwiel comments about village Kathina in central Thailand in the late 1960s:

The presentation of the *kathin* robes is a ceremony reputed to bring a great amount of beneficial *karma* to the donor and therefore it is not unusual to find laymen interested in becoming main sponsors, or 'president' [*prathan*] of such a ritual. One of the reasons why this ceremony carries great prestige and brings honour to the main sponsors is that it is extremely expensive. A private individual is expected to give, apart from the new robes, many useful goods and a great amount of money. It is not uncommon to find a rich farmer saving for more than ten years before he can become the main sponsor of a *kathin* ritual (Terwiel 1994:210).

Thus the prestige associated with the ceremony make the Kathina of high symbolic importance, providing a prime occasion on which status hierarchies are affirmed (on the symbolic importance of the Kathina rituals, see, Gray 1986, 1991, Phya Anuman Rajadhon 1986, Wijeyewardene 1986:138).

The main sponsors, or 'presidents', have the privilege of offering the *kathin*, or sets of monks' robes, ornately decorated and placed upon special gilded bowls (*phan*) to the head monk of the temple. While the offering of the *kathin* forms the symbolic core of the ritual, the Kathina is often a temple's main fundraising event of the year and donations of money or items which are useful to the monks make up an important component of the ritual. It should also be noted that the Kathina rituals are very inclusive, and traditionally temples welcome participation from outside their local areas. Within Thailand it is very common for people to travel to temples outside their local area for the Kathina ceremonies, or, failing this, to make donations to these temples.

Despite the pomp and seriousness of the ritual proceedings, and the role of the Kathina in affirming status hierarchies, the event also tends to have a somewhat carnivalesque feel, at least in the village ceremonies I attended in the South. Coming at the end of the heightened religious period of the Buddhist lent, there is a sense of playful celebration and relaxation of social mores. Villagers, accompanied by small musical troupes, will tend to dance into the temple precincts bearing their offerings to the monks, and music and dancing occur at different times throughout the day. Minor acts of light-hearted transgression are also common, with a number of both males and females cross-dressing. Also contributing to the carnival-like atmosphere, there will often be a variety of petty traders doing business on the temple precincts.

*Kathina at Wat Sai Khao*

**Figure 61. Monastic robes purchased by Malaysian and Singaporean devotees and bearing their names.**

The Kathina at Wat Sai Khao follows the same structure as other ceremonies around Thailand. However, the participation of foreign Chinese permeates virtually every aspect of the organisation of the event. The temple's lay committee, responsible for organising the proceedings, is indicative of this. It is split along national lines, with three leaders, one each from Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, co-ordinating the event. These men organise participants from their own countries, collect donations and organise the travel and accommodation arrangements for a large number of the people taking part in the Kathina ceremonies. This is reflected in the performance of the ritual itself, with each of the three temple committee leaders presenting one of the *kathin* robes to the abbot at the climax of the ceremony. Thus rather than a single *prathan*, the Kathina at Wat Sai Khao has three.

Other aspects of the ceremony also follow the standard practice of Thai Buddhist monasteries but are fundamentally inflected by the participation of foreigners. This is most obvious in the procession, by far the most spectacular event of the day, in which a large proportion of the visitors took part. This was in fact a simulation of the usual Thai custom where groups of lay participants parade into the monastery grounds, often accompanied by musical troupes, often dancing, and carrying the offerings to be made later in the ceremonies such as 'money trees' and other items useful for the monks. As already mentioned, most of the visitors to Wat Sai Khao first arrived by

vehicle, paid their respects to Luang Phò Phan and various images, and then 'bought' their robes. Once all the guests had arrived they were bussed some distance from the monastery so that they could return in procession form. It was here that some of the most obvious 'hybridity' of the day's events could be found. Another fieldnote entry illustrates the character of this procession:

At about nine, all the foreign participants have arrived and those that want to participate in the procession are instructed to find their robes and other offerings and place them in the back of several pickup trucks which have arrived outside. There is a scene of good-humoured pandemonium as scores of people attempt to do this at once. People crowd onto various vehicles and are slowly driven out to the intersection. Then follows more commotion as everyone tries to retrieve their robes and other offerings from the back of one of the pickups. People wait for the procession to begin. They line up to have their photographs taken in groups, many of which are obviously families. There is a lot of laughter as people pose with their offerings. One boy, maybe ten years old, is not that interested. He has his eyes glued on a Gameboy and does not look up for the photographs. People are carrying various offerings: robes, brooms, candles, and the money trees that are a traditional feature of the Kathina ceremonies. Unlike the money trees at typical Thai ceremonies, which are generally covered with small denomination notes – 20 baht, 50 baht, maybe a few 100 baht, these trees are extravagant. One large tree has nothing but thousand baht bills on it. A sign advertises that it is from a group of devotees from KL and bears seventy thousand baht.<sup>302</sup>

The three main sponsors are there with their *kathina* on ornate bowls (*phan*) and with a Thai-style parasol. There is also a Thai musical troupe present, with their 'long drums', cymbals, oboes, etc., but more surprisingly a Chinese group from Hat Yai also turns up, complete with large drum on wheels, cymbals and a pair of Chinese dancing lions. They take their place

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<sup>302</sup> At that time about AUD\$2,800. In 2001, the same group of devotees presented a tree with 220,000 baht (AUD\$8,800) in crisp, new 1,000 baht notes. It is hard to convey just how excessively generous such donations are in relationship to the offerings made by local people, even relatively well-off Thais.

at the head of the procession while the Thai musical troupe is relegated to the rear.

The procession begins. There is a huge noise as the Chinese music kicks into action and various men start to hurl small bunches of crackers to both sides of the road. The Chinese lions and musicians lead the procession, followed by the 'presidents' with their *kathin*. Then comes the main body of devotees, generally laughing and joking with each other, meandering up the road, often using their robes to shield themselves from the already oppressive sunlight. The Thai musical troupe, with their slower, gentler rhythms, brings up the rear. It seems that it is they, and not the Chinese, who are somewhat out of place here.

Taking part in the procession is one man of Indian appearance. I single him out to find out his reasons for being there. He was invited by the Singaporean temple committee head. "Actually, I'm a Roman Catholic", he confesses. "I'm just here for the sake of my business. [All this] doesn't matter if you believe in God, right?"

The procession makes its way into the temple grounds and then circles the ordination hall three times, as is usually the case in Kathina rituals. The noise becomes deafening as large amounts of crackers are let off at the nearby Kuan Im shrine. Virtually all the participants in the procession are Chinese. Most of the local villagers stand around and watch. However, some Thai women join the Thai musicians and begin to dance. After the third round of the ordination hall the procession comes to an end at the *wihan*. There is an incident, of sorts, as the procession compresses, accordion-like, and the two musical troupes, both still playing, come into proximity with each other for the first time. There is a cacophony as the two incompatible musical styles clash. An apparent competition for dominance takes place, with both musical troupes refusing to give ground. The Thai women dance on in support of their musicians. Eventually, the Thai group give up, being unable to compete with the louder, frenetic Chinese beat and deafening crash of cymbals. Forced out of the competition, the Thai women resort to parody; they would look at home at a heavy metal concert as they violently and gracelessly shake their bodies to the Chinese percussion beat. They can't keep this up for long, though, and fade out of the contest, one by one.

But perhaps the musical styles were perhaps less accommodating than the ritual participants themselves. Any tensions that might have existed

between the two groups were muted, barely detectable (at least to me). And so while the brief outburst of parody described above revealed something of the underlying tensions that existed during this ceremony between local and foreign participants, for the most part foreigners appeared to be totally oblivious to it. Overall, the trope of hospitality ruled the day, as I will describe.

More ceremonies carried on through the morning, then there was a lunch break, followed by yet more ceremonies in the main *wihan*. Towards the end of the afternoon each of the *prathan*, representing the congregation from their respective countries, presented the primary robes to Luang Phò Phan. Each of them then made a short speech. The Thai *prathan* made his speech first – in faltering English and then in Thai. He took on the role of host. Expressing a high level of concern for the comfort of the foreign guests, he thanked them for coming, apologised for any inconveniences they might have suffered, and hoped very much that they had had a good time and would come back again next year.

Once the three *prathan* had presented their robes, the rest of the congregation then followed suit and LPP was inundated with robes and other offerings. This was the end of the ceremony and the different groups of people then began to disperse. Tour buses turned up from somewhere and large groups of tourists hopped on board and were whisked away.



**Figure 62.** Money tree presented to Luang Phò Phan by long-time devotee from KL, Graham. It is made up entirely of 1000 baht notes totalling 70,000 baht. The Nestlé ice cream man waits in the background.



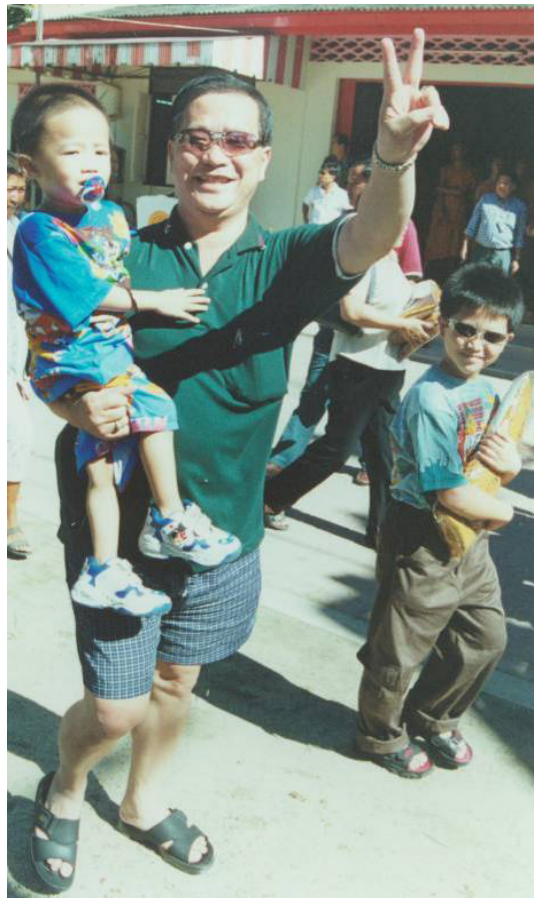
**Figure 63.** An ethnic Chinese devotee taking part in the Kathina procession. He is carrying a gilded ceremonial bowl (*phan*) filled with 100 baht notes made to resemble a flower blossom. On his shoulder are some floor mats commonly used in monasteries.



**Figure 64.** A group of Kathina participants posing for photos (not just the author's).



**Figure 65. A Singaporean family posing with their money tree. The amount on the sign is 71,500 baht (at that time about \$AUD2850).**



**Figure 66. A Malaysian or Singaporean participant in the Kathina procession. As these photos demonstrate, this was very much a family affair.**





**Figure 67. Chinese lions take their place at the head of the procession.**

*Luang Phò Phan: Broker of Morality*

The popularity of the Kathin ceremonies at Wat Sai Khao is largely due to Luang Phò Phan: the majority of the Malaysian and Singaporean participants are attracted by his reputation as a monk of considerable spiritual power. A well-known and important monk in the local area, Luang Phò Phan is a medium-ranking monk in the local Sangha hierarchy, and head monk of his sub-district (*jao tambon*). More importantly for this study, he has become renowned as a ‘magical monk’ (*keji ajan*) able to transfer his accumulated ‘charisma’ (*barami*) to other individuals or objects. In southern Thailand he is in constant demand to perform such rites. During my fieldwork our paths were regularly crossing as he participated in rituals that I was observing.<sup>303</sup> This renown as a source of sacred power, both locally and abroad, has produced sufficient “spiritual magnetism” (Preston 1992) to attract such a large number of guests to the annual robe-offering ceremony.

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<sup>303</sup> These included the sacralisation of the giant standing Buddha in the Hat Yai Municipal Park (mentioned in chapter seven), the opening ceremonies of the Thep Na Ja Chinese shrine in Hat Yai, and a fundraising ‘forest-ropes’ ceremony held at Songkhla Zoo.

A prominent example of a class of charismatic Buddhist monks in southern Thailand who have successfully cultivated patronage networks beyond the border in Malaysia and Singapore Luang Phò Phan receives many invitations to perform ceremonies abroad. Indeed, I rarely found him in attendance when I went to visit him at his home monastery.<sup>304</sup> Almost invariably, it seemed, when I asked the other monks where he was they would reply that he abroad, performing ritual services, often in Malaysia or Singapore. On the occasions that I did find him there my attempts at conversation were often interrupted by visiting Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese who had arrived either in small groups or individually, usually driving out from Hat Yai.

This wide-spread reputation is most certainly connected with perceptions about the purity of his practice. For example, several long-term devotees cited his virginity as indicative of his purity and power. This was a common trope Chinese used to explain their preference for a particular Thai master. However, another possible element of his appeal may be his connection with Luang Phò Thuat. Luang Phò Phan belongs to the lineage of monks closely connected to Luang Phò Thuat through ordination. Temple brochures for advertising the production of a batch of Luang Phò Thuat amulets list him as being among “nine magic monks in the lineage of Luang Pu Thuat” who would perform the sacralisation *pluk sek* rites. They also mention that Luang Phò Phan was taught by Jao Khun Nüang, of Wat Na Pradu, the master (*phra ajan*) of both Ajan Thim and Ajan Nòng. The clear implication made in this text is that Luang Phò Phan has a privileged access to sacred knowledge about Luang Phò Thuat through sharing in the teaching lineage of Luang Phò Thuat’s most famous avatars. The meditation centre

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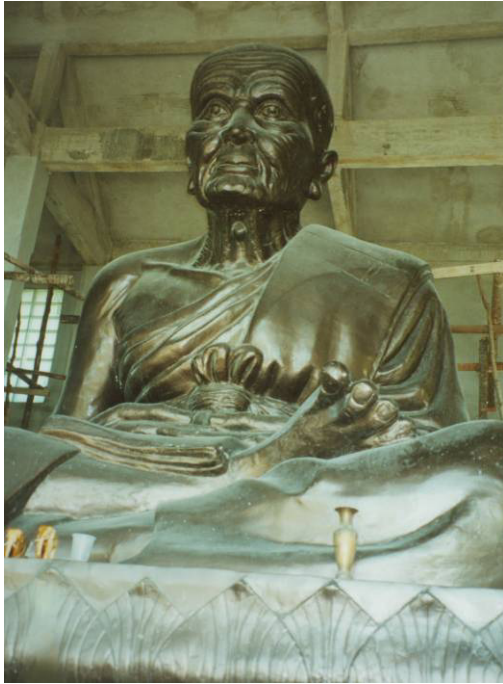
<sup>304</sup> The discrepancies between monasteries in a particular geographical zone has been produced by the increasing mobility of both monks, their devotees and images and objects that circulate in connection with them, that has developed since the 1960s (Taylor 1999:164).

which Luang Phò Phan developed on a nearby hillside is also the site of what was until recently the largest statue of Luang Phò Thuat in the world. This was commissioned by a wealthy Sino-Thai businessman whom Luang Phò Phan had met while performing *pluk sek* rites at Wat Pha Kho and who had been so impressed by Luang Phò Phan that he collaborated with him on several batches of Luang Phò Thuat amulets. Luang Phò Phan used the large statue to make several claims to having a special connection with Luang Phò Thuat. The statue, which had been constructed in Bangkok was originally to be situated at a monastery in northern Thailand but 'refused' this journey, only acquiescing when a location in the South, and under the care of Luang Phò Phan was found.<sup>305</sup> Luang Phò Phan also explained his reasons for constructing a large structure to house the giant image of Luang Phò Thuat. He had, he said, experienced a strange heat and realised that it was caused because the statue of Luang Phò Thuat was constantly exposed to the sunlight during the day. Once the housing structure had been commissioned and the roof completed, the feelings of heat subsided. Furthermore, at the Kathina ceremonies I attended, Luang Phò Phan distributed Luang Phò Thuat amulets to all devotees who paid respects to him.

The extent to which Luang Phò Phan's spiritual magnetism for foreigners is authenticated and legitimised by his connection with Luang Phò Thuat is unclear. For the participants from Malaysia and Singapore his authenticity may be just as strongly connected with broader perceptions (and stereotypes) regarding the power of Thai spirituality. In his study of interethnic relations in Kelantan, Northern Malaysia, Louis Golomb reports that "[t]he Thai have a wide reputation in Malaysia as highly adept healers and sorcerers" (1978:97).

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<sup>305</sup> This story was discussed in chapter one (page 34).



**Figure 68. The one-time ‘world’s largest Luang Phò Thuat’, located at the hillside meditation centre at Phu Khao Long, in the vicinity of Wat Sai Khao.**

Golomb proposes the thesis that ethnic Thais in this region sustain their ethnic identity through creatively manipulating certain cultural traits and specialisations. As “brokers of morality” (Golomb 1978), northern Malaysian Thais creatively use their ethnic difference to provide various services for the numerically and financially dominant ethnic groups. This includes taking on the role of ritual specialists, particularly for the benefit of relatively wealthy urban Chinese from the provincial capital, other parts of Malaysia and even Singapore. In his work Golomb emphasises the strategic use of ethnic difference, and even a creation of a sense of difference itself, which is simultaneously an accommodation of, and playing up to the expectations of, out-group members. In some senses it is the acceptance of prevalent stereotypes held by other ethnic groups, which has enabled ethnic Thai in northern Malaysia to carve out a distinctive niche for themselves. In his other work on inter-ethnic healing practices in southern Thailand and elsewhere, Golomb also emphasises the power of ethnic boundaries to produce a belief in the efficacy of traditional healers (Golomb 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1988). In all of his work, Golomb presents ritual specialists, such as curers, as ‘brokers’ and ‘intermediaries’, who act as privileged points of contact between ethnic groups. In this role Thai monks such as Luang Phò Phan creatively make use of the play of sameness and otherness to make their difference both exotic enough to be desirable and familiar enough to be intelligible. Prevailing tropes on ‘Thai hospitality’ help

to make these forms of cultural and moral brokerage more palatable to both the 'hosts' and the 'guests'.

### *Hosts and Guests*

A common experience during my fieldwork was to have my questions about why foreigners participated in Thai rituals to be met with the evocation of sameness. For example, when I questioned Chinese participants about why they were participating in this Theravada ritual, a common initial response was that they were all, essentially, participating in the same tradition. Differences between Theravada and Mahayana conceptualisations, as well as national or ethnic differences, were overlooked as relatively minor, peripheral concerns. "We are all Buddhists," was the common refrain.

This discursive positioning was one that I encountered often during my fieldwork in southern Thailand. For example, when I enquired about the placing of Chinese images in Theravada Buddhist monasteries, or the use of Theravada Buddhist images in Chinese shrines, I was often told that the Chinese and Thai are "the same". Thais would often invoke the nationally-sanctioned platitude that all religions are essentially the same because they teach people to do good and to avoid doing evil. This process was the inverse of 'othering'; a pervasive elision of difference that enabled certain kinds of social and religious interaction.

As stated above, any underlying tensions between different groups of participants at the Kathina tended to be muted and found their expression in indirect, subtle ways. Instead it was the trope of hospitality which found its expression in many ways during the rituals, in a situation where the difference in status between locals and foreign visitors was clearly expressed.

The Chinese guests are well catered for. Each year the temple organises a Chinese chef from Hat Yai to come and provide lunch for the guests. When

I inquired about the reason for separating the lunch, the most common response was that the Chinese cannot tolerate the spicy local Thai food. The Chineseness of the foreign participants is therefore being actively constructed by their Thai hosts – which is true regardless of whether this is usually the case. In trying to make their guests comfortable and ‘at home’ they automatically produce a clear cut distinction between the locals and their visitors.

Not only do the Chinese guests eat different food from the locals, their dining areas are also segregated. While the guests eat around large round tables under marquees that have been erected for the occasion and are waited on by locals, the Thais eat along the wooden benches attached to the temple school, their food prepared by local women and a group of *maechi* that have come from different temples around the province to help out with the organisation of the event. Thus while both Thai and foreign participants share the same space and perform the same ritual activities, lunch arrangements enforce a strict spatial segregation and lack of commensality, and incommensurability of cuisine.

The trope of hospitality was also expressed in the various attempts made to accommodate the visitors, who were for the most part quite ignorant of the ritual proceedings, their meaning, and modes of appropriate bodily comportment, especially in their dealings with the monks. The organisers deal with this general lack of familiarity and knowledge by employing a translator and guide. Each year this role is performed by Mr Lim, a Chinese Malaysian from Kedah, who is a long term devotee of the head monk of Kedah’s Sangha (who was also attending) and acted as MC at the rituals. Mr Lim speaks Hokkien, Malay, Thai and good English and is also quite knowledgeable about Theravada Buddhism and Buddhist rituals. His job is to officiate the rituals, translate and explain the significance of rituals to the Chinese Malaysian and Singaporean devotees and to instruct the guests

during each stage of the ritual proceedings. He explained to me that many people just go along with the ritual because everyone else is doing it even though they do not have the faintest idea about the significance of their actions. It is up to him to provide this knowledge, he said. Mr Lim therefore performs a role analogous to that of a tour guide. He is there as a relative insider, mediating between inside and outside, providing enough cultural guidance to make palatable what would otherwise be a bewildering experience for most foreign participants. This is not the only temple at which he performs this role. He is often contracted by temples in Thailand that attract a large number of Malaysians and I was to meet him on several such occasions at different monasteries in the area.

In spite of his efforts, there was still generally a great deal of confusion experienced by some guests during different aspects of the long ceremonial proceedings. An example of this was during the water-pouring ceremony (*kruat nam*), in which water is poured from a small brass bottle into a small brass bowl while monks chant and sacralise the water. This is another integral component of most Thai Buddhist rituals and is usually understood as transference of merit to ancestors. Participants are expected to touch the person in front of them, making a continuous chain to the person actually pouring the water. At Wat Sai Khao, however, many participants were unsure how to behave. Thus:

During the water pouring a woman near me touched the man in front of her and then gestured for her friend to do the same. The friend hesitated, got up on her knees to see what people in front were doing. She hesitated again, then touched the person in front of her, thought better of it, noticed someone else 'wai-ing' (inappropriately), and gestured to her friend to wai. Both of them began *wai-ing* alike while the water-pouring ritual continued.

Furthermore, despite Mr Lim's best efforts, there was a generally weak sense of appropriate behaviour vis-à-vis Buddhist monks, including the highly venerated Luang Phò Phan.

At the end of the procession the participants file into the *wihan*, deposited their robes and other offerings at the same spot as they were before and go to Luang Phò Phan to collect their amulets and have their heads sprinkled with holy water by another monk. Watching this, I see many people who do not know the 'appropriate' mode of behaviour with monks. Many did not *wai* the monk upon receiving the amulet, some do not kneel when they received their amulets but merely reach down and took them. Luang Phò Phan continues to hand out the amulets with an impassive demeanour though, not betraying any hint that he is offended by the behaviour of his guests.

For a Thai to stand over any sitting monk, let alone a highly respected, senior and elderly monk, and receive a sacred object in such a casual manner would be a grave transgression of appropriate modes of interaction and would certainly invalidate the sacred nature of the exchange. In cases where I made similar transgressions early on in my fieldwork I was alerted to this fact in no uncertain terms. Having thus internalised these modes of deportment, I found myself inwardly cringing at the inappropriateness of the visitors' behaviour. Luang Phò Phan, however, was being a good host and did not draw attention to the gauche behaviour of his guests.

Despite the pervasiveness of confusion, most of the foreign participants approached the day's events in a generally light-hearted manner.

A family group I was sitting near were completely in the dark. Chinese Malaysians from KL, they came because one family member who had come several times before had invited them. They all seemed to be having a good time, were laughing and joking with each other and spoke good-naturedly with me, but they didn't have much idea what was going on, nor did they know that much about Buddhism although they said they were interested in learning.

However, divisions within the foreign audience itself also became an issue and a hindrance to translation. Members of the family group just mentioned complained that they didn't understand Mr Lim's explanations as they did not understand Hokkien. They were thus forced to rely more



heavily on the knowledge of their more experienced relative for instructions on the meaning of what they were doing and how to behave.

Thus a number of the participants who were longer-term devotees of Luang Phò Phan and who had a better understanding of the ceremony would also perform the role of guides and hosts for their less experienced companions. Another family group from KL (with whom I shared lunch) consisted of a husband and wife who had attended the rites for four consecutive years running after they noticed an improvement to their business following their first visit; they had brought their niece to participate for the first time and joked that she was a 'rookie' and that they had to show her the ropes. The niece meanwhile admitted that she was more interested in doing some shopping in Hat Yai after the ceremony than in the ceremony itself, though she still found it 'interesting'.

During the rituals, I found myself in the unorthodox position for an anthropologist of being the (relative) cultural insider compared to the people I was studying. On several occasions during the rituals, visitors, perplexed as to how they should sit, kneel, hold their hands, or bow, would look around at me and see what I was doing and then imitate me. Thus, in a sense, I too was transformed into a host of sorts.

Another response to this unfamiliarity was to present elements of the rites as pre-made 'packages' for the participation and consumption of guests. The procession into the monastery was one example of this. Another was the offering of rice to monks which occurred later in the morning. This is one of the most fundamental ways of making merit (*tham bun*). The symbolic centrality of rice in Thailand makes the offering of this staple a central element of sacred exchange between laity and monks and expresses the dependence of the latter on the former. At Wat Sai Khao this element of the rite was simulated for the benefit of the foreign participants. Two bowls were set up at the front of the *wihan*: a gilded rice serving bowl, and a monk's

alms bowl. The guests were then asked to line up and transfer a spoonful of rice from the serving bowl to the alms bowl, which they all dutifully did. In this case the foreigners are provided with the rice and merely have to do the manual labour of moving a spoonful of rice a few centimetres. At the time this struck me as an empty parody of the 'real thing'. I wondered what merit such an action can conceivably generate. It occurred to me that these rich foreigners were merely the consumers of a religious experience. The whole day's events were put on for them, as a package, in exchange for which they make donations of money.

As this example also shows, the accommodation of visitors facilitates a certain "standardisation of facilities" (Erik Cohen, cited in Tomasi 2002:18). The various kinds of devotion usually practised at such ceremonies – the offering of rice, the offering of various objects to the monks, the pouring of water – are provided to the visitors in exchange for money. Many of the visitors may turn up with nothing but money and fully participate in the day's events. Money, the "frictionless surface to history" (Graeber 2001:94) becomes the equivalent of all devotional acts that go to make up the Kathina ceremony. My sense of the centrality of money was strengthened when in the afternoon, during the speeches, another bowl was passed around the congregation soliciting yet more donations. However, this did not provoke any visible outrage and many individuals reached to their wallets to add donations. From a financial point of view the ceremony was a huge success. It was announced at the end of proceedings that an amount of roughly one and a half million baht (A\$60,000) was raised. This was a huge amount to raise at a remote provincial monastery and was far in excess of the amounts raised at other Kathina ceremonies I attended in the South. Even Wat Chang Hai, the centre of the cult of Luang Phò Thuat and one of the most popular pilgrimage destinations in the South, did not raise anything like this amount in that year.

Differences in systems of valuation meant that many visitors saw the amount of money raised as quite modest. One long-term devotee of Luang Phò Phan from Singapore who had been attending these ceremonies since 1969 told me in an interview that the Kathina ceremonies raised over one million baht every year, which “wasn’t very much”.

The emphasis on hospitality as a national quality was clearly expressed to me by one Thai man, who helped officiate the ceremonies and was a regular attendant of the Wat Sai Khao Kathina. As we sat and talked in the monastery grounds he winced and looked fed up every time he was forced to pause and wait for yet another deafening fusillade of Chinese crackers to pass. I asked if he was sick of this (*büa*), and he admitted he was, but the trope of hospitality overrode any objection he might have. “It is our culture,” he told me, “We try to make our guests feel comfortable,” evoking a pragmatic sense of Thainess, adept at divesting itself of particularity and bending with the breeze. Such a comment is reminiscent of the manner in which state discourses are expressed in metaphors of intimacy, in this case by evoking the notion of the tourist as family guest (Herzfeld 1997:5).

### *The Limits of Hybridity*

What do these observations allow us to say about such an apparently hybrid event? The concept of hybridity is sometimes celebrated because it implies resistance to the supposedly homogenising tendencies of globalisation (P. Jackson 1999).<sup>306</sup> Similarly, in the case of writing on Thai religion, the concept has been deployed to convey the manner in which various ‘marginal’ religious forms, such as urban spirit mediums (Pattana 1999a, 1999b, 2005a, 2005b), or urban religious movements such as

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<sup>306</sup> Not to be confused with Peter A. Jackson.

Thammakai (J. L. Taylor 1999, 2002, 2004), challenge the unitary vision of official state-controlled Buddhism.

However, the concept of hybridity has been subject to a great deal of critique over recent years (e.g. Dirlik 1997). One main point of contention is that the concept, as the negation of the notion of purity, does not acknowledge its simultaneous dependence on this very notion. This is one example of the general principle by which the “the conceptual act of negation always presupposes a position from which that negation takes place” (Butler 1997:38).

The concern with hybridity among anthropologists is itself integral to the shift from modernist to postmodernist theory.... The transgressive potential ascribed to hybridisation necessarily presupposes systems and categories to be subverted, that is, presupposes modernist notions of order. Simultaneously, postmodern and post-colonial scholars celebrate hybridity as routine and normal and as integral to all historical language- and culture-building, which defies modernist notions of cultural boundedness in terms of ‘purity’ and ‘authenticity’ (Brendbekken 2003:58).

For Nederveen Pieterse, the historical *ordinariness* of hybridity renders it not as an endpoint for analysis but rather a starting point: “for in the end the real problem is not hybridity – which is common throughout history – but boundaries and the social proclivity to boundary fetishism. Hybridity is unremarkable and is noteworthy only from the point of view of boundaries that have been essentialised” (Nederveen Pieterse 2001:220). He then reiterates this point: “The importance of hybridity is that it problematises boundaries” (Nederveen Pieterse 2001:220). The ordinariness of hybridity in history leads us to ask the more important and interesting question of how and why hybridisation fails or is limited in some way.

Similar arguments have been put forward to challenge the simplistic notion that globalisation involves the increasing overcoming of boundaries and cultural homogenisation. Anna Tsing (2000) has argued for the importance of considering the terrain which cultural flows must navigate, and to discern the features that channel, direct, and limit their possibilities. In a similar vein, Geschiere and Meyer have called attention to the “dialectics of flow and closure”, or “flux and fix” that characterise contemporary cultural traffic (Geschiere and Meyer 1998:601-2). It is necessary to move beyond the notion that represents globalisation as a purely homogenising force that can only either be resisted or succumbed to. Instead, it is important to be aware of the micro-dynamics of cultural flows, where flows themselves produce the assertion of boundaries, and revitalise claims to difference. It is in this spirit that this chapter seeks to investigate the apparent hybridity and cultural cross-over of the Kathina ceremony and to illuminate instead the play of both flow and closure that are apparent in the negotiations that take place in this context.

Such interactions require the complex interplay of boundary crossing and boundary maintenance, of recognition and incommensurability, and of sameness and difference. In the context of the robe-offering ceremony, as with other cross-border religious interactions in southern Thailand, it is the complex negotiation that takes place, where boundaries and differences are simultaneously elided and evoked, problematised and realised, and where essentialised notions of national difference find their expression in the trope of hospitality.

### *The Sanctity of (National) Difference*

While all travel might be ‘sacred’ because it entails a structural departure from the ordinary and everyday, where “[f]undamental is the

contrast between the ordinary/compulsory work state spent 'at home' and the nonordinary/voluntary 'away from home' sacred state" (Graburn 1989:25), the act of movement in itself can be viewed then as a form of sacralisation. I would argue that the movement across national boundaries enhances this sense. National boundaries produce powerful performative effects *as* boundaries. They are tangible manifestations of the power of nation-states to create zones of disjuncture and the potential for crossings.

The fact that Thailand itself, and not merely its monks, has developed an aura of sacred power was clearly made by Graham.<sup>307</sup> As a long-term devotee, and 'serious practitioner', he has quite a low opinion of the usual Malaysian and Singaporean devotees, who, he considers, are primarily involved in a selfish search for personal power, rather than genuine spiritual development. However, his statement also reveals the sanctity of national difference:

Thailand has projected an image of supernatural power for years and years and years to Malaysia and Singapore. And as a result of which, you get a lot of devotees coming here due to their greed, anxiety, and their own motives, because they've heard you've either got a superman here or superman there. And, they feel that when they dawn on an amulet, so to speak, they are protected from various factors. It might be true, it might be not...

When I was young, when anybody talked about Thailand, they would always say if you want to get things done, or you wish to have the bad luck eradicated, go to Thailand. The monks are very powerful. So in Southeast Asia, it has been established that Thailand is the place.

Heather, the wife of Mr Lim, also evoked ethnic and national difference when describing her own motivations for patronising Thai monks. Like

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<sup>307</sup> The long-time Malaysian devotee of Thai Buddhism mentioned in previous chapters.

Graham, she has been coming to the Kathina at Wat Sai Khao for many years. She characterised her patronage of the ceremonies at Wat Sai Khao in terms of relative wealth between Malaysians and Thais; the Thai monks are quite poor and are in need of assistance, which Malaysians are able to provide. Therefore she comes up to donate money to them and thereby do a good deed. She was sceptical about the motives of some Thai monks. Many travel to Malaysia in search of money, she claimed. Indeed, as she told me, her own 'master',<sup>308</sup> Luang Phò Phan, and Dr Thawi were all exceptions to this. Her master's purity was testified to by the fact that he remains a virgin to this day.

In the context of the ceremony itself essentialised national categories were also deployed to produce a curious moment of solidarity-within-difference. During the speeches, much was made of the differences between the national groups, especially in terms of their material prosperity. The celebrity monk, Dr Thawi made a speech in English during the 1999 ceremony. At that time Thailand was still very much in the throes of the economic crisis of 1997. "We Thai are poor but we have faith," he stated. And: "Malaysians and Singaporeans have prospered because they rejected the IMF solution". This statement elicited a rousing round of applause from the audience, the only spontaneous outburst of this kind during the entire ceremony. This moment of cross-border solidarity was achieved precisely through the evoking the notion of the spiritually rich but materially poor, passive Thai succumbing to the will of foreigners. Through this manoeuvre he made use of this trope as a critique of Thai state policy as too 'hospitable' to the will of outsiders, while simultaneously performing the selfsame hospitality towards foreigners. National difference was paradoxically both evoked and elided – through common resentment towards the infantilising

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<sup>308</sup> Malaysians commonly use this word to refer to monks with whom they are in a devotional relationship.

pronouncements of the IMF. The Thai are constructed as inherently more spiritual compared to the Malaysians and Singaporeans, who are both seen to be more materialistic, and wealthy – and therefore inherently more *modern* (in the manner desired by the IMF). An attribute of this modernity, the implication seems to be, is the ability of the nation to manage its affairs as a fully mature member of the community of nations and to avoid the paternalistic, and patronising, intervention of the IMF.

### *Conclusions*

While in this thesis I have talked of 'religious tourism', this characterisation should be understood as provisional at best. The rites at Wat Sai Khao defy categorisation as either (genuine) pilgrimage or (staged) tourism. Though not specifically organised by the tourism industry, the number of participants unfamiliar with the ritual proceedings necessitated many elements common to the tourism experience – tour buses, events provided in 'packages', an insider/outsider 'tour guide' to provide enough rudimentary information to allow visitors to take part in the ritual proceedings. In many ways the 'bubble of home' phenomenon common to much mass tourism was reproduced, for example allowing Chinese ritual forms such as crackers and lion dances within the framework of the Kathina or the provision of a Chinese lunch. However, while the assumption has been that this kind of accommodation on the part of the host culture can be the most detrimental (e.g. Graburn 1989:35) and can lead to an erosion of boundaries and 'local culture', I would suggest that, in this case at least, it is precisely this accommodation that allows a sense of difference and separation to be maintained.

It would be easy to view this event as an example of cultural hybridity. However, I argue that far from representing an erosion of boundaries



categorical distinctions, especially those that intertwine ethnic and national identities, are highly significant in both the motivations for participation and the negotiation of the ceremony itself between its composite groups. As a counterpoint to the notion of hybridity, popular in contemporary theorisations of Thai religion, I consider a specific example of negotiations of self and other, sameness and difference, which not only leave boundaries intact but actually reinforce them. Instead of emphasising the blurring or 'overcoming' of boundaries, I try to capture the manner in which totalising entities, such as nation-states, underpin and facilitate cultural flows, and how they are utilised to make sense of and negotiate interactions.

Thus, through this case study I sought to complicate further the picture of 'religious tourism' that I have been developing over the last two chapters. As in the case of the Vegetarian Festival, the lines between tourist, pilgrim and long-term devotee are certainly blurred and particular kinds of relationships transform over time, so that, for example, tourists may develop long-standing devotional relationships as a result of a telling first encounter with a ritual specialist. Such relationships may come to be sustained over decades and form the basis for further 'recruiting' and development of a ritual event such as the Kathina.

An easy characterisation as a staged tourist event is also challenged by the fact that the robe-offering was not merely simulated for the sake of foreigners. Local devotees of Luang Phò Phan – Thai villagers from around Songkhla province and further afield – also took part in the ceremony. While sharing the same ritual space it was as though (at least) two parallel but separate ceremonies were carried out with occasional moments of solidarity and exchange.

Even the distinction between host and guest should also be problematised in this context. *Maechi* devotees of Luang Phò Phan travelled from their own monasteries to help with the food preparation, and one

female follower of Luang Phò Phan even travelled from her home in the USA to sell robes to the foreign visitors. The event was thus the site of a number of 'pilgrimages' even on the part of many whom I have described as 'hosts'. Thus, a simple distinction between a stable 'host' population versus a mobile 'guest' one cannot be made. Furthermore, the more experienced foreign participants in the ceremony, including myself, also came to behave as 'hosts', directing and guiding their less experienced companions.

Despite the fact that a stable distinction between insider and outsider, host and guest, cannot be maintained, and despite the apparent blending of 'Thai' and 'Chinese' religious forms, the event should not be thought of as simply 'hybrid'. Differences that mattered were asserted through a variety of discursive and spatial practices, sometimes subtle, as in the Thai women parodying the Chinese music, and sometimes explicit, as in the spatial separation of the lunch banquets and the evocation of national differences to 'explain' the reasons their involvement in the ceremony. Instead of ending with the recognition of hybridity my approach in this paper has been to address directly the deployment of totalities, such as national entities and essentialised ethnic differences, and to recognise the play of 'flux and fix', the manner in which boundaries are both fetishised and elided to facilitate exchanges while simultaneously maintaining a *sense* of stable distinction.

## Conclusion

### The *Bodhisattva* and the Borderland

During the course of my fieldwork the amulet magazine *Saksit* ran a series of articles entitled “In the Footsteps of the Great Bodhisattva Somdet Luang Phò Thuat”.<sup>309</sup> Written by a Buddhist monk Phra Sittha Chetawan, who had retraced the routes taken by the great *bodhisattva*, the articles showed him paying his respects at a number of the sacred sites associated with Luang Phò Thuat. As would be expected, Wat Chang Hai and Wat Pha Kho were featured prominently, as well as many other sites associated with Luang Phò Thuat’s journeys, such as the Sai Khao waterfalls in Pattani, the cave in Sabayoi in which he carved his name, the tree under which his umbilicus was buried, and so on. More surprisingly, some sites not associated with the dominant narrative of his life were also included. For example, Phra Sittha visited the “world’s largest Luang Phò Thuat” statue on the hill near Wat Sai Khao. The articles did not explicitly state that this was a site visited by Luang Phò Thuat, but the inclusion nevertheless affirmed it as a site of pilgrimage for those interested in ‘following in his footsteps’. This is just one example of the continuously emergent sacred geography associated with Luang Phò Thuat and the manner in which new locations are rendered part of his story through manifestations of his charisma.

In a sense, this thesis is founded on a similar act. As in the *Saksit* series, this thesis has also retraced Luang Phò Thuat’s footsteps. And like all such retracings, it does not merely reveal a stable, pre-existing reality but brings into view new elements of the (social and political) landscape. Like the

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<sup>309</sup> The Thai title of this series is *tam roi bat phra mahaphotiset jao phu prasoet luang pu thuat yiap nam thale jüt* (which translates as something like. “In the footsteps of the great bodhisattva, the most excellent lord Luang Pu Thuat who treads saltwater fresh”. Examples of this column can be found in issues 412-419 from the year 2000. I am not sure exactly how many issues this series contained.

objects of this study, this work is also a “social activity whereby ‘givenness’ is produced and transformed” (M. Jackson 1996:11).

The scope of focus, geographically and thematically, has meant that this study has been exploratory in the sense that it deals with broad processes in both ethnographic and historical contexts. By necessity, my research and analysis has not been characterised by the level of intimacies developed in localised settings that are usually considered the hallmark of ethnography. However I would assert that this alternative methodology and approach – dictated in part by the material itself – has resulted in productive juxtapositions that open up new spaces for thinking about topics that are often separated by analytic and disciplinary subject specialities, for example religion, tourism, the state, “Chineseness”, and transnational flows.

#### *The State Disaggregated, and Retained*

This thesis has sought to reveal a particular vision, and version, of southern Thailand, over which Luang Phò Thuat presides as a patron saint of sorts, at least for some of the population. As I have indicated, he does not hold this position for Muslims and most minority members. The version of the South he sustains is therefore partial and politically charged. I have approached the construction of this vision through the framework of state formation, suggesting that this is a disaggregated and dispersed phenomenon. Making use of Tony Day’s (2002) arguments about this process, I have argued for the need to bring culture into an analysis of the state, and to emphasise continuities across time instead of creating a strict periodisation between ‘premodern’ and ‘modern’ eras. I have also argued that it is necessary to move beyond a mere study of state apparatuses, officials and policy to gain a fuller understanding of various “state effects” (Trouillot 2001). Emphasising the processual nature of state formation – a

project that is never finished – I have also drawn attention to the dimension of popular participation. I have tried to emphasise the manner in which peripheral actors produce the state, rather than viewing state formation in the periphery purely as an expansion of the power of the centre. As Kemper notes, “virtually all studies of nationalism concentrate on what the centre does to the periphery” (Kemper 1999:30). Such studies therefore assume an opposition between national and local. By contrast, this thesis focuses on “the dialectic of local and national interests that produced the boundaries of national territory” (Sahlins 1989:8). In other words, state power, or state formation, in the periphery is not just the result of impulses arising from the margins or from the Centre as dominant source of power and influence, but is expressed through network of alliances, especially economic ones, which develop between the centre and the periphery. These networks are complex and, as McCargo (2006, 2007) has argued, apparently ‘local’ issues, such as the eruption of ‘separatist’ violence since 2004, can actually be product of machinations between networks of elites whose activities and influence are both ‘regional’ but also intimately connected to the centre.

This ethnographic, disaggregated approach to state formation means that it is unnecessary to oppose the institutions and apparatuses of the state to wider society. Following Gramsci (as related in Trouillot 2001), I do not try to oppose state and society, as has been the case in much discussion of ‘civil society’ in Thailand (e.g. Chatthip 1991). Instead, it is possible to consider how a range of activities at a number of levels contribute to a particular ‘state of being’. For example, instead of thinking of the process of ‘territorialisation’ purely in terms of state efforts to administer and control the population and resources of a particular geographical area, I consider the informal mechanisms by which a range of actors contribute to the process of state formation. By focussing on the stories, actions, rituals and sensibilities that attempt to make the Thai state ‘at home’ in the South I demonstrate that

this is a process of active participation at a number of levels. The production of territory involves the creation of roots and routine assumptions about the nature of the past and the relationship of a local population to location conceived within a wider national story. In other words, territorialisation not only involves the bureaucratic control of a region but the linking of its past to the past of the nation.

The historical genesis of a figure like Luang Phò Thuat demonstrates the importance of sites of potency in the landscape as they are connected and founded through the journeys of sacred ancestral figures. I have drawn attention to the visionary work of Buddhist monks and others who excavate, recycle and rearticulate details from the landscape and deploy local knowledge to tap its potency. Engaged in social poetics, they deploy “the debris of the past for all kinds of present purposes” (Herzfeld 1997:24). When successful, these skilled deployments underpin commonsense understandings of locality and belonging and, as it were, become a part of the landscape, the ground upon which one walks.

The charisma of locality and local figures contributes to the magic of the state (Taussig 1997). However, the presence of the state contributes in its own way to local sources of charisma. It is worth recalling here the teacher from Yala, who commented that the schools, hospital wings and other state institutions, constructed with the assistance of Wat Chang Hai and bearing Luang Phò Thuat’s name, allowed him to “see the charisma” (*hen barami*) of Luang Phò Thuat more clearly. In an endless feedback loop, the charisma of the local religious figure and the charisma of the state support each other simultaneously. Furthermore, as I have suggested, other ‘rational’ forms of knowledge, such as the use of historical texts (*tamra*) and the reproduction of images and myths in museum displays, support the ‘reality effect’ surrounding Luang Phò Thuat, bolstering his charisma by making it visible.

While this approach supports an understanding of the state which is much more diverse, decentred, and disaggregated than is often assumed, it is equally important to acknowledge that the state continues to lend itself to fetishisation (see Taussig 1997). Repeating Herzfeld's (1997) admonishment that an awareness of stereotypes in the social sciences should not blind us to their power in social life, it is also necessary to take into account the ongoing monolithic appearance of the state, the 'state idea' (Abrams 1988). Thus I am not arguing that the state is 'nothing more' than networks of interaction, as some aspects of Day's (2002) approach could imply.<sup>310</sup> On the contrary it is also essential to consider the 'something more' these networks produce to truly grasp the performative dimension of the state. In short, demystifying the state is only half the work required. The 'truth' of the state lies somewhere in the interaction between its many disaggregated networks and the appearance of unity.<sup>311</sup>

It is worth bearing in mind here Geertz's argument that charisma draws on 'centres' of various kinds, even when apparently antagonistic towards those centres. For Geertz, charisma is "a sign of involvement with the animating centres of society" (1977:151). Thus while the efflorescence of popular religious forms has been interpreted as a form of fragmentation in discussions of Thai religion, my approach has been to consider the underlying unities inherent within this proliferation, the extent to which the production of religious charisma continues to participate in the animating centres of society.

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<sup>310</sup> For example, he states that all states are "culturally constructed repertoires of practices reticulating out into the world at large, saved only from total dissolution into the multiplicity of power networks that constitute them by the magical and illusory boundaries that define their 'statehood'" (Day 2002:292). While I endorse the notion of networks, and the 'magical' qualities of states, Day's argument would suggest that states can be unmasked to reveal them as illusory and 'nothing more' than networks.

<sup>311</sup> As was discussed in chapter two.

In part this argument seeks to resist, or at least mediate, the impulse toward demystification. In contrast, I have tried to bear in mind Walter Benjamin's injunction that "truth is not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it" (cited in Taussig 1999:2). To this end, my method of argument has been more dialectical than empiricist, focussing on tensions within emergent processes rather than on trying to stabilise categories and analyse their properties.

This method applies not only to the question of state formation but other key terms focused on in this thesis, for example the value of 'Chineseness'.

#### *Chineseness, Commoditisation and Transnational Networks*

In keeping with a processual approach, this thesis has not involved focussing on 'the Chinese' or 'the Thai' as discrete ethnic groups. I have instead emphasised the manner in which signs and symbols, dispositions, and stereotypes are produced in different moments, for example within ritual contexts or the construction of spaces for tourist consumption. In these complex encounters, 'Thainess' and 'Chineseness' play central roles. Luang Phò Thuat has featured as a figure of such complex encounters as he embodies both 'Thai' and 'Chinese' qualities, providing a mechanism for their simultaneous expression.

By thinking about 'Thainess' and 'Chineseness' not as mutually exclusive qualities, but as identities that can be creatively deployed in different circumstances, I have considered the way they mediate relationships across difference. The 'Chineseness' that is expressed in the southern Thai borderland is not simply the expression of a local cultural identity of an ethnic minority. It is also produced as a quality in tourist and other commodity markets. Local businesses, religious specialists and



municipal governments deploy expressions of Chineseness to appeal to cross-border patrons. The Sinification of the landscape in Hat Yai and elsewhere is as much the product of tourism and pilgrimage across the border as an expression of the growing confidence and affluence of a local Sino-Thai population. But just as the production of Chineseness involves the production of 'sameness', it is also inflected by difference. Even in situations where local Sino-Thai produce Chinese rituals for Chinese patrons from Malaysia and Singapore, it is their 'Thai' qualities, or the changing hierarchies of value produced by crossing the border, which give the local events their attraction. Thus I have found that both 'Chinese-Chinese' and 'Thai-Chinese' religious interactions display a number of remarkably similar characteristics. In these interactions, national-based, as well as ethnically-based, distinctions and differences are evoked and utilised in negotiations of various kinds.

I have also suggested that transnational interactions should not be thought of as primarily destructive of national forms, despite the unorthodoxies that they often introduce. Recall the spirit medium in Hat Yai who said that if a monastery or shrine in southern Thailand appears to be prosperous it is due to Malaysian influence. As I have shown, Malaysian and Singaporean money is a primary mechanism allowing people to "see the charisma" of Buddhism in the borderland. These signs of prosperity, and appearances of charisma, generate further networks of patronage, investment and future development.

Dominant constructions of Thainess connect 'proper' Thai identity with orthodox Theravada Buddhism, properly reproduced through the institutions of the Sangha. A conventional Thai understanding would assume that transnational Chinese religious networks would tend towards unorthodoxy and fragmentation, especially those characterised by highly commoditised sites, objects and interactions. However, I am arguing the

opposite. In fact, tolerance of unorthodox Chinese forms is greater because they reproduce and support Buddhological space, albeit an unorthodox one. Throughout this thesis I have suggested that transnational factors and actors have had a constitutive role in the production of charisma in southern Thailand. It is my contention that transnational actors contribute to the production of a national self by means of various modes of participation. They help to perpetuate a certain version of the nation and so must therefore be considered agents of state formation in Day's terms. This recognition accords with recent histories of Thailand (e.g. Baker and Pasuk 2005) which treat various Chinese actors as central in Thai history rather than "symbolic pollutants" (Herzfeld 1997).

The production of sacred sites linked to the process of state building intersects with the commoditisation of these sites as tourist attractions or places of pilgrimage. Likewise, local knowledge and magical objects are mass produced and circulated both within Thailand and abroad. These processes of production and circulation do not float free but are grounded in local and national hierarchies of value. Locality takes on new value as it is incorporated into novel flows, but the materiality and specificity of the local continue to play a role. Local sites, materials, and the knowledge thereof are crucial to the production of charisma that allows objects to be desired and to circulate. Thus the processes that have led to the emergence of figures like Luang Phò Thuat, which are thoroughly concerned with the production of place and the 'grounding' of a particular world view, feed into novel patterns of circulation. The sacred geography of the nation-state provides the sacred infrastructure for novel processes of circulation of images, objects and people.

*The South Today, or the End for Luang Phò Thuat?*

Like many tourism-based networks, the networks of patronage and pilgrimage that characterise cross-border religious interactions are volatile and subject to the vagaries of local political and economic conditions (Smith 1989). Furthermore, commoditised religious production is subject to unstable cycles which see massive charisma wax and wane according to the whim of the market. For example, the Phra Jatukam Ramathep amulets that recently exploded onto the amulet scene and seemed to be the 'Next Big Thing' of the amulet trade already appear to be on the wane. In a typical boom and bust cycle, amulets which inspired scenes of pandemonium which led to one person being trampled to death appear to be rapidly losing favour. Temples that have invested large amounts of money in the amulets are left with enormous debts and masses of now unwanted amulets (*The Nation* 22 October 2007). By contrast, one of the distinctive features of Luang Phò Thuat has been his endurance and stability. He has been a popular figure both locally and in the wider amulet trade since the 1960s. Notably, in the wake of the 1997 economic crash, when the amulet trade as a whole experienced a downturn, that this was one of the few amulets that retained its value. This durability suggests Luang Phò Thuat is grounded in more enduring social relations. I would suggest he is grounded in the particular vision of the South as a unified entity that I have argued he both performs and sustains.

Despite Luang Phò Thuat's close connections to the production of the Buddhist nation-state in the South, I have argued that to view Luang Phò Thuat purely as a colonising figure misrepresents the tenor of his presence and the nature of the hopes that he embodies. He has undoubtedly been closely associated with the institutions and officials of the Thai state – the armed forces, the construction of schools and other state institutions – and he has both been instrumental in the production of Buddhological space and the

maintenance of both personal and political boundaries. However, the tenor of his presence is also one that embodies the possibility of rapprochement. His is the compassion of a *bodhisattva* which is capable, at least in theory, of creating a space of tolerance across difference.

This may offer a partial key to understanding the ubiquity of Luang Phò Thuat images, especially in the lower South. Images contain within themselves a world view and are therefore not neutral or objective (Morgan 2005). Is it in this infinite reproduction, in the omnipresence of the image in public (and private) life, that materialises an abstract authority. In a sense it is consumption which manifests that state, as the ubiquitous consumption of Luang Phò Thuat and other sacred images as commodities contributes to the process of state formation. And, as Kemper argues, “goods are put to new purposes. They allow people to think the nation” (1999:33).<sup>312</sup>

This is no simple matter of a state-authority imposing its vision on the population but rather a mass participation in state formation. The tension and violence in Patani (which is now out in the open) finds its symptom on the streets and in the shopping centres of Hat Yai and Songkhla in the mass-produced images of the local saint. Although not a part of the ‘deep South’, the border provinces in which the conflict is occurring, I would argue that there is a widespread investment in the notion of a unified South, even if this has never been a reality. However, if the violence continues and makes this notion of the South untenable, even to imagine, it may mean the end for Luang Phò Thuat.

If and when this comes to pass is uncertain. Until that time, the always-yet-to-come quality of the *bodhisattva*, continues represents the hope for unity. The *bodhisattva* represents a process of becoming and so is an apt metaphor for the ongoing process of state formation in the southern

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<sup>312</sup> It should be noted that Kemper only applies this argument to ‘Third World’ countries. I would argue though that this notion can be applied more broadly.

borderland. Perhaps then, Luang Phò Thuat's ubiquity in the South better represents the longing for unity within the open-ended process of state formation, asserted precisely because it is not (yet) true.



## Appendix 1

### Guest Arrivals at Accommodation Establishments in Hat Yai. January-March 1999

Nationality	Total	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.
Thai	157,398	45,750	45,800	65,848
Malaysia	102,065	33,832	31,950	36,283
Singapore	48,906	14,378	15,468	19,060
China	679	204	260	215
Hong Kong	863	137	225	501
Japan	4,125	1,228	1,128	1,769
Korea	313	80	175	58
Taiwan	207	86	24	97
Austria	90	30	28	32
Belgium	106	51	36	19
Denmark	526	198	150	178
France	665	195	287	183
Germany	1,278	401	492	385
Italy	429	172	120	137
Netherlands	391	138	121	132
Sweden	823	318	242	263
Switzerland	232	75	59	98
U.K.	2,555	850	743	962
U.S.A	1,959	599	751	609
Canada	510	197	162	151
Middle East	415	252	145	18
Australia	1,179	384	366	429
New Zealand	160	59	43	58
India	131	56	30	45
Others	16,404	6,759	5,039	4606
Total	342,409	106,429	103,844	132,136

Source: TAT Statistics





## Glossary of terms

Terms are Thai unless otherwise noted.

Ajan	Master, teacher, professor, learned monk
Anam nikai	“Vietnamese sect”; along with the Jin nikai, one of two Mahayana Buddhist orders officially recognised by the Thai Sangha
Aphinihan	“Miracle”
Arahant (Pali) Phra arahant (Thai)	Enlightened disciple of the Buddha. The pinnacle of achievement within an orthodox Theravada Buddhist framework.
Bap	Demerit, negative karma. Opposite of “Bun”
Bodhisattva (Sanskrit) Bodhisatta (Pali) phra photisat (Thai)	Buddha-to-be. In Theravada tradition refers to earlier incarnations of Gotama Buddha and future Buddha, Sri Ariya Mettraya
Bot	Ordination hall
Bun	Merit, accumulated positive karma
(Bun) barami	Accumulated merit of certain extraordinary individuals, associated with religious and/or political excellence and legitimacy; often translated as “charisma”
Chao nam	“Water folk”; Sea Gypsies
Chedi	Reliquary stupa
Jin nikai	“Chinese sect”; along with the Anam nikai, one of two Mahayana Buddhist orders officially recognised by the Thai Sangha
Kamma (Pali) Kam (Thai)	Karma, or ‘action’; the principle of moral cause and effect
Kathina (Pali) Thòt kathin (Thai)	Robe-offering ceremony
Keji ajan	“Magic” monks; monks with a reputation for supra-normal powers.
Kris / keris (Malay)	Sacred knife in Malay traditions

Khatha	Sacred formula; mantra
Khaek	“Guest”. A derogatory term generally used for Muslims and people of South Asian origin.
Khon song (jao)	Spirit medium
Khon tai	Southerner
Khvam pen thai	“Thainess”
Kiao	Ritual palanquin for carrying statues of deities
Krap	Act of bowing, e.g. before sacred images
Kuti	Monk’s dwelling
Lak müang	City pillar
Luang Phò / Luang Pu	“Venerable father” / “Venerable grandfather”; colloquial title of respect given to respected, usually senior, monks
Luang phò thuat	Southern Thai title given to “ancestral” monks considered to have enduring spiritual presence
(Kan) lui fai	Firewalking (ceremony); carrying sacred objects over hot coals / fire
(Kan) lui nam	(Ceremony) of carrying sacred objects through water
Luk jin	Sino-Thai; lit. “Chinese children”
Luksit	Disciple
(Khon) Malayu	Malay (people)
Maechi	White-robed female ascetics; Buddhist “nuns”
Mahanikai	“Great sect”; majority sect of the Thai Buddhist Sangha
Manora (nora)	Southern Thai ritual dance/healing tradition
Metta	Compassion (e.g. of bodhisattva)
Mò du	Generic term for provider of sacred services, e.g. horoscope reading or other forms of divination
Müang	Premodern Tai political unit
Munnithi	Charitable foundation
Nam mon	Holy water

Nangtalung	Southern Thai shadow puppet tradition
Nibbana (Pali)	The extinction of suffering that marks the end of the cycle of birth-death-rebirth or samsara
Nipphan (Thai)	
Nimit	Vision, often occurring during meditation
Ngo Pa	Sakai; negrito forest-dwellers
Patani	Former Malay Muslim kingdom. Territory roughly corresponding to contemporary Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and part of Songkhla
Pattani	The province of Pattani
Phak tai	Southern region of Thailand
Pak tai	The South; the fourteen (provinces) of the South
Phi	Ghost
Phansa	Buddhist lent; rains retreat
Phra	Monk, deity, Buddha, respected spirit; title of respect conveying sacred nature of being
Phra khrüang	Amulet
Phra Pa	Forest monk
Phu Mi Bun	“Person with merit”. Associated with millennialism. Akin to bodhisattva.
Phuttha phanit	“Commercial Buddhism”
Pit thòng	To attach gold leaf to a sacred object as a devotional act
Ple	Cradle
(Kan ) pluk sek / phuttaphisek	Ritual of sacralisation or enchantment of objects by Buddhist monks
Rüang lao	Oral story; folk tale
Run	Batch of amulets or statues. Images produced in same batch are generally considered to have similar qualities and efficacy
Sai sin	White cord used to conduct sacred power in certain ceremonies
Sak yan	Tattooing of sacred symbols

Saksit	“Magical” potency, efficacy
Samnak song	Buddhist sanctuary
San jao	Joss house; spirit medium’s residence / place of business; Brahmanical or animist shrine
Sangha (Pali)	Community of monks; monkhood
Satsana	Religion
Sema	Boundary stones, marking boundaries of sacralised Buddhist space
Setthi	Rich man
(Siang) siam si	(Casting) divining staves, a form of fortune telling of Chinese origin but widely practised in Thai temples
Sing saksit	Sacred objects
Somdet	Royal title
Somdet jao	“Royal Lord”. Title given to certain legendary monks in Satingphra region said to have been monastic landlords.
(Phitthi) song nam	Lustration (ceremony)
Tai hong	To die a violent or inauspicious death
Thesakan (thü sin) kin je	Chinese Vegetarian Festival, most commonly associated with cities of Phuket and Trang
Tamnak	Spirit medium’s residence
Tamra	Authoritative texts; in this thesis the term primarily refers to royal decrees of land endowments
Thai Islam	Politically correct term for Thai Muslims
Thammajarik	“Wandering Dhamma”; 1960s project to use Buddhist monks in conversion of non-Buddhist hill people
Dhammaraja (Pali) Thammarat (Thai)	Righteous ruler in Theravada Buddhist tradition
Thammathut	“Envoys of Dhamma”; 1960s project to use Buddhist monks in domestication of national periphery and fight against communism
Thammayut(anikai)	“Adherents of the Dhamma”; minority, royal-

	sponsored sect of the Thai Buddhist Sanhga
Tham bun	To make merit
Thesaban	Municipality
Thesamontri	Municipal councillor
Thòt pha pa	“Forest robes” ceremony, similar to Kathina but can be performed any time of year
Thuat	Lit. “great grandfather”; ancestor; (in southern Thailand) ancestral spirit
Thudong	Ascetic practice undertaken by wandering monks. Involves extended periods in remote areas and a strict ascetic regime
Wai	Act of respect, typically placing palms of hands together and bowing slightly
Wai khru	To pay respect or thanksgiving to teacher, master, and source of sacred power
Wan	Forest plants used in production of powder to make amulets
Wat	Combination of Buddhist monastery and temple
Wihan	Shrine hall
Vinaya (Pali)	Buddhist discipline. The code of monastic conduct
Winai (Thai)	
Winyan	Spirit
Yan	Sacred writing / symbols



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