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’.

---

5 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 memoralised 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 criticial 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 indeterminancy. 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

---

6 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
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,7 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.8 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

---

7 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.

8 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. 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,10 ferrying him in his family’s pickup to and from the forest temple on errands.11 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.12 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.

---

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

10 Buddhist monks are not permitted to drive vehicles.

11 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).

12 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.13 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,14 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 1997.15 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.

13 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.

14 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 Mū (‘The thousand-hand bodhisattva Kuan Im’).

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.16

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

16 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.](image)

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 (หลวงพ่อทวด), whose name may be translated as ‘Venerable Great Grandfather’ or ‘Venerable Ancestor’, 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

---

17 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.18

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).19

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

---

18 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).

19 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 Ekbnannasingh 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. 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 khong 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

---

20 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”.

33
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.\textsuperscript{21} Luang Phò Thuat preferred the warm climate of the South to the cold of the North, the abbot explained.\textsuperscript{22}

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.\textsuperscript{23} It was almost inevitable to find a small statue, often inside a plastic case or suspended inside a crystal ball\textsuperscript{24} on the dashboard of cars and tuk-tuks,\textsuperscript{25} 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.

\textsuperscript{21} 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.

\textsuperscript{22} 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.

\textsuperscript{23} 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).

\textsuperscript{24} 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.

\textsuperscript{25} 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 sönghaëo 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.26 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.27 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

26 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.

27 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.\textsuperscript{28} 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.\textsuperscript{29} For this reason, temples associated with Luang Phò Thuat have become popular tourist/pilgrimage attractions with ethnic Chinese from

\textsuperscript{28} At the time I was conducting research in 1999-2002 there were about 25 baht to the Australian dollar.

\textsuperscript{29} 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 \textit{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 \textit{kae bon}, or pay thanksgiving, for receiving the miracle. No doubt my own status as a \textit{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.30

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 tongue31 (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

30 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.
31 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.32 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 giganticism in the production of images of Luang Phò Thuat.33 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).

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

33 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 Huphasawan 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*). 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, imbed in the landscape, an invisible inscription waiting to be rediscovered by another who possessed sufficient merit and discipline to recognise it. Recognising the area as 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

---

34 *Thudong* (Pali: *dhathanga*). 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.35 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

---

35 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 (rūang 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.36

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).

36 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’)37 Buddhism 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,38 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

37 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.

38 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.\textsuperscript{39}

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

\textsuperscript{39} 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.


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.\textsuperscript{40} 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.

\textsuperscript{40} 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.\textsuperscript{41} 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

\textsuperscript{41} 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 delegitimate 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. 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). This was also a time of growing interest in particularistic cults surrounding an apparently ever-

---

42 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.

43 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.44

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

---

44 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).45

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.

---

45 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). 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.

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

46 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.

47 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 legitimatory 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).48

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).49 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 Thammaryut order (in Thai *Thammaryutnikai*: ‘adherents of the Dhamma’). The order emphasised knowledge of the Pali scriptures and close observance of the monastic discipline, or *vinaya*.50 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

48 See discussion on how these reforms impacted on the South in next chapter.
49 See also discussions of Mongkut and ‘rationality’ by Cook (1992) and Johnson (1997).
50 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”. 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).

---

51 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 dissention 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.\(^{52}\) 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

---

\(^{52}\) 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, but the Sangha was used ever more overtly for the purposes of national integration and consolidation of peripheral areas. To these ends the \textit{thammathut} or Dhamma Ambassador program was established in 1962 for the purposes of community development and national integration, while in 1965 the \textit{thammajarik} (‘wandering Dhamma’) program was intended to convert non-Buddhist hill-tribes (often suspected of communist sympathies) to Theravada Buddhism. 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).

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:

\begin{quote}
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
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} See Tambiah (1976:258-60).

\textsuperscript{54} On the \textit{thammathut} program, see Tambiah (1976, chapter 18). On the \textit{thammajarik} program, see Keyes (1971).

\textsuperscript{55} 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).56

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.57

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,

56 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.

57 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).

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). Naruemon also notes that the so-called ‘people’s constitution’,

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

59 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. 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).

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,

---

60 Whether these challenges have fulfilled their promise is entirely another matter.

61 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). 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).

62 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.  

63 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.
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. 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).

---

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.\(^65\) 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 –

---

\(^{65}\) 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”, 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

---

66 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. 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, giganticism, and the mystical experiences of its adherents through the

---

67 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 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 at least 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).

---
68  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. 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).

---

69 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.\(^{70}\)

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 mediatisation 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

\(^{70}\) 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 assumptive 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 focusing 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 postmodern 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 (khwam 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. 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.

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

---

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

72 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. 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

---

73 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).

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.

---

74 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.75 From having multiple roles within the community, monks have been encouraged

---

75 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.76 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

---

76 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 delegitimating 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 theorists 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*). 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.

---

77 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.  

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

---

78 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.
Wither the State?

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. 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

---

79 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.\(^{80}\) 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

\(^{80}\) 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 karmá” (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.\textsuperscript{81} The prohibition issued from a dispersed space which could not be localised within any formal rule; it just \textit{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.

\textit{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

\textsuperscript{81} 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. 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

---

82 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).83

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,

83 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.


Namō phōitisathō ākhantimāya itṭāphakhāwā
Namō phōitisathō ākhantimāya itṭāphakhāwā
Namō phōitisathō ākhantimāya itṭāphakhāwā

The words of the mantra (khattha) 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 footprint 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, 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” (phasisom 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

---

84 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. 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

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 Bangkoksians 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.  

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

---

86 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 Zizek 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” (Zizek 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” (Zizek 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.87

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).

87 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.
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:

Figure 3. The fourteen provinces of Southern Thailand, showing provincial boundaries and capitals.
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 rajas, 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.88

---

88 Something that has arguably been done by some writing on the South (e.g. McCargo 2004).
Figure 4. Map of political organisation of Siamese influence on the eve of administrative reforms. Reproduced from Pasuk and Baker (2005:55).
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 niia), 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.89 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 sipsi 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

---

89 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]. 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

---

90 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.91 However, in contemporary Thailand, ethnic Malays are primarily considered to be those

---

91 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.92

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

---

92 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). 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)

---

93 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. 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.

---

94 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).

95 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.
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. 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

---

96 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.97

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.98 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.99 For example, pale skin, a typically northern trait, is considered more desirable than dark (as is indicated by the wide range of skin lightening

---

97 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’.

98 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.

99 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’
The Metonymics of Place

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 Negritos 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.\(^{100}\) 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

---

\(^{100}\) “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
Chapter 3

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”. 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

101 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).102

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.103 Chinese ritual practices and religious figures are represented to a lesser extent,104 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.105

102 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.

103 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.

104 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.

105 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.
7. Phra Phuttha Taksin Mingmonkhol Buddha image at Wat Khao Kong, Narathiwat province.
8. Phra Boromathat stupa at Chaiya, Surat Thani 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!”

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. This has

---

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

107 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).\(^{108}\)

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

\(^{108}\) 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

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 ...


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.109 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.110 Somdet Jao Pha Kho sits in a superior position, apparently instructing the other monks. He is so named because he was the abbot of

109 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).

110 They are called khoi books as they are made from the bark of the tree of that name.
Wat Pha Kho,\textsuperscript{111} 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).\textsuperscript{112} 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 (\textit{thuat ngu, thuat siua} – ‘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.\textsuperscript{113}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{statues.png}
\caption{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.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{111} 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’.

\textsuperscript{112} I.e. “Luang Phò Thuat who trod on saltwater and made it fresh”.

\textsuperscript{113} 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 “corpothermal” (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). 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’. ‘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

114 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).

115 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.
Chapter 4

Chang Hai that is nowadays the undisputed centre of his cult. 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 interactons. Now, however, I turn to Satingphra, Somdet Jao Pha Kho’s original ‘stamping ground’.

116 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.\(^{117}\) 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 *sóngthäo*\(^{118}\) 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.\(^{119}\)

---

\(^{117}\) 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.

\(^{118}\) 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.

\(^{119}\) 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, the revered reclining Buddha statue at Wat Jatingphra, and the tiny but highly revered Buddha image known as Jao Mae Yu Hua. 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

---

120 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).

121 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.

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

122 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 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’.

Temple booklets detailing the history of the monastery and the biography of the Royal Lord are also made widely available throughout the complex.

---

123 Wandering ascetic, i.e. following the Dhuthanga (Pali) ascetic regime.

124 Sacred objects (sing saksit) in Thailand are not generally considered to be bought/sold (sii/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).
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. In 1962 it built
what was then the largest Luang Phò Thuat statue in existence. 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, 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). 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

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

126 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).

127 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).

128 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. 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).

---

129 Probably the tree depicted in the background of Figure 11.
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.130

130 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.
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.\footnote{In some versions the foreignness of the crew is emphasised, being described as Malay or Chinese.} 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.\footnote{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).} Impressed by
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 Abhidhamma – 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. 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.

---

133 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).
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). 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.

---

134 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 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.\(^\text{136}\)

\(^\text{135}\) As this was referred to by my Thai teacher and friend in Songkhla, Wuthinat Jiraphan.

\(^\text{136}\) Consider the account in the Sri Lankan chronicle, the Thūpavamsā, in which King Duttagāmāni 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.

172
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.137 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).138 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

---

137 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.

138 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).\footnote{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.}

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.\footnote{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).} Indeed, the story as a whole follows this logic through: the accomplished monk returns to Satingphra to renew the monastic control
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. 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

---

141 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, which resulted in a purifying flood.

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. 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

---

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

143 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).

144 As is made clear in Figure 4 on page 123.
The Royal Lord

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.\(^{145}\)

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

\(^{145}\) 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).\footnote{\textsuperscript{146} 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 Nakorn 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 Nakorn “as its loyalty to Bangkok had become suspect” (Kobkua 1988:7).} \footnote{\textsuperscript{147} I.e. Nakhon Sri Thammarat.} Zulkifli Mohamad (2002:9), goes as far as suggesting that Nakorn was not as purely Siamese as is often assumed in Thai historiography, stating that “the Sultan of Ligor”,\footnote{\textsuperscript{148} In the 1698 	extit{tamra}, reprinted in 	extit{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).} 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.

\textit{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’ (\textit{huamüang khaek}) that had completely destroyed a number of towns and monasteries around that time.\footnote{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 (\textit{pen thi sakat kan kanrukran thang wathanatham lae kanmüang}). To this end the abbot of Wat Pha Kho (\textit{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’ (\textit{kha...}}
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).¹⁴⁹

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 Satingphra 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

¹⁴⁹ 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 Conscription Act (C. J. Reynolds 1979:191).

Although this practice has been superceded, I argue that the idea 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,¹⁵⁰ 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

¹⁵⁰ 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.151

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

151 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.\textsuperscript{152} These other figures include another ‘magic monk’ locally known as Phra Khru In, a local of Bang Kaeo in neighbouring Phatthalung.\textsuperscript{153} 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

\textsuperscript{152} 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.

\textsuperscript{153} 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). 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

\[154\]

‘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.\footnote{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.}

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
that the ability to maintain the integrity of the scriptures is a prerequisite for sovereignty.156

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

---

156 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.
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). 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.

157 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. 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). The commonly held notion that the king is the individual with the greatest accumulated merit would imply that other men 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 bodhisatta-king." (Jory 2002:38).

---

158 This aspect will be further elaborated in chapter 6.
159 These are generally considered to be Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.
160 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).161

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

---

161 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

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

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