

## Visions, Claims and Utopias



Map 1: Southern Thailand, showing Songkhla and Pattani in the Gulf of Thailand

The present study is concerned with the escalating competition in which cultural concepts vie for hegemony in the expanding local public sphere in Southern Thailand. The aim of the study was to assess recent forms of we-group formation, which seems to be centrally based on the cultural imagination and distinction of the educated middle classes. The transformation of society and culture in Southern Thailand has rarely been explored from this angle. Buddhist-Muslim relationships and identity politics in the 1990s can be interpreted as resulting from

the integration of Southern Thailand in national and global processes of change. The incorporation of the region into national and global spaces is a social process that leads to new forms of differentiation and distinction, not only for economic and political systems, but also for ethnic and religious communities (cf. Preyer/Boes 2001).

We want to turn the notion of globalization on its head by examining how the participation of the educated middle class is producing new zones of change and also new borderlines and new frontiers in social conduct. As the world-system expands, it incorporates new territories and new people. Southern Thailand is a boundary zone and a locus of resistance to incorporation. In this study, we explore how ethnic and religious communities in Southern Thailand are using social and cultural resources in local, national and transnational networks in their struggle for cultural distinction, thereby negotiating new borderlines and conditions of membership in local society.

Globalization is not a new phenomenon in Southern Thailand. The port on the Malaysian peninsula has been an important locus of education, cultural encounter and trade. It has produced a region of enormous cultural complexity influenced by India, China, Turkey and the Middle East. The incorporation of Southern Thailand into Thailand shifted the region from a center of the world to a border zone in the periphery of the nation-state.

The present study examines modernity from the angle of the educated lower-middle classes. This social segment comes about from the expansion of educational institutions, colleges and universities and the increasing plurality of education in Southern Thailand. We do not believe that globalization is a process that miraculously draws people from locals into a homogenous world, but, rather, it is a process that results from the initiative and creativity of people. The educated middle class are at once a powerful and a less-powerful group. They are powerful, because their educational capital provides them with a privileged position in the cultural field. They are less powerful because their modest income limits their influence in the economic field.

### **Morality and Politics in Southern Thailand**

It is from this context of accelerated change and the globalization of ethnic/religious codes that we re-examine the rise of ethnic and religious emotion in Southern Thailand: it is as women and men are discovering themselves in the numerous discussions with the researcher. The educated middle class is at home in educational institutions, comprising universities, research institutes, religious institutions, foundations, colleges, government schools, and Islamic schools. In addition,

women and men are activists in charities, associations, Qu'ran reading groups, social networks, meditation groups, non-government organizations (NGOs) and in the media. The emergent educated middle class coexists with an impoverished peasantry and occupies a space between big power and the mass of rural smallholders.

Lifestyle groups develop a moral crusade as a privileged project of ethnic groups in Southern Thailand. The structural change of the public sphere is being indicated from the angle of the moral state of society.<sup>1</sup> Lifestyles are becoming issues of political legitimization. In developing discourses on moral boundaries, the players present powerful standards of esteem and contempt, in which they distinguish the friend from the enemy. The question raised here concerns the rationality of the accentuation of cultural orders. What is the significance of a guided walk to a forest *wat* and its reporting in the local radio station? What is the significance of the spectacle of a public prayer in Patani Malay language and Qur'an citations, in which life conduct is embodied? In short, this study is sensitive to the symbolic worlds of the educated middle class and their spectacle of authenticity. It examines the practices and symbols that inter-cultural communication uses at this point in time.

### State of the Art

Chavivun (1993) points out in a review article on social sciences in Southern Thailand that studies on inter-cultural relationships are needed (e.g. Nishii 2001). Social sciences in Southern Thailand have concentrated on the traditions, folklore and arts of the region. This has produced some essentialised characterizations of Southern Thai identities and ways of life. In many works, scholars on Southern Thailand have taken culture for granted and present cultures as authentic cultures. Political considerations haunt the quality of research on Southern Thailand and continue to do so.<sup>2</sup>

The Institute of Southern Thai Studies in Songkla, without doubt the leading research institute, has focused on the documentation of Southern Thai history and culture, and links its research activities with the museum.

In this regard, Chaiwat (1992) argues that studies on Patani in the 1980s are political stories in which heroes and villains can be identified and in which academic and intellectual circles are, as we shall see, active participants as well as innovative agents in the representation of reality.

The master-discourse in Southern Thailand concerns the nationalist question and the reproduction of national intimacy in everyday life. The government has never been very successful in incorporating the

cultures of the south into the nation-state. The south is an ambiguous landscape in which Thai civilization ends and in which another history begins. Taking this ambiguity of national intimacy as a starting point, the focus on inter-cultural communication is crucial. In the identification and presentation of the self, the other is always present. While Buddhists and Muslim cross in everyday life, people very much live in separate lifeworlds and choose their friends from among their ethnic peers. The other is not to be trusted. Everyday interaction reinforces this narrative of 'us' and 'them'. It is as if the national border between Thailand and Malaysia is multiplied on many levels of Southern Thai society.

I saw the whole zone of Southern Thailand as a borderland and have organized my empirical data around the question of cultural boundaries between the cultural segments of the Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims.<sup>3</sup> In reflecting the multicultural character of the south and the political arenas and social struggles associated with it, this study focuses on the communication, plurality and work in which cultures are negotiated and made up.<sup>4</sup>

### **Communal Space**

'Communal Space' here refers to an associative, communal framework, in which activities can be carried out, in which practical knowledge can be recorded and in which a project can be pursued. An analysis of communal space requires an understanding of how participants utilize resources, cultural or symbolic, in the transmission and preservation of power and practical knowledge; how organizational arrangements of the association affect the continuity, encouragement or obstruction of the participation by leaders, followers, friends and members; how the members constitute or re-constitute their identity in public life or beyond: and how the community and its activities are linked and articulated with power relationships and the discourse of the state.

The study is particularly attentive to the social class of people who organize themselves into new forms of sociability, such as neighbourhoods, friendship circles, networks and communities and to the inner life of these spaces. The public sphere cannot be reduced to an idealized communicative space, in which a reasoning educated class openly exchanges views about power. Locally-based social movements display a variety of performative expressions in the public space, which has been overlooked in general discussions about civil society. This includes visions, claims and utopias, which are communicated in the public space through cultural and religious performances.



Wat Phra Kho, Reliquia, Songkla, South Thailand.

## **Visions, Claims and Utopias**

Southern Thailand is one of the main zones of contact between the main cultural worlds of Southeast Asia, namely the Malay Islamic and Thai Buddhist worlds. Indeed, the regional conceptualization of 'Southern Thailand' itself is problematic. The borderlines of the south as a region are constructed and reproduced by the Thai state and by Thai national institutions and organizations (Thongchai 1994, Bowie 1997). Much of the literature fails to make the problematic representation of Southern Thailand a conceptual starting point for the analysis of its multi-ethnic society and political arenas. The landscapes of Songkla and Patani are localities which are affiliated with strong emotions of belonging and home. The Thai-Malaysian border slides well-established kinship relationships and religious networks. Social and cultural relationships across the border continue to be meaningful and the moral communities criss-cross the political boundaries of the Thai state.

The present study, exploring as it does the cultural arenas of Southern Thailand, is concerned with the many new and uncharted cultural territories that question, subvert and counter the official discourse upholding hierarchical traditional cultural values, officializing and legitimizing political ideology and suppressing cultural differences. Especially in the past two decades, Thai culture has been undergoing a process of redefinition and reshaping and the hierarchical top-down ideology has been rapidly losing force. The case study aligns itself with the approach of scholars who show that the opposition between strong centralizing forces and weak local resistance is ideologically loaded and needs some rethinking as regards the complex mechanisms by which local players filter national imageries according to their specific needs. However, the nation-state is not the only game in town.

Cultural globalization has unleashed a strong cultural dynamic, which leads to the contestation of development models and to a negotiation of Westernization. This case-study aims to show the complex and ongoing negotiation and reconstruction of Thai-ness and national identity and the contested nature of provincial identities in one region.<sup>5</sup> While the post-colonial school has underlined the hegemonic and dominant location of national culture with regard to minority cultures, this case-study understands Thai-ness as an important site of social struggle.

Stivens (1998) provides an approach going beyond the public/private divide. She stresses that anxiety about gender relations is a central characteristic of many Asian leaders and of the principal cultural contests in the region (Stivens 1998: 2). Gender relations, women's sexuality and ideologies about family and domesticity emerge as important

fields of cultural competitions. Stivens shows that contests around the private spaces of modernity are dominant issues for the educated who are reworking ideologies about gender and the organization of the family and that the so-called private sphere has become a key site for the expression of the ambivalence about modernity. The ambiguous private sphere emerges as a politicised field, which is no longer a private sphere, but a contested issue in the public arena, with frequent debate in the media about the pressures and costs of juggling work and home, the nature of family life and proper and good Asian families and lifestyles.

This argument about the negotiation of the so-called private sphere on different levels of society links the private family to wider society and appreciates the multilayered complexity of political reality; this includes political action in everyday life and the symbols and rituals associated with everyday political actions (Gledhill 1994). Feminists have pointed to the multiple and shifting connections between the private realm of the household on the one hand and the market and state on the other: Sen/Stivens (1998) argue that such dualities (private and public) are collapsing completely in the modern world. Instead, they suggest that: ‘the construction of these supposedly private spheres has been a very public process in which state, economy and religion have all played extensive parts’ (Sen/Stivens 1998: 4). The example of Southern Thailand, shows how much the private has become a key site of social competition and how much the so-called ‘private’ sphere has been politicized.

Journalists, artists and academics, among them many women, are simultaneously creating, living in and contesting their own middle-class cultural forms. As Purushotam points out, the compliance of the lower-middle classes with the ‘normal family’ is not just produced through repression but through other far more subtle means, “including rising affluence itself and women’s own policing of their ongoing construction of a middle-class way of life” (Purushotam 1998: 10).

Furthermore, the private is a highly politicised and contested agenda in the new social movements in Southeast Asia. Being a pivotal nexus between the local and the global, private issues, such as the family and ‘correct’ life conduct, play a crucial role in the self-definitions of religious and cultural movements, which are popular among the educated middle classes. The speakers for the Buddhist and Islamic movements are the representatives of their cultures, which are increasingly defined by family, gender and sexuality.

This study highlights the construction of morality as a key field, in which the segments of the educated middle class are articulated and make themselves visible and in which the borders of the others are de-

veloped. It shows that the people themselves are actively involved in shaping the cultures of Southern Thailand.

Previous Studies on the Middle Classes in Southeast Asia

Table 1. Share and Growth of the Middle Classes in Thailand:<sup>6</sup>

	1960	1994
Thailand	15,2 %	30,4 %

Source: Pasuk/Baker (1997: 32).

Recognizing the negotiation of identity, Kahn turned towards a concern with the textual qualities of accounts of other cultures and of the knowledge in the society that produces it. Kahn has argued for a definition of the middle classes that relates them by reference not primarily to the relationships of production, but to the processes of modern state formation in the colonial and post-colonial periods. The site for the production of cultural images is to be in the political arena, in that nexus of relationships of power forged by modern state formation between employees of the state and civil society.

The questions are how are cultural images actually produced, how and by whom are the same cultural images contested and what alternative concepts of culture are being developed? What has to be explored are the social spaces of local movements in which the production and consumption of ‘cultural images’ can be realized. The cultural images of culture and modernity are being developed by Stivens (1998a) who asserts that gender relations are absolutely central to the making of the middle classes. She is especially interested in the terms under which women as a category enter into public discourse and rhetoric about national and ethnic identity within present-day reworkings of national and ethnic imageries. Stivens hypothesizes that the recent politicization of gender is tied to ideological remakings of the private/public divide within late modernity. The current reworkings of domestic ideology are key aspects of the cultural production of the new indigenous middle classes.

Stivens’ inclusion of gender relations and current reworkings of the public/private divide among Malay Muslim middle-class women is taken up in my chapters on the negotiation of the family, the consumption of cultural images and the making of moralities among young middle-class families (see Chapter 2). Stivens discusses the negotiation of gender relations among Malay families and shows that discourses of sex, gender and modernity are to be understood at the nexus of relation-



ships between family, religion, nation and cultural globalization. The public spheres are conceptualized as public spaces in which gender relations are a site of conflict, contestation and inherent outcomes. The perception of the family as a fundamental institution of values in crisis is in particular a key subject of legitimizing discourses in neo-Buddhist as well as Islamist discourse. I show that the production and consumption of cultural images translates into frugal lifestyles according to role patterns of popular religious and political leaders and intellectuals (such as Chamlong Srimuang, Prawes Wasi and Nik Aziz Nik Mat).

Lifestyle is a significant mode of social integration that is increasingly moving to centre-stage: why does lifestyle move to the centre-stage? One of the main arguments put forward in this study is that private and public spheres are increasingly blurred in modernity, making the private a highly politicized issue in the extended public sphere. In ignoring the private, and in separating the cultural from the political, Rüländ (1999) seems not to be able to catch the centrality of the new culture for the identity of the middle classes. Can it not be that the middle classes forward their own visions, claims and utopias, thus providing the state with additional legitimacy or contesting the political ideology of the state and its cultural politics?

The formation of the cultural identity of the middle classes can also be considered in a context of globalization. One of my aims is to reject simplistic arguments on the global homogenization of middle-class lifestyles (Robison/Goodman 1996). Instead, this study underlines the importance of culture and religion as important social fields in which alternative modernities can be expressed. Cultural images about life as a central cultural code are not only entangled in global networks and ideas, but also enter global cultural communication and in large part contribute in structuring global we-group formations.

Basically, the performance and demonstration of cultural images is seen as a process of communication and lifestyles are a central cultural sign with which the culture of the middle classes can be communicated in the public sphere. The focus is rather on the politics of everyday life and on the ways in which the identity of the middle-classes is negotiated in a particular setting at a particular historical juncture.

In Southern Thailand, cultural images of the good life are matched by lifestyles as blueprints for the organization of everyday life. Local signifiers are not replaced by Western symbols. Islamic or Buddhist networks, for instance, are rapidly extending to a global scale. The middle classes participate in the dissemination of new patterns of lifestyle and life-conduct. Lifestyles are systems of reference that in the case of the cultural periphery can be powerful markers in which alternatives to the Western models can be expressively identified. Kahn notes that not

only have the symbols of culture entered all areas of public life, but the cultural arena has itself become intensely politicized. Thailand and Malaysia are currently awash with symbols of traditional culture. Symbols of traditional culture are being used by the state and by the middle classes alike.

### **Religious Self-Affirmation in Southern Thailand**

Any analysis of religion in Southern Thailand must first note the coexistence of the Buddhist and Islamic religious fields. Theravada Buddhism is the official religion of Thailand. Buddhism is also an ethnic identifier that is closely associated with notions of Thai history, customs and selfhood as is Islam for Malay identity. This study looks at the contemporary religious tensions between the revitalized and globalised forms of Buddhism and Islam. This study in particular highlights the privatization of religion in Southern Thailand in the communities of Thai Buddhists and Malay speaking Muslims.<sup>7</sup> In Asia, the processes of secularization and rationalization have stimulated the growth of charismatic forms of religion among the emerging middle classes (Lee/Ackerman 1997). In Southern Thailand, Theravada Buddhism has been secularized, whereas Islam has not. For Buddhism, Songla and Nakhorn Sri Thammarat represent centres of Theravada, but also a border with Islam. Malay speaking Muslims in Patani are culturally bound to the Islamic strongholds of Kelantan and Trengganu on the east coast of northern Malaysia. The study is interested in exploring the practices of self-affirmation, the individualized appropriation of religion, the channelling of globalized networks and signs into local Buddhist and Muslim society and the use of religious forms in the cultural competition.

Taking issue with the production and consumption of cultural images, I will show the positionalities and politics of representation in competing public spheres that themselves have become arenas of competition and contestation in the transformation and global re-construction of locality. The aim is to present a more comprehensive and fine-grained analysis of sociocultural changes in Southern Thailand.



Mosque, Langkawi, Malaysia.

### **Outline of Chapters**

The book is divided into 3 Border Stories on Buddhist Muslim relationships in south Thailand, highlighting the crucial role of educated individuals in the resurgence of cultural and religious forms and in the escalation of cultural competition in south Thailand. The purpose of Chapter 1 has two related concerns. First, it provides a historical backdrop to social and cultural change. Second, the chapter draws on the narratives of typical middle class men and their concept of a 'worthy person'. A 'worthy person' corresponds to certain moral standards, which are defined and contested by Buddhist and Muslim segments of the educated middle class. Chapter 2 looks at the birth of consumers in south Thailand and portrays some families and their personal negotiation of cultural images about good life. I argue that the self and identity are increasingly defined through practices of consumption.

Largely unnoticed by the literature, social and religious networks have been established in Songkla and Patani. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are devoted to the presentation of the Thai Buddhist people's organisation in Songkla (*Klum Rao Rak Songkla*) and to the presentation of Islamic movements in Patani. From a dramaturgical perspective, the city becomes a front stage. Urban life is like a play in which roles are distributed and in which people engage in symbolic interaction. Strategies of selfhood—individual and communal—are explored in these movements where the so-called private sphere becomes a politicized subject of public concern. At first sight, the practices and discourses do not allow for comparison. But a closer look reveals striking parallels: both movements centre on models of legitimate behaviour and life-conduct, on the access to education and knowledge and both movements develop sophisticated patterns of social organisation and leadership. Activities are organised by a core group of leading local intellectuals who adopt the role of a parent. Both movements develop patterns of mobilisation and discipline of new members. Both movements recognise the increasing importance of the cultural market. Culture in this process becomes a key element in the negotiation and contestation of new class relations and the genesis and change of society more generally. By realising cultural productions, the socio-religious movements are increasingly able to set the standards of legitimate models of behaviour. The leadership is upgrading the cultural field, thereby creating and defending a communal space which is steadily nourished and supplied with the movement's own media/knowledge/cultural material. In the process of constructing and conceiving space, new positions emerge in the social arena which are being occupied by the new class of educators. The production of small-scale community media is absolutely central to the articulation of the socio-religious core groups and their members. Community media, private radio, print media, pamphlets, brochures and videos provide a new dimension to the making and distribution of public opinion. The role of the community media are analysed in Chapter 4. Social memory is central in the making of a society and in the production or challenging of the social order. Southern Thailand's cultural heritage becomes part of culture as a contested space. In the politics of selective remembering and forgetting, middle class agents become archaeologists, historians and architects of collective identities. The appropriations of partial interpretations of Southern Thailand's history constitute a crucial part of cultural identity assertion. The re-enactment of the past in commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices is shown in the second half of Chapter 4. The identity politics in Southern Thailand are taken up in Chapter 5. The concluding remarks provide a summary about how the cultural seg-

ments of the middle classes discursively construct, contest and re-imagine Southern Thailand in pluri-cultural society and political arenas.

