



South and Southeast Asia Culture and Religion

The SSEASR Journal

South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Culture and Religion
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From the Editorial Board

We are extremely happy to see the fourth issue of the SSEASR Journal coming out. It took this year long to finalise the publication due to the late submission of the corrected/improved files from the respective writers. The Board also waited for long to shape up this issue. However, we pledge, the next issue of the Journal would be released in the month of March only.

The articles selected for this issue are mostly from those who had presented their papers at the 3rd SSEASR Conference, Bali. But as stated frequently by us, our Journal seeks articles and research work from any scholar working on the subject related to the study of culture and religion of any part of South and Southeast Asia. Some of the articles therefore reflect upon this desirability of ours.

We have added the abstract and keywords before each the article. It would help the reader to grasp the main focus of the article concerned, and would also add up to our standard.

As you happen to see this Volume, our parent organisation International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) is going to hold its 20th Quinquennial World Congress this year in mid-August at Toronto. We expect a larger participation from our region. At the same time, you should also not forget the forthcoming 4th SSEASR Conference, Thimphu, Bhutan in late June 2011. We all wish you happy conference experience in the coming months!

May 2010

Editorial Board: Brief Introduction

Arvind Sharma, McGill University, Montréal, CANADA

Dr. Arvind Sharma is a Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University in Montréal, Canada (previously at the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney, Australia). Dr. Sharma specialises in the study of Hinduism and has written extensively on the subject. A world class authority on Religious Studies, Prof Sharma's recent works include **The World's Religions After September 11 [Four Volumes]**; (and **Part of the Problem, Part of the Solution: Religion Today and Tomorrow** (both from Westport: Praeger Publishers 2008), **The Philosophy of Religion: A Sikh Perspective (New Delhi: Rupa & Co. 2007)** **Religious Studies And Comparative Methodology: The Case For Reciprocal Illumination** (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), **A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion** (Springer Verlag 2006) He is consulted by both the United States and Indian governments on matters of culture and ethics in Hinduism.

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, Nakhon Pathom, THAILAND

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is one of the most prominent scholars on religion and women in Thailand. Before becoming a practicing Bhikkhuni, she has been worldwide known as Prof. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh and was **Professor of Philosophy and religion at Thammasat University, Bangkok for over 30 years**. She graduated in Religion at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario and got Ph.D. in the same field from Magadh University, Bodh Gaya. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda was also Director of the India Studies Centre at her University in Bangkok. She has **authored more than 70 books** in English and Thai. Bhikkhuni was honoured by the **UN Outstanding Buddhist Woman Award in 2004** and later on was nominated for **Nobel Prize in 2005**.

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (Ph.D, University of Hawaii) is currently Professor of Asian Theatre at the Cultural Centre, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. He established Malaysia's first academic programme in Performing Arts at Universiti Sains Malaysia. He received the prestigious *Tokoh Maal Hijrah* Award for his outstanding contribution to Malay culture followed by Dato' in 2008. A leading scholar of Southeast Asian theatre, with interests in literature, religion and philosophy, Prof. Yousof's books include **Ceremonial and Decorative Crafts of Penang** (1986), **Dictionary of Traditional Southeast Asian Theatre** (1994), and **The Malay Shadow Play: An Introduction** (1997).

Juan R. Francisco, University of the Philippines, Manila, the PHILIPPINES

Juan R. Francisco is an emeritus Professor in the University of the Philippines, Manila. He is the foremost Indologist in the Philippines who developed the inter-regional research interest between South Asia and Southeast Asia. He was the person who discovered the Maranao version of the Ramayana that is native to his country. He has to his credit over hundred research articles and the two monumental works **Maharadia Lawana** and **From Ayodhya to Pulu Agamaniog: Rama's Journey to the Philippines**. Prof. Francisco has been founder member of the IAHA (International Association for the Historians of Asia).

Amarjiva Lochan, University of Delhi, Delhi, INDIA

Dr Amarjiva Lochan teaches Ancient Indian History and Culture at Shivaji College, Delhi University. His area of research interest has been **the Syncretism of Indic elements in Southeast Asia**, especially in Thai religion and culture. His major research works include the **Indian Legacy of the Thai Royal Court Brahmanas**, an outcome of research project funded by the ASIA scheme of the Ford Foundation.

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All correspondence regarding membership, subscription, advertisement and announcement may be addressed to the **SSEASR** Secretariat (**SSEASR** Secretariat, 95, Vidya Vihar, Outer Ring Road, New Delhi 110034, INDIA). email: secretariat@sseasr.org

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Being a **peered review Journal**, it may take five to six months to know the outcome of such submission. Book Reviews submitted should relate only to the books published in the past two years.

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SSEASR: AN INTRODUCTION

The SSEASR stands to bring out the genius of the local regional scholarship which generally remains deep buried in international academics. It is for creating a network of scholars in the South and Southeast Asia and to develop healthy academic atmosphere in the region. The SSEASR cooperates with the related agencies in the region. In recent times, Asian scholars have started to 'work *within* Asia; such trends would be further promoted by the SSEASR among Asian scholars who need exposure to the high standard of research being conducted at world's various competent academic institutions. Thus, the SSEASR offers native scholars, writers and artists on culture and religion a platform to join the international fraternity.

The objective of the SSEASR is pursued by means of scholarly activities such as the organisation of conferences, symposia or colloquia; the encouragement of research publications; exchange of information through various means, and such other activities as the association or its elected officer determine time to time.

For the benefit of its members, the SSEASR also stands to promote regular academic exchanges and study tours to the Asian countries. Such tours can be specifically organised for the SSEASR members to enhance their knowledge of the culture and religion of the region. For more details, one can visit www.sseasr.org

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Thai Nationalism and the Crisis of the Colonised Self

Erin Kamler

Abstract

Thai Nationalism and the Crisis of the Colonized Self, What social and psychological conflicts lie at the root of the political crisis in modern Thailand? Why is the notion of “Kwampbhen Thai,” or “Thainess,” defined so rigidly, and why are Thailand’s border communities along the Mekong River not considered to be “Thai?” Ancient Siam was inhabited by ethnic communities whose Buddhist cosmographic beliefs defined their understanding of space, geography and cultural identity. The Red Karen and Lao people among the Mekong River, in particular, experienced space not in terms of physically imposed boundaries, but as a complex web of tributary systems that depended on a vast network of inter-connected communities. With the advent of 19th century colonialism in the surrounding territories of Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, however, Siam’s King Chulalongkorn began to adopt western notions of territorial definition, a shift that resulted in a radical marginalization of Siam’s Mekong River-based cultures. Desperate to construct a national identity, Siam underwent a “colonization of the self:” a process of imposing restrictive cultural definitions that continue to surface negatively in contemporary Thai politics. “Thai Nationalism and the Crisis of the Colonized Self” asks us to re-examine the roots of Thai nationalism, cultural identity and the underlying psychology that drives Thailand’s modern political landscape.

Keywords: Nationalism, Kwampbhen Thai, Peasantry, Identity.

“Nationalness... is ...a fatality embedded in history.”

—Benedict Anderson¹

On a freezing night in November, 2008, in a tiny Thai restaurant in New York City’s Midtown, I watched an elderly Thai man hold his head in his hands and weep. Through a drunken haze he cried for his homeland, expressing his longing to return. The man, who was likely in

School of International Relations, the University of Southern California, LA, USA

¹ Anderson, Benedict (1983). *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso

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his late 60's, seemed determined to explain his conflicted relationship with his country. He wept not only for himself, but for the political crisis that had erupted in Thailand-- a crisis between the people of the country's rural provinces and the Bangkok ruling elites who recently overtook the democratically-elected Prime Minister in a coup, sparking mass protests and demonstrations, gunshots and grenade blasts, civilian deaths, and the disruption of infrastructure and tourism in Thailand—two of the country's most vital symbols of political sovereignty, independence, and strength.² Perhaps without knowing it, the weeping man in the Thai restaurant represented the lost modern Thai identity; the crisis of the constructed Thai "self;" a nation struggling in its quest to stay free.

For decades, there has been a deep and indelible rift in the political culture of modern Thailand, one that can be traced back to the trajectory of colonial-style oppression adopted by Bangkok's ruling regimes throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Each of these regimes, in similar and contrasting ways, contributed to constructing Thailand's national identity. Unlike its neighbors Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and Vietnam, Thailand had continuously resisted colonial domination by the French and British—a feat that modern Thais uphold as being one of their country's greatest accomplishments, the word "Thai" meaning, "free." In circumventing colonialism, however, Thailand's ruling elites tightened their grip on the people within Thailand's newly-formed territorial jurisdiction, and prescribed a new political culture based on rules of Thai "identity." These rules were not always in line with the notion of freedom that the government purported to uphold. In becoming a sovereign nation and in constructing a "national identity," Thailand's governments co-opted and overrode the traditional value systems, histories, languages and cultural content of the country's indigenous communities, and in so doing, created a construct of the "other" which would thereafter exist in stark contrast to the construct of *Kwamphben Thai*, or "being Thai." This systematic "othering" spurred a cultural and political rift between the Bangkok government and Thailand's border communities, and set the stage for an internal struggle that continues to play out within modern Thai society—a struggle between the nationalist identity that is projected upon the Thai people, and the buried and co-opted aspects of self that form the underlying truth of who they are.

² *BBC News*. (December 2, 2008). Top Thai Court Ousts PM Somchai. Retrieved on December 4, 2008 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7759960.stm>



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In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson discusses the idea that the nation is a construct of the imagination; a symbol of camaraderie and fraternity that is empty at its core due to its inherent artificiality.³ While modern nation states impose identities on people, in that every human being on earth must, in some way or another, exist within the confines of a sovereign state, these nation states are nevertheless “philosophically empty,” possessing political power without unifying ideological cohesion.⁴ Thailand adopted the process of national identity construction in the 19th and 20th centuries, beginning with the physical co-optation of geographic space. Anderson explains that a turning point took place during the reign of King Rama IV in the mid 19th century, during which time the indigenous cosmographic notion of world-space was replaced by western concepts of physical space.⁵ The indigenous conception of space, which was alive in what are now known as Thailand’s “border communities” in the north, northeast, and south,⁶ utilized on a “cosmograph,” a “symbolic representation of the Three Worlds of traditional Buddhist cosmology.”⁷ Rather than being represented horizontally, the conceptions of space depicted in these three worlds were imagined to be “a series of supernatural heavens and subterrestrial hells wedged in the visible world along a series vertical axis.”⁸ These maps made no reference to earthly, physical territory, nor did they serve as a symbol depiction of a group of people’s claim to ownership or even inhabitation of a particular plot of land; rather, they were maps toward salvation, directions through the life-long process of making merit and clearing *karma*, Buddhist principals of spiritual structure that guided Thailand’s indigenous communities.

The co-optation of space was the first way in which Thailand’s pre-national ruling regimes used “othering” as a form of nation-building identity construction. In *Siam Mapped*, Thongchai Winichakul’s deft exploration of pre-national Thailand, Winichakul contrasts the conception of indigenous space within Hill populations with the development of Western mapping techniques. Winichakul cites mapping as being a core activity transforming Thailand’s northern

³ Anderson, p. 7

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 5

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 171

⁶ Anderson primarily discusses the transformations that took place in Tenassein Province, among the Lanna in the Chiang Mai region of Northern Thailand, and in Nakhon in the south (p. 68)

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*



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communities. Working in conjunction with the British, the Thai ruling regime took what had once been dynamic village-to-village relationships operating across porous boundaries and, through documenting territorial boundaries distinguishing “Siam” from “Burma,” rendered the traditional cultural modes of communication and interaction between those communities obsolete.

The Kayah, or Red Karen people who lived along what is now considered to be the Thai/ Burmese border were one such community. In the paradigm of their traditional systems of cultural interaction, known as “tributary systems,”⁹ villages were autonomous, with allegiance given to a hierarchy of overlapping local overlords. These rulers presided at local levels and, in turn, answered to rulers above them. This process, known as *samfifa*, meaning, “under two overlords”¹⁰, helped the indigenous *muangs* (“cities”) interact easily.¹¹ Without having to adhere to a rigid construction of physical boundary identification, the small Red Karen *muangs* “formed a dynamic, fluctuation frontier between Burma and Lanna.”¹² Able to move fluidly across land and interact with one another, these communities “gave allegiance to both sides” of a frontier that needed to maintain fluid interaction in order to insure the survival of its populous-- the geographic area being one of dense mountains and difficult terrain. The ambiguous sovereignty that these *muangs* operated under was useful to overlords, since shared borders helped increase interaction capacity.¹³ This tributary system was echoed in communities along what is now the Thai-Laotian border.

With the construction of Thai nationalism, however, these tributary relationships would change. European sovereignty, with its conceptions of territorially defined space called for the closing of borders. This process radically transformed the traditional paradigm of cosmographic space while impacting the autonomy of the northern communities’ tributary systems. In the 1880’s and 1890’s, Siam’s ruler Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910), accepted that maintaining an independent Siam would necessitate adhering to cultural and political norms imposed by the British and French, who were rapidly colonizing Southeast Asia. Chulalongkorn had studied the political systems of India, Singapore

⁹ Winichakul, Thongchai (1994) *Siam Mapped*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’I Press. p. 81

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 96

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 100



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and Denmark and aspired to modernize and “Europeanize” Siam.¹⁴ To do so, he sought to reform provincial administrations first in the Lanna region (the area that is now the city of Chiang Mai), and next along the Lao border.¹⁵ Chulalongkorn facilitated the local autonomy of the indigenous *muangs* being replaced by a centralized, administration, in effect transforming the political culture of the northern indigenous communities. Once the sovereign borders of Siam, Burma and Laos were delineated, communities such as the Red Karen would no longer possess the political flexibility and autonomy that had previously allowed their culture to thrive.

The process of imposing formal border constructions on indigenous communities had severe implications on the construct of Thai nationalism. Winichakul unravels the complex relationship between boundary delineation and conceptions of nationhood, suggesting that during Siam’s negotiations with the British, an important theoretical concept was cemented in the minds of the Siamese. While previously the Siamese had acknowledged territorial boundaries as having importance only at local tributary levels, the British viewed these interests as being part of a larger national construct.¹⁶ It was here that a foundational shift in thinking emerged: prior to interacting with the west, Siam had not conceived of itself as a “nation state” and Siamese identity was constituted by and inclusive of the many ethnic populations that resided within its loose, porous physical borders. Siam, in other words, was *inclusive*. Once European colonial powers introduced new definitions of physical space, however, a larger pressure emerged: the pressure to nationalize. Whereas once Siam’s boundaries were a “connected but flexible patchy network of power units,”¹⁷ emerging alliances with the British and French transformed the “technology of political space”¹⁸ allowing Siam to dominate tributary states for the first time. The closing of physical borders and new paradigm of sovereignty being constituted by physical space spurred a new identity for Siam. As Winichakul explains,

The beginning of full-scale surveys and mapping of boundaries by the Chulalongkorn regime reflected not merely his sympathy for modern geography but also a change in the discourse of sovereignty. To fulfill the desire to have their geo-bodies concretized and their

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 106

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 102

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 64

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 79

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 95



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margins defined for exclusive sovereignty, the French and Siamese alike had fought both with force and with maps.¹⁹

A deeper exploration of this process indicates that by imposing physical boundaries, Siam, in tandem with the British and French colonial powers, succeeded in co-opting both the symbolic “mind” and “body” of its people, in service to the construction of the Thai nation. This process of co-optation overrode all traces of original ethnic identity construction. As Anderson illustrates, the nation is inherently imposed, artificial and superficial. It does not exist in nature, meaning that its inherent creation necessitates imposing rationality upon nature. This imposition renders all other identity formation processes inferior to the identity of nationhood. I will take this idea farther, asserting that such a radical co-optation of identity leaves open the possibility that in the face of this imposition, virtually *no* roots of original identity may remain. Winichakul describes mapping as being a new “cognitive paradigm” that gave the King “a practical means” to determining the type and scale of populations that resided under his jurisdictional rule.²⁰ Mapping was a way to track citizenship. It can therefore be hypothesized that the process of putting pen to paper and creating a new paradigm of space cemented a new cultural and political identity that rendered the old obsolete.²¹

The shift from functioning as autonomous, indigenous communities to being deemed “border” communities adhering to a centralized hierarchy of state-control has powerful implications on modern Thai nationalism. The co-optation and re-definition of these communities created a new paradigm of “non-citizens:” people who were, and still are, both literally and symbolically marginalized. Anderson lends additional thoughts on the subject of the elimination of self-autonomous tributary muangs, showing how the western census was also used as a means of documenting the populations within Thailand’s territorial jurisdiction, primarily for purposes of taxation.²²

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 112

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 123

²¹ In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson goes into great detail about how the development and evolution of print-language rendered previous conceptions, ideas, thoughts and even histories virtually obsolete in early modern Europe. Indeed, the same trend can be seen in Thailand with the development of map-making, this being the first instance of how the availability of print served to construct the concept of the Siamese state and, in so doing, render its indigenous border populations subject to a new centralized form of rule and domination. (Chapter 3, pp. 41-66)

²² Anderson, p. 166



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Between territorial boundary delineations, map-making and the census, Siam's indigenous populations were forced to undergo a complete shift to becoming "nationalized."

The process of nationalization had detrimental effects on indigenous communities of the north and northeast. Because of their remote locations and lack of access to the power-center of Bangkok, these communities had difficulty adopting the newly forming traits of Thai citizenship that would have provided them political and cultural agency. Some examples of these identifying traits of nationhood would later include cultural customs such as speaking the central Thai language and wearing western-style clothing. These constructs were most rigidly imposed under the Phibun regime of the mid-20th century. Rather than being easily accessible to the indigenous communities of the north, however, these "nationalistic practices" remained difficult to achieve and were only readily available to citizens residing in or near Bangkok.

Not coincidentally, the development of nationalistic practices contributed to an "othering" process, which in turn facilitated the construction of Thai nationalism. As many scholars on nationalism have explained, the concept of the "other" is as important, as the notion of "self." This distinction helps to create and reinforce a paradigm of national identity. The central Thai language, for example, would not have emerged as a language of privilege and exclusivity, had it not developed *by definition* in contrast to Lao, which, though still the most widely spoken language throughout Thailand today,²³ came to represent the indigenous communities of the rural Northeast *as opposed to* Bangkok's status quo "Thai" citizens. By creating an official Thai language, and the subsequent textual and cultural uses of that language which followed in the 20-th century, northeastern border communities could be defined as being "less" Thai than Bangkok elites, a distinction that in turn legitimized Thai national identity. As Anthony Diller observes:

State control of names, along with media campaigns employing hypograms, metaphors and other tropes, would be cardinal examples of the political use of language to shape a particular frame of mind, a mentality that construes ethnicity along particular political lines. However, propaganda is but one side of the coin. Language itself—in

²³ Diller, Anthony. What Makes Central Thai A National Language? From *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*. (2002) Craig J. Reynolds (Ed.) Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. pp. 71-107



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this case, the Thai language—is an important (or perhaps the preeminent) *component* in the type of mentality under construction.²⁴

The co-optation of central Thai language and its use as a tool for creating “otherness” is still experienced today. According to Anderson,

Today, the Thai government actively discourages attempts by foreign missionaries to provide its hill-tribe minorities with their own transcription-systems and to develop publications in their own languages: the same government is largely indifferent to what these minorities *speak*.²⁵

The use of language as a means of creating cultural and political division reveals the artificiality of the construction of nationhood: the central Thai language was not rooted in ideological, or values-based ideas, nor did it contain any specific philosophical meaning. Rather, this language was merely a tool used to construct differences between populations, legitimizing one while marginalizing the other.

The co-optation of the indigenous “mind” and “body” of Thailand’s rural populations has implications on the identity crisis that seems to plague Thai citizens today. In addition to language reinforcing Thai national identity, Thai cultural and political elites also use religion as a means of identifying social differentiation. While many citizens of Bangkok no longer adhere to indigenous constructs of Buddhist cosmography, these urban elites nevertheless derive their religious beliefs from the same cultural and spiritual source. How does the loss of the Buddhist cosmographic construction of space affect the modern elites of Thailand’s Buddhist populous? While intellectually, modern Thais may appreciate the traditional roots of their religion, and while they may rationally accept the construction of the “Three Worlds” as being a historically significant *idea*, many cosmopolitan Thais may no longer make the same *visceral connection* with their ancient cosmography as they would have before the advent of modern Thai nationalism. The implication, then, is that the process of nation building necessitates the abandonment of traditional spiritual beliefs. Anderson elaborates:

The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning.²⁶

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 73

²⁵ Anderson, p. 45

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 11



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Expanding on this concept, Peter Jackson explores the complexities of Thai Buddhist identity in his essay, *Thai Buddhist Identity: Debates on the Traiphum Phra Ruang*.²⁷ A fourteenth century Buddhist text illustrating the traditional Buddhist cosmography, the *Traiphum Phra Ruang* was a foundational treatise exploring the structure of the cosmos as well as justifying the emergence of socio-political institutions such as the Thai Kingdoms of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Thonburi and Bangkok.²⁸ The text provides an illustration of the tensions between modern Thai conceptions of Buddhism and those of pre-national society, through an analysis of two contrasting Buddhist perspectives.

The first of these perspectives is the “traditionalist” view of Buddhism, in which metaphysical doctrines emphasize *kamma* and merit, and the interplay between these concepts and a person’s socio-economic standing. Jackson describes “traditionalist view” Buddhists as having little personal agency around their lot in life; rather, political agency is conceptually overridden by pre-determined “destiny.” The tension resulting from the clash of this traditionalist reality with the dynamics of life in a modern nation state are numerous. These tensions lead to a second, contrasting perspective on contemporary Thai Buddhism: that of the “reformist.” Reformist Buddhism emphasizes a rationalist, demythologized interpretation of Buddhist concepts that support the individual’s capacity to determine her or his own destiny.²⁹ The political implications of reformism reflect a value system in which the citizen has autonomy and agency within his or her own life.

While reformist Buddhism illustrates the integration of traditional religious principals into modern cultural identity, the actual *role* that Buddhism plays in Thailand’s national identity remains opaque. Jackson’s exploration of the intersection between Buddhist identity and Thai nationalism begs the question: Is “Thainess” found in ancient Buddhist principals, or in modern “obedience” to the state?³⁰ Where and how do Buddhism and Thai nationalism intersect? This is a subject of great debate. What can be identified from Jackson’s delineation between the two conceptions of contemporary Buddhism, is that a change has taken place in Thai Buddhist ideology. No longer is ancient cosmology a “given” in Thai society. Now, by necessity, an increasingly rationalist approach has been adopted, one that leaves behind

²⁷ *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*. (2002). Craig J. Reynolds (Ed.) Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books pp. 155-188

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 156

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 157

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 156



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Buddhism's visceral connection to the "Three Worlds." The rift between old and new ideas is evident once again: while many Thais today may choose to follow traditionalist beliefs, the fact that a more secularized, rationalized view exists-- and in some cases dominates Thai culture-- illustrates the loss experienced by Thailand in its transformation from being a society of indigenous pluralism into one of a rationalist, modern nation state.

A final example of the way in which conceptions of space were co-opted to create "othering" can be seen in Duncan McCargo's *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*.³¹ The first ethnographically based study of its kind, McCargo's book illustrates the complexities of the relationship between Bangkok's political authority and the marginalized Malay-Muslim Yala of Thailand's south. McCargo argues that the Southern Thai border was an artificially imposed segregation of land which, if left to the cultural will of the Malay-Muslim people, would have more naturally fallen under the jurisdiction of the state of Malaysia. By adopting Malay-Muslim communities as being part of the official Thai state, Thailand's ruling regimes created a rift between nationalists and the border communities of Southern Thailand. This rift took shape in Bangkok's refusal to recognize (and thereby legitimize) the Yala people's language(s), Islamic customs, educational system, and political organization. Because the Yala do not speak the central Thai language, practice Theravada Buddhism or conform to other culturally defined aspects of "Thainess," today the people of these communities are considered second-class citizens. This rift has resulted in the deaths of over three thousand civilians in Thailand's Islamic south.³²

Here again is an example of the way in which national identity construction is explicitly interlinked to difference in Thailand, resulting in the creation of an "otherness" that reinforces Thai national identity. While Thailand's border communities are still populated by tribal peoples such as the Hmong, Lao, Karen, and Lanna in the north as well as the Yala Islamists in the south, the cultural values and identities of these communities remain irrelevant to Bangkok's central government. In the words of a young Thai woman and member of the Bangkok elite (regarding the Yala of Southern Thailand), "They have their own language, their own ideas and want things to be their own way. They're not really Thai."³³

³¹ McCargo, Duncan. (2008) *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press

³² Conversation with Duncan McCargo, September 23, 2008

³³ Conversation with young Thai women and member of Bangkok elite, July 15,



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We have thus far explored the processes of “othering” that occurred under the monarchies of the 19th century through co-opting indigenous cultural conceptions of Buddhism, language and physical space. As the monarchy shifted its role in the political hierarchy to being symbolic rather than actively political, and as the regimes of the 20th century took hold, additional attempts at national identity construction emerged.

The Phibun and Sarit regimes illustrate these attempts most strikingly. In 1939 Siam adopted the name “Thailand,”³⁴ meaning “Free Land,” in a symbolic gesture intended to promote a nation upholding ideals of freedom and autonomy. Along with its new name came the philosophical rule of a new regime. In 1932, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsong Khram (also known as Phibun) and civilian leader Pridi Phanomyong (Pridi) waged a tumultuous bloodless coup that officially marked the end of monarchical rule in Thailand.³⁵ In the years that followed, Phibun adopted authoritative, colonialist modes of behavior that would exacerbate Thailand’s national identity formation.

Phibun supported the construction of Thai national identity through prescribing cultural behavior and institutionalizing cultural policy. Cultural policy is a way of institutionalizing certain cultural norms, behaviors and values, in support of a nationalist agenda or ideology. While the idea of prescribing certain types of behavior may seem alien to citizens in nations where values of self-expression and individualism are publically upheld, many governments have successfully upheld nationalist agendas using culture as a tool of self-definition. Out of the monarchical empires of Siam came one such legacy that remains cemented in Thai political culture today. Beginning with Thailand’s *lèse-majesté* law--legislation in Thailand that prevents any citizen from speaking critically against the King,³⁶ Thailand continues to perpetuate cultural policies that provide identity definition while restricting certain freedoms and, it may be argued, rights. In her essay *State Identity Creation, State-Building and Civil Society, 1939-1989*, Chai Anan Samdavanija outlines the cultural policies implemented under Phibun’s nationalist regime of 1939-1957.

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³⁴ Thailand (Siam) History as understood by a Farang. Retrieved on December 7, 2008 from http://www.csmngt.com/thailand_history.htm

³⁵ Fineman, Daniel (1997) *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. p. 23.

³⁶ *Bangkok Pundit* (May 12, 2007). YouTube and Lese Majeste. Retrieved on September 24, 2008 from <http://bangkokpundit.blogspot.com/2007/05/youtube-and-lese-majeste.html>



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Samdavanija asserts that during Phibun's time in office, "the ideological enthronement of the nation-state was basically a matter between the king and the bureaucratic elite."³⁷ The people, in other words, had little agency in the formation of an organic Thai nationalist culture. Rather, culture was prescribed to the Thai: a legacy that continues to penetrate the nation today.

Samdavanija explains that after overthrowing the monarchy in 1932, the "official class" (Thai elites), feeling outnumbered by a growing ethnic Chinese (Sino-Thai) population in Bangkok, constructed their own constitutional rule and supported Phibun in changing the political order that had been established shortly after the monarchical overthrow of the early 1930's.³⁸ The Thai elites resisted giving voice to the ethnic Chinese, and instead allowed Phibun to implement repressive policies that would prevent their representation in government.³⁹ During this era, as the cold-war paradigm took hold and fear of communism spread, identity began to be linked to ethnicity. Elites suspected Chinese and ethnic Lao populations of having ties to communism. In a parallel "othering" process, many people who were legitimately identified as having communist tendencies were accused of being "Chinese" or "Lao"—but *never* called Thai.⁴⁰

Other cultural practices were also used to create national identity. Nationalistic plays, songs, prose and poetry was mandated as a way of cultivating Thai citizenship. This art was mass-produced, much as pop-culture is produced and distributed in the Thailand of today, and often depicted a mythologized history of the Thai race.⁴¹ This "historical imaginaire" (or "fictitious cultural narrative"), was considered part of the "official" realm of Thai culture, as opposed to the "folk" realm of indigenous artistic expression. Indeed, virtually all modes of artistic and cultural expression among indigenous border communities were relegated to a marginalized status during the Phibun regime.⁴² The suppression of indigenous voices served to dampen any hint of political consciousness within the Hill communities of the north, the Lao of the northeast and the Yala of the Islamic south. Additionally, practices such as kissing one's wife goodbye before leaving for work, as well as

³⁷ Samdavanija, Chai Anan, *State Identity Creation, State-Building and Civil Society, 1939-1989*. From *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*. (2002) Craig J. Reynolds, (Ed.) Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. p. 58

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 51-53

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 55

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 61

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 60

⁴² *Ibid*



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adopting Western styles of clothing became government mandates during Phibun's regime.

In a section of his essay focusing on Thai national security and identity, Craig J. Reynolds makes an astute observation about the role of culture as political pacifier in contemporary Thailand:

What Thai nationals believe about Thai identity, what they feel in their heart of hearts about their food, their language, their kinfolk, their religion, their monarchy, and so on has been planted there by state institutions to cultivate a sense of belonging that will make governing those 55 million people easier and more peaceable.⁴³

The above examples illustrate the ways in which the cultural identity of central Thailand has been co-opted to serve the interests of the state. Expanding on our analysis of the co-optation of indigenous cultural identity, it can also be seen that not only were Bangkok's ruling regimes engaged in a process of creating the "other," but they were simultaneously engaged in co-opting central Thai culture. The central Thai culture was used in service to the mandate of national identity. The use of culture to meet these goals is still evident throughout Thailand today.⁴⁴

In addition to the cultural policies imposed on Thailand's population under Phibun, the mid 20th century saw an era of ruling regimes that deepened the divides between Bangkok elites and the rural border communities. This division continuously re-constructed and promoted the concept of "otherness" in opposition to *Kwampbhen Thai*. One such regime was that of Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat. Sarit ousted Phibun in 1957⁴⁵ during an era when American occupation in Thailand was dense. An ethnic Lao with strong connections to the rural northeast, Sarit's rule was characterized by his attempts to create a stronghold on the northeast in order to serve U.S military interests in Vietnam.⁴⁶ In so doing, Sarit's policies deepened the divide between

⁴³ Reynolds, Craig C. Introduction: National Identity and Its Defenders. From *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*. (2002) Craig C. Reynolds (Ed). Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books. p. 22

⁴⁴ Here I am thinking of the Thais continued adoption of western dress, of tourism being the main economic industry of Thailand, as well as the elements of Thai culture that are promoted to *farangs* (foreigners) on a daily basis: Thai cuisine, classical dance, Bangkok's canals, the temples of The Grand Palace and the ancient cities of Sukkothai and Ayutthaya. "Official Thai Culture" continues to be a landscape in which there is little room for individual self-expression or political or social dissent.

⁴⁵ Sivaraksa, Sulak. *The Crisis of Siamese Identity*. From National Identity. p. 44

⁴⁶ Kislenco, Arne. The Vietnam War, Thailand, and the United States. In Richard Jensen, Jon Davidann, and Yoneyuki Sugita (Eds). *Trans-Pacific Relations*. Oxford:



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Bangkok's ruling regime and the ethnic populations of the northeast.

One action that exemplified this divide can be seen in the construction the "Friendship Highway," a U.S.-led construction project linking Bangkok to the rural north. While the road was intended to provide a cultural and economic bridge between Bangkok and *Isan*, instead it incited division:

Ironically, the highway has bred an aggression no one expected. With the advent of modern transportation, the northeast's endemic bandit population switched from cattle rustling to highway robbery. The region's 30 holdup gangs now roar down the Friendship Highway in hot rods, pulling abreast of buses and firing shots across their bows, then relieving their passengers of cash and jewelry. Many of the bandits, according to Thai police, learned their holdup techniques by watching U.S. westerns on TV sets supplied to most villages for propaganda purposes.⁴⁷

The division created by Sarit's Friendship Highway exacerbated tensions between Thai rural and urban populations—tensions that persist in Thai political culture today. In its co-optation of ethnic border communities via territorial boundary imposition, language reconstruction and the overriding ancient Buddhist cosmography, Thailand's contemporary governments have, in effect, acted as the role of the colonizer. This form of colonization differs, however, from that of the British and French. Thailand's elite ruling regimes have in essence, colonised their own citizens. The irony here, is that not only do Thailand's ethnic minorities suffer under this "internal colonization;" rather, the people of central Thailand and members of the Bangkok elite also pay a price, as many aspects of their culture have been mandated according to the needs of the state.

The "freedom" of which Thailand is so proud requires a deeper examination. For just as the ethnic indigenous communities have been silenced under Thailand's construction of national identity, so too have the Bangkok elites overridden their use of "indigenous" beliefs, "ancient" cultural tendencies or "remote" languages in service to the construct of nationalism. In the fire-storm that envelops Bangkok today, a deep protest is occurring, with both Thailand elites as well as its rural populous. While the PAD and Red Shirt protesters rally for

Greenwood Publishing Group. p. 224.

⁴⁷ The Rural Revolution. (May 25, 1965). *Time Magazine*. Retrieved on November 20, 2008 from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,941337-1,00.html>



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democratic change in Thailand's government, perhaps another drive underlies their deep need for political transformation. Perhaps the role of culture in Thailand's nationalist agenda is as disturbing to Bangkok's elites as it is to the rural peasantry who has recently been appearing in Bangkok in droves. Perhaps, unbeknownst to either side, all the citizens of Thailand subscribe to a national identity that acts as a colonising force. This "internal colonizer" prescribes the values, behaviors, language and experiences of personal agency that make up the fabric of Thai identity today: an identity born from a rift between peoples; a paradigm of the "other."

Kwampben Thai, or "Thainess," is a political construct that has been imposed on the people of Thailand in response to 19th and 20th century colonial domination of the surrounding Southeast Asian regions. With the growth of this political construct, in tandem with the decreased *real* threat of external colonial domination, there has come a nostalgia among Thailand's citizenry for a cohesive past-- a reunion with an authentic experience of their pre-national identity. In contrast to the current paradigm of protesting against Bangkok's elite rulers while simultaneously subscribing to the cultural constructs that make up contemporary Thai national identity, perhaps what the people of Thailand search for is not, in fact, the myth of *Kwampben Thai*. Perhaps it is not the nation they are seeking but rather, a return to a *less* culturally prescribed mode of existence, one in which speaking an ancient tongue, moving freely across the land, choosing one's cultural modes of expression, and experiencing an authentic connection to spiritual tradition was allowed and celebrated. When the elderly Thai man weeps in the restaurant eight thousand miles from his home, when Red Shirt and PAD protesters shoot to kill and when rage overtakes Bangkok elites and the rural village populations alike, perhaps it is not really politics over which they are fighting, but rather, the century and a half of nationalist ideology that has been imposed upon them, suppressing their expression, co-opting their culture and rendering them mute.

Thai Nationalism is a paradigm of self-colonisation. The Thai ruling regimes of the twentieth century came to symbolize the deeply imbedded fear of colonialism to which Thai people still respond. The current rift in Thailand, then, is less about Prime Ministers Thaksin and Abhisit than it is about the stifling of pluralism, and the co-opting of culture to serve the interests of the state. When citizens become willing to kill and die for the Thailand they believe is true and just, perhaps what they are really longing for is to be free of the chains of nationhood itself.

