

RELIGION: WHY AND TO WHAT ENDS? DISCUSSING CHANGING MODES OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN SOUTHERN THAILAND AND BEYOND

Draft (not to be quoted)

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As the villagers always pointed out to me, all religions teach to be a good person, religion is defined here as the interaction of ritual practice, cosmology and world religion as well as the synthesis and assemblages to which these components merge. My sympathy lies with the people who defend the concept of strong community and cosmologically embedded religion against the odds of orthodoxy and nationalism. In this paper, I will explore changing modes of religious authority in Patthalung and in Pattani provinces by considering the processes of and discourses about syncretism and anti-syncretism (Stewart & Shaw 1994).¹ My assumption is that discourses about syncretism and anti-syncretism involve strong moral judgements on what is right and wrong in religion and concern the power to define authority.

In Southern Thailand, traditional religious authority is very much undermined in the face of serious political and economic disruption. By tradition, we mean historically grown ritual knowledge, representing the social relations of a society. The term tradition is not unproblematic as traditions are also invented by warlords to legitimate their claims on resources or as fundamentalist movements are typically involved in exercises of "traditioning" the past (Antoun 2001). Traditional religious authority draws on and is embedded in the cosmology and value system of local society in difference to modern approaches which draw on texts from outside the community. Thus, in orthopraxis, the community members adhere to a common set of values, in which world religion is inculturated by giving in a synthesis of world religion and cosmological ideas. Political tensions that result from processes of religious purification and resistance characterize the religious dynamics of modern Southeast Asian societies and impact on the authorisation of religious and social practice.

All factors of modernity affecting people's lives tend to weaken traditional authority, while modern adjusted authority is thriving on the instrumentalization of religion for political or business ends. As Jeremy Kemp (Kemp 1988, 1989) argues against the *Watthanatham Chumchon* (Community Culture) intellectual school, local village society was never the autonomous bounded unity that urban intellectuals and NGO-activists imagined. For the Community Culture School, the good traditions of the villagers should be defended against the evil intervention of the state Leviathan which tends to weaken the community and which leaves the community in disorientation.² Kemp argues that the interaction of the village and the state is probably as old as the village itself and that the relationship of village and state was characterised by a long history of close interaction. And yet, neither Thai scholars nor Kemp seem to take the religious dynamics of state and globalisation in the last 30 years or so into account.

The combined forces of national integration and market expansion encourage the rationalization of religious authority in the sense of Weber, and put traditional religious authority into a marginal position. Working in Patthalung, Southern Thailand, Chatthip Nartsupah has talked about a specific Southern Thai cultural identity (Chatthip 1999), without taking into account the religious dynamics, the politics of Buddhist hegemony in the region or the specific identity of Muslims in Thailand. One of the key questions for the dynamics of syncretism, conversion and religious purification in the region is the hierarchical relationship of autochthonous cosmological religion, Theravada Buddhism and Islam and the question of a shared culture of Buddhists and Muslims.

¹ See the introduction by Stewart & Shaw (1994: 1-26) for a good overview of the debate.

² See the contributions in Hoadley & Gunnarsson (1996) for a good overview.

Here, the question is if the traditional cosmological system of the village allowed for exchanges between houses and villages, e.g. marriages, crossing ethnic or religious boundaries. In Southern Thailand, the ethnification of religion was always an important factor influencing the relations of Buddhists and Muslims. Malays tend to be Muslims and Thai tend to be Buddhists. Although there were always cases where Malays were Buddhist or Hindu or Muslims who shared many of the cosmological values of Buddhists, and Thai who are being Muslim like the Sam-Sam of Satun and Kedah, there is a strong essentialisation of Malay Muslim and Thai Buddhist identification that tend to be reinforced and escalate in the propaganda of the conflict parties. As Buddhism was always associated with the Thai monarchy and the Thai state, and the Buddhist monasteries regarded as outposts of the Thai state in the hostile Malay Muslim population, the Buddhist population in the South identified with the Thai nation and the Thai king, while the for the Muslim population, the Islamic networks popping up in the 1970s and 1980s were crucial for their survival and reproduction as a minority.

In these processes of ethnification of religion, the hierarchy and representation of autochthonous cosmology in relation to state religion and world religion changed and shaped the character of religious authority. In the border provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, the first decisive intervention of the state was the period of nationalist chauvinism in the 1930s. The first scholarships were provided to Muslims in Thailand by Nasser's Egypt as late as 1970.

As for Theravada Buddhism, the old monasteries of Wat Prathat, Wat Khian and Wat Phra Kho were established in close association with the Thai monarchy, the Thai Sangha and the Ceylonese chapter of the Sangha. In the period of expansion, the grip of the national Sangha was reinforced in the end of the 19th century through centralization, but the local chapter of the Sangha had to incorporate nearly all of the autochthonous religion, especially the values and beliefs relating to ancestor worship. The integration of cosmological beliefs was not only due to the tolerant nature of Theravada Buddhism, but due to the strategy of the Buddhist sangha to incorporate traditions and to put them under the authority of the Buddhist monks. Syncretic practice is valued by the Sangha as tradition which are not harmful to Buddhism, because the Buddhist image is superior to the ancestor spirits and ancestor spirits are domesticated by Buddhist recitation. Many of the arts of Southern Thailand, such as shadow puppet theatre (Nang Talung) and dance theatre Manooora, have a close association with Buddhism and are associated with sacred, old temples. Nevertheless, the synthesis is more ambiguous in the arts as Nang Talung and Manooora remain faithful to their cosmological origin (Pittaya 1992).

The resulting localization of Buddhism also applied to Islam, but in the Muslim communities, in the absence of a strong Islamic authority, debates and social struggles emerged with the intensification of South-South relationships of Southern Thailand, Northern Malaysia and Southeast Asia with South Asia and the Middle East.³ Going back to Fraser's ethnography of Rusamilae (Fraser 2004), the Imam coexisted with the Bohmo and the elders. While the Imam decided on matters of religious ritual and education, the Bohmo applied the cosmological system for traditional healing. The Pondok centred on the religious teachers and on the Islamic literature translated from Arabic to Jawi (kitab Jawi). Especially in the 1970s, 1980s, and intensifying in the 1990s, the Islamic field has expanded widely, with multiple groups competing over the space of the mosque and religious authority. Fraser discussed the debate between a kaum tua (old faction) and kaum muda (new faction), representing the traditional and reformist, modernist understanding of Islam. But in the 1990s, I have described the multiplication of Islamic actors and missionaries in the Islamic field, and the entry of the Indian-Pakistani transnational Dawa-Movement Tablighi Jamaat al-Dawa (Horstmann 2007). The Tablighi Jamaat has established a presence in every Muslim community in Southern Thailand, with hundreds of followers from Patani, Yala and Narathiwat visiting the Yala markaz besar every Friday. The followers are walking the roads in their white robes and turbans from village to village even in times of

³ On South-South linkages, see, for example Dennerlein/ Reetz (2007)

heated violence. The membership of the Tablighi Jamaat is rapidly increasing, resulting in fierce competition as some of the traditional Imams of the Kaum Tua faction do not accept the claims of young aggressive Tablighi leaders. The Tablighi Jamaat does preach a radical rupture with the ritual practice of the Muslim communities, a particular pious and frugal lifestyle and a full commitment to religion. The followers go themselves on missionary tours, discovering the Islamic world per foot. The Tablighi Jamaat adds to Wahabi, Sunna and Shia missionaries who all have established their own Islamic schools and their own private Islamic seminaries. Again, traditional leaders are very sceptical about the business attitude of modern religious teachers who collaborate with foundations and missionaries from the Gulf-states. The modern private Islamic seminaries give no credentials to the Islamic literature, but to the interpretations of Islam according to the model of the Islamic centre. I thus highlight the tensions within the Muslim public sphere.

And yet, changing religious authority also finds cultural niches to appear in a new dress and to proliferate on the cultural market of religion. We want to stress this kind of dynamics and movement by offering some case-studies of religious authority and leadership in Southern Thailand, drawing on ongoing fieldwork in southern Thailand, by taking into account the moral judgements, political assumptions and implications of religion and charisma.

In Southern Thailand, the borderly disorder of Patani, Yala and Narathiwat has to be considered just as the region of Nakhonsrithammarat, Songkhla and Patthalung in the Songkhla Lake region with which the conflict zone of Patani is compared. While local communities are obviously now driven into the violence by the rapid militarization of the local Buddhist population and the ugly attacks on civilian persons and retaliation by Malay people, the relations of Buddhists and Muslims in Ban Tamot, Patthalung province, where I stayed in 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007, seems to be characterized by harmonious relations between Buddhists and Muslims. Traditional approaches of dealing with conflict seem to be particularly apt and interesting in our context and it is this theme which among others, I like to focus.

Ban Tamot lies in the fertile valley between the Banthat mountain range and Thalesap Songkhla. In Tamot, the relationship of Buddhists to Muslims is 60% to 40%. Marriages between Buddhists and Muslims occur regularly, producing kinship ties between Buddhists and Muslims according to either Thai or Malay kinship systems. In the construction of their history, Tamot used to be a Muslim settlement before the arrival of Thai Buddhist villagers. The main temple, Wat Tamot is constructed on the remains of a Muslim cemetery. In Ban Tamot, a unique ritual is taking place on the 15th of April every year as part of the Tambun Wang New Year celebrations on the old cemetery of To Mot and To Lamat (Machmudh and Mohamad?), where the dead of the Muslim community lie side by side with the conspicuous tombs of the Thai and Thai Chinese. In this ritual, both Buddhist and Islamic religious leaders do take part and give meaning, laying great emphasis on the fact that Buddhists and Muslims are related by kinship relations as nearly every Buddhist household has a Muslim ancestor on the Thuat level that is, the parents of the grandparents level.

The Muslim Imams of several villages begin their prayer in the Islamic sala after greeting the Buddhist villagers. After this, the Buddhist monks perform their recitation in a much bigger sala on the top of the hill. Imam Leb is then invited in the Buddhist sala to give a speech in front of the Buddhist sala and eating monks. The Imam emphasizes that Buddhist and Muslim villagers are tied to each other by kinship relations and that there should be exchange and no separation between them. To Imam Leb and Phra Ajaarn Somchai both give interviews for the journalists who visit Tamot for the occasion. Buddhist elders and natural leaders join the Muslims side by side for their doa prayers along the tomb of To Lamaat. In the afternoon, after all ritual is completed, the families assemble at the graveyards to consume food which they prepared for the ritual. The exchange of food between Buddhists and Muslims is meaningful as the families accept the food of the other party.

The Thai Buddhists and the Muslims have a slightly different version of the same ritual. For the Thai Buddhists, the ritual is an occasion to send merit to their loved dead and also to reciprocate with the power of the ancestor gods and spirits (*kaebon*). In the understanding of the Thai Buddhists, the ancestor spirits as a collective take care of the happiness of the living. *Thuat Mot*, a kinship term from the Thai matrilineal kinship system, is the guardian spirit of the village and the founder of the world. Everybody who enters the village has to greet the owner of the village. But the ancestors do not only grant wishes of the living, they can also strike with illness or accident if they are neglected. If wishes have been granted, the person is obliged to feed the guardian spirit.

The ritual of two religions is supposed to bring Buddhists and Muslims together. In modern times, the *Thuat* is worshipped more by the Buddhists than by the Muslims. The Buddhists are aware that the guardian spirit of the village is Muslim and that his origin is from the Malay world (Kelantan). In the ritual of two religions, Buddhist villagers visit both Buddhist and Muslim ancestors as they are aware of their Muslim descent (*chüasai Islam*). Buddhist villagers believe that on that day, two religions are present in one person. The Islamic Imams and the Buddhist monks visit the graveyards where the villagers assemble to send their prayers. Buddhist villagers assembling at the graveyard either wai the monks or pray to Allah. Only on that particular day, Buddhist villagers perform both Buddhist and Islamic prayers for the dead.

The context of the ritual is changing, adjusting to modernity, and to Buddhist hegemony. The Buddhist leadership circle calls on the Imams of the Muslim communities of Ban Klong Nui and Ban Kuan to participate in the ritual, while other Imams do not come. To Imam Man, now over 80 years old, who used to lead the ritual in honour of the Muslim guardian spirit for many years, argues under the influence of reformist thinking that Muslims are not allowed to participate in a Buddhist ritual or to worship a guardian spirit. 2007 is the first year that he decided to stay at home. In a communication after the ritual, Imam Leb complained also that the constant noise of firecrackers, market and manora singing was most disturbing to the performance of the Islamic ritual. He also suggested that while Buddhist villagers and leaders showed their goodwill by joining praying Muslims, they cannot actually benefit as Non-Muslims. The tiny minority of a dozen Muslims participated to visit their dead and to show their goodwill. The large majority was made up of Buddhist villagers who assembled as large families at the graveyards of their ancestors to commemorate the ritual of two religions.

The ritual of two religions in Tamot follows the Buddhist Tambun Wang merit-making activities and precedes the Kao Gubo (Entering the Islamic Cemetery). The Entering of the Cemetery is also led by Imam Leb in Ban Klong Nui and the Muslim villagers bring their favourite food to feed the spirits of the dead. This is a much contested syncretic ritual and regarded as a marker of traditional Muslim culture. The ritual is celebrated at different dates in the 6th lunar month of April in different communities, but Ban Hua Chang is not doing the ritual and Ban Kuan Klong Yai is doing the ritual at the mosque. The Tablighi Jamaat would not allow their followers to participate in the ritual that they consider *bida'a*.

The very interesting ritual is part of exchange systems between Buddhists and Muslims in Ban Tamot that includes all domains of society and culture and that centres on the Temple committee. The temple committee is a religious committee, with the Vice-abbot Phra Ajaarn Somchai in the centre of a campaign of Buddhist revitalization and social activism that focuses on environmental problems. In the temple committee, disputes within the community are settled without applying the state's monopoly of violence. Muslim leaders (To Imam Leb) are member of the temple committee as well and are consulted if needed. Religious leaders and elder people constitute the leadership of the community as represented by the membership of the temple committee. Buddhists and Muslims defend their natural resources against intervention from outside and are engaged in a waterbank project, a project on community forest and a project on reforestation. The village community is using religious authority and the revitalization of culture and tradition to construct a strong community organization that is able to deal productively with conflict, ethnic and religious difference and that is able to reject development policies of the state that does not conform to its values. Religious authority is used in a most

productive way. Buddhist education is another cornerstone of Wat Tamot's active participation in development. The temple is known far beyond the boundaries of the village and young boys in the age of 12 are invited to ordain as novices, to learn Buddhist recitation, dharma and the moral precepts. Young people come in buses on Buddhist days to learn about Buddhist festivities. Thus, the temple helps the villagers to market their fruits, to produce eco-sound pesticides, to plant trees, and to engage in merit-making activities. The small sala in the compound of the temple is the main meeting point and the morning café for temple members. Conversion from Buddhism to Islam is regarded as a loss of a soul for Theravada Buddhism, but dispute is avoided as potential converts ordain as Buddhist monks before conversion or reconvert to Buddhism after formal conversion to Islam. When the mosque in Ban Klong Nui needed funds for the renovation, Phra Ajaarn Sunthorn, the monks and the laity bring a money-tree to express their benevolence to the Muslim project. Unfortunately, the Buddhist images disappeared from the former Buddhist holy cave in Ban Hua Chang where *thudong* monks used to live in ascetic lifestyle. Nobody knows who has stolen the Buddhist images, but it is believed that they contained some valuable items.

The revitalization of Theravada Buddhism sheds interesting light on religious authority in Southern Thailand. People from the border provinces in Patani sometimes come to visit Tamot on the ritual of two religions to study the way of life and to look for the reasons of harmonious coexistence. Looking closely, the ritual of two religions is now much more a Buddhist ritual than an Islamic one and Imam Leb also insists that there are Islamic rituals in which Buddhists cannot participate. Muslim villagers are much less interested in the community forest or the water-bank project than their Buddhist counterparts. Imam Leb also has to defend his authority against the encroachment of the Tablighi Jamaat that threatens to end relationships across religious boundaries. While To Imam Leb is committed to the local, the Tablighi Jamaat is Muslims on the move that is committed to some idealized utopian transnational space. The Buddhist temple committee in Tamot makes no secret in their emphasis on Buddhism as main vehicle of development, but the abbot is not alienating Muslims in neighbouring villages.

A nora rong kruu ceremony in Tamot in May 2007 illustrated the ambiguous integration of Buddhists and Muslims. The business of nora rong kru in Southern Thailand is booming, with Nora faculties being hired every week from May to September. As the daughter of the household in Ban Tamot is going to marry, her mother invites a Nora-faculty to receive the benevolence of her ancestor-spirits. In the Nora rong kru ceremony, the nora-master is inviting the great Nora-ancestors to come down from heaven to earth to see their descendants and to communicate with them. The benevolent ancestors come down and invite their good descendants to dance with them Nora for three consecutive nights. In Tamot, the host family had Buddhist, Chinese as well as Islamic ancestors and the spirit-mediums became possessed by all of them. Nora rong kru is able to integrate cosmological, Buddhist and Muslim elements, representing the local history of Southern Thailand. However, the change in Muslim communities results in the rapid decrease of Nora performances in Muslim houses.

In Panare, the majority is made up of Malay Muslims, but there is an old settlement of Buddhist villages. Like Tamot, Panare is rich in natural resources. Nevertheless, poverty is rampant among young and unemployed Malays.

On 16 October 2004, 01:45, an unknown number of assailants broke in to murder a Buddhist monk and burn down their living quarters at Promprsait temple, Mu 2, Ban Koh, Bannok Subdistrict, Panare District, Pattani, Phra Kaew Kusaro, a monk, was found nearly decapitated in front of his quarter. Nearby, two motorcycles were found burned. Bodies of two temple boys, Narong Kham-Ong, age 17, and Sataporn Suwannarat, age 15, were found. Both were from the village and both bodies bore bullet wounds before they were burned. The authorities managed to make an arrest in the case and obtained a confession from the perpetrator (NRC Report 2006, pp. 52-53.).

I went into the village to follow up the case and to learn something about Thai-Malay relations before the incident. I went with Sabri, a Malay-Muslim from Mayo who used to teach in a Thai government primary school in Panare. He is a very good friend of a Thai villager who returned from his rice-fields. The Thai villager used to work in the post-office for 30 years and used to meet Sabri from early on. The whole village was in alarm and the crowds came to stare at us and to learn about our purpose of visiting.

Friendships such as between Khun Leg and Sabri are not the exception as Thai villagers organized a *ngan liang* to help Muslims to perform the Hadj as Khun Leg told us. Marriage between Buddhists and Muslims existed whereby groom and bride either converted to Buddhism or to Islam. However, relationships quickly deteriorated after the massacre at Wat Promprasit as Khun Leg pointed out. Today, a tank comes everyday to the temple and soldiers follow the monks on their alms-round. Thai Buddhists at the village are afraid of leaving the house and think about moving from the area. I got competing narratives from Thai and Malay sources on the murderous act.

Leg and his wife pointed out that military rushed in after the incident and were quick in searching the Islamic school and arresting young Malays. They noted that the military found weapons in the school. Sabri pointed out that he did not believe the story. No weapons were found, he stated. I brought up the issue to leaders and supporters of BERSATU whom I met in Hamburg on a regular basis. They told me that BERSATU observed the infiltration of temples with fake monks. Temples are traditionally a sanctuary free from violence and strife as Chaiwat was arguing in his report. The BERSATU leaders noted that the government staffs the temple with spies or informants. Moreover, they received information that fake monks at Promprasit temple were dealing with drugs and that the massacre was the result of internal conflict in the illegal economy. They further stated that the Thai intelligence service would commit such acts to raise hatred against the Malays. They also stated that Malay Muslims would never do such a cruel act. The conspiracy theory is widespread among Malays. But Sabri is also aware about Malay criminals in his village who used to stay in prison for drug offences. These young criminals also are active in violent networks. Yet, he is afraid of telling me that militants are in his village, too and says that assailants come are strangers from outside the community. His village is a good illustration of internal division and strife. The district office member is also a follower of the Tablighi Jamaat as is the shopkeeper. Haji S. is a local *naklaeng* who used to stay in the forest and is known as a leader who has the power to solve disputes. He is also going with the Tablighi Jamaat who controls the mosque. The young criminals are not going with the Tablighi Jamaat. After I left the village, there was a massacre at the district office and all members present were brutally shot. Who was responsible? The example of Mayo illustrates the weakening of the communities and the new spaces of governance, religion and legitimacy.

In Panare, I relate to Ding, the son of a charismatic guru, whom I have known in Hamburg. His father is a traditional guru of the *Kaum Tua* who leads a small pondok, teaching kitab Jawi and the Al Quran. The guru refused any intervention of the Thai ministry of education in his school and was under close supervision. The guru who passed away recently was the undisputed leader in the village, his pondok being the cultural centre, similar to Wat Tamot in Patthalung province. His staunch rejection of Thai secular education brought the guru in opposition to the Thai state who suspected the guru of collaborating with BERSATU. The guru nevertheless taught his students both Malay and Thai in order to escape poverty in Thailand. His traditional position did not provide him with financial support, but with a solid reputation among Malays. He rejected the Tablighi Jamaat whom he called a new illness of the Malay Muslims. When I visited, the community was on constant alarm about incoming military.

An analysis of religious authority thus examines the relationship of world religion and autochthonous religion. Anthropologists rightly pointed out the weaknesses of concepts of cultural purity and wholeness that were blind towards agency and change or deemed transformation as superficial (Marcus). On the other hand, post-modern anthropology questioned the presence of values in a society. I suggest focusing on the processes and moral discourses of syncretism to see the adaptation

and adjustment of religion and ritual to the forces of modernity. By giving due attention to agency and change, we can decipher how people are able to appropriate religion according their own needs.

The villagers in Ban Tamot use every Buddhist ritual to remember their ancestors as key part of their religious dedication. Before ordination, young men are encouraged to marry with the female Thuat to ensure a smooth passage. We can also decipher how religious movements and institutions aim to clean and purify religion and ritual from cosmological elements or to domesticate the spirits. This dynamic interaction of cosmology and world religion has huge impact on religious authority or authorized cultural memory in Southern Thailand and beyond. While the example of Ban Tamot shows that monks can use their authority and charisma in society, the state has always aimed at using the temples for control of the population. The Buddhaization of tradition is quickly advancing, putting Muslim ancestor spirits under Buddhist control. However, many temples seem to fall in a kind of irrelevancy in the face of social transformation as the monks are not able to help people in their cultural crisis. The community does not have any expectations for the monks that go beyond their mediation of religious merit. Some monks are known for their magical capabilities in magic or healing, some temples are venerated for their reputation of hosting Buddhist saints. In Tamot, the temple attempts to regain much of the authority that has been lost in numerous communities. In Patani, soldier monks are a new type of monks, transforming the temple into a military base. As for Islam, normalizing influences weaken and divide Muslim communities, engendering social struggles and competition in the Islamic field. In the violence, a crude version of Islamism is used by the militants to justify their violent operations, prepared to kill Muslims branded as spies or traitors. Although many of the folk elements of Patani Islam have been purged, some elements, such as Manoora Khaek, persist.

In the violent conflict, instrumentalizations of ultra-nationalist and radical positions of religion are on the rise. The space of syncretic religion beyond political violence is dwindling fast. It is precisely this space of traditional religious authority that provides the sanctuary of exchange that is free from conflict and violence. The dismantling of this centre of community authority leaves very little space of traditional approaches to conflict transformation or of dealing with difference. Ultra-nationalist discourses and anti-Islamic propaganda by Buddhist monks and claims to Islamic utopian communities by missionary *dawa* movements do fill the vacuum that the dissolution of traditional religious authority produced.

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