



“Rao Rak Nay Luang”: Crafting Malay Muslims’ Subjectivity through the Sovereign Thai Monarch¹

Anusorn Unno *

Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, Thammasat University, Thailand

Received 2 April 2016; Received in revised form 21 August 2016

Accepted 22 November 2016; Available online 13 December 2017

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which Malay Muslims of southern Thailand engage with the Thai state amidst the recent unrest in the region. It argues that a group of Malay Muslims chose to participate in a state ceremony as the king's subjects rather than as citizens of the Thai state by exploring the significance of the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” (Rao Rak Nay Luang, or We love Mr. King) that appears on a ceremonial platter they made for the event. In terms of sovereignty with regard to the state of exception, the sentence suggests that these Malay Muslims have put the king, who can be conceived as the Thai state in a state of exception, into an exceptional state. This makes it possible for them to demystify the god-like monarch in a way that allows them to engage with him without compromising their religious principles. In terms of subjectivity and agency, the sentence illustrates that these Malay Muslims were able to craft their subjectivity as the king's subjects, and to exercise agency through the king's sovereignty. This is possible because of their perception of the king as a protector of their ethnicity and religion. Whilst enabling Malay Muslims to engage state authorities with authority, this subjectification process however is self-contradictory, as subjectivity is crafted by stripping the king of his god-like features, whilst agency is enacted by treating the king as the sovereign. Moreover, the central feature of the king's sovereignty, which resides in his ability to suspend the application of law, implies privilege, whereas Malay Muslims have been demanding equality and justice. Rather than the exceptional king in an exceptional state, it should be the Thai state with fragmented and flexible sovereignty that is a means through which Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand can realize their ethno-religious concerns and political aspirations.

Keyword

Malay Muslims, Southernmost Thailand, Subjectivity, Agency, Sovereignty

¹ This article was drawn primarily from the author's two related works. The first one is “We Love Mr. King.”: Exceptional Sovereignty, Submissive Subjectivity, and Mediated Agency in Islamic Southern Thailand (Unno, 2011). The second one, which is the elaboration of part of the first one, is “*Khuen Ni Mai Mi ‘Dangdut’*”: *Amnat Nuea Chiwit Kab Kan Sang Tuaton Lae Kan Sadaeng Ok Sueng Sakkayapap Hang Ton Khong Chao Malayu Nai Changwat Chaidan Pak Tai* (Unno, 2015).

Introduction

During a hot, breezy afternoon in a Malay-Muslim village in Southern Thailand, a typical conversation at a roadside pavilion was halted and reoriented when a ceremonial platter was brought in by a schoolchild. It was a platter made for the parade and the opening ceremony of “*Tadika Sumpun*,” an intramural sports game among the *Tadika* – the traditional Islamic elementary schools in the Raman district of Yala province. The platter containing tricolored sticky rice had the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” (Rao Rak Nay Luang) inscribed meaning “We love the King.” It would not have drawn much attention from those at the pavilion if the word “King” had been spelled as it should have been. Instead of “ในหลวง” (Nai Luang), “the King” – the most commonly used phrase for designating the current Thai monarch – what was inscribed was “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang), a term which literally means “Mister Luang”, and which, for the Thai-speaking people of the Central Region of the kingdom, has nothing to do with the Thai monarch.

After my remarks on the title “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang), there were various reactions from the others at the pavilion. Some were surprised and said they had never realized that the spelling was incorrect before, despite its virtual omnipresence, especially after the nationwide state-supported campaigns of “เรารักในหลวง” (Rao Rak Nai Luang) or “We love the King.”² Others – especially those who had been involved in making the platter – seemed embarrassed, as they had been particularly attentive in making it, and it had already been displayed in the parade and at the official opening ceremony where senior government officials were present. “It should not have happened” one of them said in disappointment. Still, although some wondered if the phrase “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang) could be considered blasphemy to the highly-revered Thai monarch, most of them did not take the issue seriously, turning it into a minor mistake and joke among themselves.

“เรารักนายหลวง” would have simply passed as an illiteracy problem, a failure of formal education, or an unintended consequence of the state’s propaganda, had it not been written by a group of Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand, during a period when they were

² The status and role of the monarchy and especially of the king, which had significantly declined since the 1932 Revolution, has been restored and strengthened since the 1950s. As a result of decades-long state efforts to emphasize the king’s involvement in development projects and his frequent visits to rural areas, most Thais have come to appreciate the king’s devotion to the well-being of the country and especially of his subjects. Building on widespread sentiments of gratitude towards the monarch, in 2006, as part of the sixtieth anniversary celebration of the king’s accession to the throne, the Thai government launched a nationwide campaign that used the sentence “We love the king;” the sentence has become common among Thais since then.

attempting to negotiate their identity, ethnicity and religion, at times resulting in unrest in the region. Long held by *Tadika* in cooperation with the mosques of each sub-district, “*Tadika Sumpun*” was organized in 2007 by the Office of the Raman District at the district level. Despite the Office’s claims that it helped ease *Tadika*’s financial burden, *Tadika* personnel believed that the Office’s real purpose in taking over “*Tadika Sumpun*” was to closely monitor traditional Islamic schools, which security agencies deemed to be a breeding ground for the militant Islam that in part allegedly accounted for the recent unrest. Their discontent and unwillingness notwithstanding, *Tadika* personnel had no choice but to participate in the now state-held “*Tadika Sumpun*” in the capacity of “invited guests,” unless they wanted to be suspected or accused of resisting the state or worse, of getting involved with the unrest.

Rather than participating as just citizens, these Malay Muslims chose to participate in “*Tadika Sumpun*” as the king’s subjects, as articulated in the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” that appeared on the ceremonial platter. Taking cues from anthropological discussions on subjectivity and agency in relation to sovereignty, this article examines the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” and its related practices as ways in which Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand craft their subjectivity and enact agency through the sovereign Thai monarch. It argues that by putting the Thai monarch, who embodies state sovereignty in a “state of exception” (Agamben, 2005), in an exceptional state, Malay Muslims are able to craft their subjectivity and to enact agency through the Thai monarch without compromising their ethno-religious identity and allegiance.

The Parade and the Opening Ceremony: The Thai State and the Monarch

During the morning of 25 June 2009, a main street in downtown Raman was crowded with hundreds of *Tadika* schoolchildren and teachers, Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO) members, and government officials who were parading to a sports field in front of the district building for the opening ceremony of “*Tadika Sumpun*.” Parade participants – mostly local Malays – were in glamorous and colorful costumes. Schoolgirls who carried sub-district name-plates wore exquisite traditional Malay dresses, and female teachers were in formal Malay dress with headscarves on. Male teachers wore exquisite Malay short-sleeve shirts and long pants. Students were in school uniforms and sports outfits while government officials, many of whom were Thai Buddhists, were in formal clothing. Some parade participants carried gold and silver flowers, likening the parade to a royal procession of Malay rulers in the past, whereas others held national flags as well as images of the king in their hands to represent their current status as citizens of Thailand and their allegiance to the king. In addition, representatives of the *Tadika* of each sub-district carried delicately decorated ceremonial platters, some inscribed with words revering the king.

Once the parade arrived at the sports field, they split into rows, each representing the *Tadika* of a certain sub-district. Participants stood facing a flagpole and a makeshift ceremonial stand where the platters were placed among other ritual items including a large image of the king and two national flags. There was also a tent in which senior government officials – most of whom were Thai Buddhists – sat on comfortable couches. The official opening ceremony of “Tadika Sumpun” began with the Raman district chief’s reading of a report to the deputy governor of Yala province who presided over the ceremony. The background of the event was outlined and its aims explained in terms of creating love and unity among the people in the nation in times of unrest in the region.

After the district chief finished his report, the deputy governor walked to the ceremonial stand to light candles in order to pay respect to the king’s image. This ritual was followed by the raising of the national flag, during which all participants, including the government officials, stood to attention and sang the national anthem. Afterwards, everyone sang the royal anthem and the *Sadudee Maharaja* song to pay respect to the king, marking the end of the opening ceremony and the beginning of the sports games, which lasted until the evening.

As a state ceremony, the parade and especially the opening ceremony were aimed at reinforcing the identity of the participants as citizens of Thailand as well as their loyalty to the nation. This was done by means of having the participants carry national flags and standing to attention and singing the national anthem while the flag of Thailand was raised. Following the lyrics of the national anthem (below), the participants were reminded that they are Thais, obliged to sacrifice their lives for the nation.

*Thailand unites the flesh and blood of Thais.
Nation of the people; belonging to the Thais in every respect.
Long maintained [has been] the independence
Because Thais seek love and unity.
Thais are peace-loving;
But at war we are no cowards.
Our Sovereignty will not be threatened.
Sacrificing every drop of blood for the nation
Hail the nation of Thailand, long last the victory, Hurrah!*

The Thai state, however, does not correspond solely to the nation – but also to the monarch. This is because the Thai state ideology consists of the Nation, Religion, and Monarch. The Monarch is the most important of the three elements. On the one hand, the monarch is regarded as “center of all Thais’ hearts” (*Soon ruam jai Thai thung chart*), implying that the nation cannot exist without the monarch. Instead of the nation, as suggested by Anderson (1996), it is the monarch that Thai soldiers usually declare they are willing to die

for. On the other hand, the monarch is constitutionally and traditionally regarded as the Upholder of Religions, meaning that no religion can prosper in the kingdom without the monarch's support and protection. The ideological significance of the monarch in relation to the nation and to religion is reified in the design of the national flag, where the dark blue stripe which symbolizes the monarch is placed in the middle, with the two white stripes symbolizing religion on either side of it. The red stripes symbolizing the nation are outermost. This shows that, although the monarch is not explicitly addressed by the lyrics of the national anthem, he is – literally – the most central element as shown in the Thai flag.



Figure 1 Thailand's national flag

In addition to the national flag-raising ritual where the king was addressed as an element of state ideology along with the two other elements, he is also addressed by means of items and rituals in which he is directly associated. Some parade participants carried images of the king and ceremonial platters inscribed with words revering the monarch. Importantly, all participants also stood to attention and sang the royal anthem, whose lyrics praise the king and strengthen the loyalty of his subjects. Below is a translation of the royal anthem.

*We, servants of His great Majesty,
Prostrate our hearts and heads
to pay respect to the ruler, whose merits are boundless,
outstanding in the great Chakri dynasty,
the greatest of Siam,
with great and lasting honor,
(We are) secure and peaceful because of your royal rule,
results of the King's care
(is) people in happiness and in peace,*

*May it be that
whatever you will,
be done
according to the hopes of your great heart
as we wish (you) victory, hurrah!*

The opening ceremony of “*Tadika Sumpun*” is therefore a spatio-temporal dimension in which the monarch becomes manifest both as an element of state ideology as well as through items and rituals that are directly related to him. As a result, the identity that the ceremony reinforces is not so much that of citizens of the Thai state, but rather of subjects of the king. This is also the main reason why a group of Malay Muslims from a village of southern Thailand chose to inscribe the sentence “*Rao Rak Nay Luang*” on the platter they made for “*Tadika Sumpun*.”

The Ceremonial Platter: Crafting Royal Subjects

When I asked *Mung*, the individual in charge of making the platter, why the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” was inscribed on it, he said that it was not the result of demands from the district. The district, he explained, had only asked for a beautiful platter for the parade and the opening ceremony, leaving great freedom to the imagination and creativity of the *Tadika* of each sub-district. He said the sentence was proposed by *Kak Dah*, a village-level public health volunteer and a member of the “housewife group.” *Kak Dah*, in turn, said that she wanted to imitate the ceremonial platters she saw during those state ceremonies she attended on behalf of her state-supported groups – especially those made by Thai Buddhists and by state agencies. Other village public health volunteers and “housewife group” members who were there agreed with her idea on the ground that such a sentence is commonly seen in state ceremonies. They said that to be Thai is to express loyalty to the king – especially in these kinds of events. *Tadika* schoolchildren, who provided assistance for making the platter, also had no objection, as the sentence was very familiar to them from both school textbooks and school activities as well as from the various mass media which they spent much of their free time on. *Mung* further claimed that *Kak Dah*’s idea was the decision of the majority. He added that, as a “cultural specialist” and a “local artist,” his duty was only to decorate the platter.

The platter contained cooked sticky rice dyed in three colors, each of which represents each of the three fundamental institutions of Malay Muslims – their religion (white), their nation (red), and their race (yellow). However, *Mung* explained that, in addition to their race, yellow also referred to the *raja* – the king – because race is a group of people whom by nature are ruled and led by a *raja*, as it would be difficult or almost impossible for a race to exist and prosper without the reign and the guidance of a *raja*. On top of the platter was a hard-boiled egg which symbolized life.

Taken together, the platter conveyed the meaning that Malay Muslims' life is based on or supported by the three pillars of religion, nation, and race or raja. *Mung* said that the tradition of ceremonial platter making has existed for centuries. He added that originally the cone shape of the platter symbolized Mount Meru, which has a specific meaning in Hindu mythology, but after their ancestors converted to Islam, this symbolism was abandoned despite the persistence of the ceremonial platter tradition.



Figure 2 Ceremonial Platter: เรา้ก (Rao Rak)



Figure 3 Ceremonial Platter: นายหลวง (Nay Luang)

It is noteworthy that the symbolism of the ceremonial platter corresponds to that of the national flag. However, while the two red stripes are meant to represent the Thai nation, it remains unclear what nation the red cooked sticky rice refers to. *Mung* himself did not specify what he means by “the nation.” On the one hand, red sticky rice may refer to the Thai nation as in the national flag. On the other hand, it may denote the Malay nation to which separatists in previous decades claimed to belong to and which remains the inspiration of some Malays of southern Thailand. In addition, while the two white stripes are often associated with Buddhism, within this context the white cooked sticky rice definitely refers to Islam, the religion of Malays of southern Thailand. It is only in the dark blue stripe and the yellow cooked sticky rice, which represent, respectively, monarch and raja, that these two different claims to symbolism are rendered compatible. In the context of the ceremonial platter, the latter specifically denotes the current Thai monarch, as highlighted by the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง.”

How is the king capable of serving as common ground to claims which appear so incompatible? Why did these Malays not feel any contradiction in expressing their love to the king the way they did when it came to the question of religion and the nation? The answer, I argue, lies in the ideological significance of the king in relation to the state. As I mentioned earlier, the reason why the king is the most important element of state ideology is that without the king, the two other elements – nation and religion – would find it difficult or impossible to survive. The reason why the king is capable of such a task is that he has been promoted as transcending all ethno-religious differences. Although he is a Buddhist, the monarch is constitutionally and traditionally regarded as the Upholder of Religions – including Islam. As a result, whilst Islam finds it difficult to fit in the “religion” category of state ideology because of the latter’s strong association with Buddhism, it can find support and protection in the “monarch” category. Likewise, although he is an ethnic Thai, the monarch is constitutionally regarded as the Head of State, and, more recently, as Father of the Land, whose benevolence supposedly extends to all the citizens of the country regardless of their ethnicity. Whilst Malay ethnicity finds it not easy to fit in the “nation” category of state ideology because of the latter’s association with Thai ethnicity, it can similarly find support and protection in the “monarch” category. This category therefore makes it possible for Malay Muslims to reside within the territory of the Thai-Buddhist state, which is notorious for its ethno-religious discriminations.

Mung said that the reason why his fellow villagers do not find it difficult to respect the Thai king is because monarchy is a tradition they have long been familiar with – one that they can trace back to the Malay Raja era. However, he added that this also has to do with the way the villagers perceived King Bhumibol. He said that although villagers in general are “indifferent” to the king, they do not feel oppressed under his reign. They may dislike state

authorities – especially security authorities – but they do not relate either such state authorities or the government to the king. *Kak Dah*, a member of numerous state-supported groups, similarly claimed she does not think that the king is discriminatory in terms of ethnicity and religion, although she finds that certain state authorities are. She also added that “it is not only Thais who can love the king. Malays too, can love the king.” *Asroh*, a Grade 6 schoolboy who helped make the platter, also claimed that he has no problem with the king because “the king is good to us Malays. He is good to Islam too.” In addition, although some villagers – like many people across the country – make comments and “gossip” about some members of the royal family, none expressed their dislike of the king to me or in public.³

The question then, is why the king is perceived as unrelated to the government and to state agencies despite his involvement in or his influence on both. The reason, I argue, can be found in an ad-hoc political strategy concocted by the Thai ruling elites precisely for dealing with matters related to ethno-religious differences.

The Thai Monarch: Thai State’s Sovereignty in a State of Exception

As soon as the borders of Siam were demarcated, its ruling elites were preoccupied with finding ways for connecting peoples of different ethnicities and religions within their territory. Doing so was particularly important as the French utilized a racial justification for expanding their control over the Lao and Khmer who they claimed belonged to French Indochina. Faced with such logic of race, King Rama V and his advisers advanced that the peoples living within Siam belonged to *Chat Thai* – the Thai nation – which transcended local linguistic and cultural differences, and implemented measures to suppress “primordial attachments” among ethnic groups across the territory in favor of a “common heritage” (Keyes, 1971, 1995). Anyone residing in the Siamese Kingdom belonged to the Thai nation as long as they met certain criteria, one of which was to be loyal to the king as his subjects.

King Rama V’s “inclusive” nation-building project was, however, not pursued by his successor, King Rama VI, who associated the Thai nation with ethnic Thais alone (Keyes, 1971, 1997) and introduced a nationalist ideology through compulsory primary education, state propaganda, official rewriting of history, militarism, and the affirmation of the identity of monarchy and nation (Anderson, 1996). Some leaders of the 1932 Revolution reinforced such an “exclusive” nation-building project by creating the notion of “Tai,” which allowed them

³ It should be noted that, in addition to general help and support, Malay Muslims have received special attention from the king as well as from other royal family members. For example, the king made personal donations to the construction and renovation of several mosques in the South. The king also has a Malay Muslim “close friend” named *Wa-deng Pu-teh* (who is the king’s only commoner friend) and their relationship is said to be cordial and intimate. This, combined with the strength of state-supported propaganda for the king, makes it understandable why Malay Muslims have positive attitudes toward him.

to link all the Tai-speaking peoples inside and outside the country's borders under the Pan-Thai Movement, or *Maha Anachak Thai* (Great Thai Empire), across the region (Keyes, 1995, Scupin, 1986; Dulyakasem, 1988). Thai nationalist ideology was then forcefully promoted under the government of Field Marshal Pibul Songkram (Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud, 1994; Che Man, 1990; Haemindra, 1977; Scupin, 1986; Dulyakasem, 1988; Yegar, 2002) and then discontinued during Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat's government. The latter restored the role of the monarch and resumed the previous "inclusive" nation-building project. How the Thai nation is defined and built is therefore related to how the king's sovereignty is conceptualized and put into practice.

In ancient Siam, the kings' legitimacy derived from their perceived status of *Devaraja* – King-Gods in Hindu mythology. Faced with Western discourses of science and modernity, King Rama IV and the Siamese elites rid kingship of such supernatural beliefs, and adopted instead the Buddhist notion of *Dhammaraja*, where the king's legitimacy derived from his abiding to *Dasabhidha-Rajadhamma* – the Ten Kingly Virtues of Buddhism. The 1932 Revolution, which marked the shift from absolute monarchy to democracy, then transferred sovereignty from the king to the people, reducing the influence of the king on politics. This was particularly evident during the government of Field Marshal Phibun, who fashioned himself as the country's leader. However, the king's role was restored during the government of Field Marshal Sarit, which reintroduced and created several royal ceremonies, and which powerfully switched the date for National Day from the anniversary of the 1932 Revolution to the king's birthday. Initially, young King Bhumibol led the country as a *Dhammaraja*, but was later increasingly "re-mystified" as *Devaraja* by means of royal ceremonies, state propaganda, and mass media. King Bhumibol has prerogatives and powers that are far greater than what the English-modeled constitutional monarchy would allow for (see Handley, 2006; Ivarsson & Isager, 2010; Suwannathat-Pian, 2003; Phongpaichit & Baker, 1997; Chaloeontiarana, 2007; Winichakul, 2008).

The question of the king's sovereignty of the monarchy's involvement in politics is often framed in two ways. On the one hand, it is framed in terms of how the monarchy has been used instrumentally by political leaders – and, especially, by army generals – in order to serve their own interests, without the monarchy's involvement. This strand of thinking is evident in scholarly works focused on how Field Marshal Sarit sought legitimacy from attaching himself to the monarchy after staging a coup against Field Marshal Plaek (see Chaloeontiarana, 2007 for an example). On the other hand, it is framed in terms of how the monarchy itself has become a major political actor in Thai politics. This strand of thinking is evident in scholarly works that examine the monarchy's role in politics since General Prem's era. Initially this line of work was framed under Gramsci's notion of hegemony, arguing that the king's initiatives have been employed to create royal hegemony (see Chitbundit, 2007).

The monarchy's *modus operandi* was then examined by McCargo (2005) through his notion of "network monarchy," which proposed that the monarchy operates through an informal network of elites composed of military leaders, bureaucrats and the "palace" centered on General Prem, the president of the Privy Council. McCargo maintained that this network has reinvented itself in order to cope with the process of democratization that has followed the May 1992 incident. Recently, Mérieau (2016) argued that McCargo's notion of "network monarchy" is unable to adequately conceptualize the institutionalized basis of Thailand's elite network, evident in the 2006 and 2014 coups. Drawing on the concept of the "Deep State," she argued that the judicialization – especially through the Constitutional Court – has been an attempt to institutionalize Thailand's Deep State in order to protect it from the challenges of both democratization and royal succession.,

I pursue the latter line of thought but in a different direction, focusing instead on the king's sovereignty. Given the identicalness between the king and the state, discussed earlier, the question of the king's sovereignty can be framed as the question of the sovereignty of the state. It is an anthropological discussion of sovereignty with regards to the "state of exception" that I find relevant here.

Writing in response to Agamben's notion of sovereignty and the state of exception (see Agamben, 1998), Ong argues that the state of exception can be conceptualized more broadly as "an ordinary departure in policy that can be deployed to include as well as to exclude" (Ong, 2006, p. 5). She also adds that in practice, sovereignty is manifested in multiple, contradictory strategies. Rather than a simple opposition between normativity and exception, as Agamben would have it, sovereign power, argues Ong, is a "shifting and flexible ensemble of heterogeneous calculations, choices, and exceptions that constitute security, life, and ethics" (ibid., p. 10). Drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality – the right disposition of things, arranged so as to lead to a convenient end (Foucault, 1991, p. 93) – Ong proposes a notion of neoliberal exception arguing that, rather than simply an economic doctrine, neoliberalism is the most recent development of biopolitics and in particular is a governmentality that "relies on market knowledge and calculations for politics of subjection and subject-making" (Ong, 2006, p. 13). She argues that this kind of governmentality is exercised in a state of exception because, in encountering global markets, regulatory institutions, and transnational NGOs, many "Third World" states have no choice but to resort to creating "special economic zones" where they allow the criteria of other sovereign powers to be imposed. In this state of exception, she argues, the state becomes "graduated sovereignty" – the effects of a flexible management of sovereignty – as it moves from "being administrators of a watertight national entity to regulators of diverse spaces and populations that link with global markets" (ibid., p. 78).

Taking cues from Ong's notion of "neoliberal exception," I advance that the Kingdom of Thailand can be conceived as a state of exception that sees Thailand as a democratic state created in dealing with the question of ethno-religious difference. As mentioned earlier, faced with European colonial expansion and with the question of how to connect peoples of different ethnicities and religions in a newly-demarcated territory, King Rama V created an "inclusive" nation claiming that everyone living in the Kingdom belonged to the Thai nation. Although disrupted by subsequent rulers, this project has resumed under King Bhumibol. There is, however, a difference between the "inclusive" nation under the reign of King Rama V and the one that has followed the 1932 Revolution. During the reign of King Rama V, the kingdom coincided with the state, and sovereignty belonged to the absolutist king. After the 1932 Revolution, the kingdom and the state have separated, because, following the democratic model, sovereignty belongs to the people. Despite this, the concept of kingdom has remained intact along with that of a democratic state, as manifested in the country's official name – the Kingdom of Thailand – and in the state ideology which stresses the importance of the monarch.

The reason why the concept of the kingdom has been kept intact has a lot to do with how the Thai state deals with the question of ethno-religious difference. Rather than a democratic state committed to equality and to the rights of its citizen, the monarch comes into the picture when it comes to the question of ethnicity and religion. The monarch is constitutionally regarded as the Upholder of Religions and the Head of State, whose benevolence covers all his subjects, whereas the Thai state, which is only associated with Buddhism and ethnic Thais (both at the ideological level and in practice), is notorious for ethno-religious discrimination. However, given the identicalness between the state and the monarch, it is misleading to place the two against one another. Rather, the monarch should be read as a configuration or the embodiment of the Thai state when it deals with the question of ethnicity and religion. Or, to put it in Ong's words, the Thai state has resorted to a "state of exception" by creating a "special political zone" – the Kingdom of Thailand – when it deals with ethnicities and religions other than Thai and Buddhism. This allows the criteria of other ethnicities and religions to be imposed on its peoples and places along with those of the sovereign monarch.

Although allowing the criteria of other forms of sovereignty to be imposed, the sovereignty of the Thai state in such a state of exception is not exercised in a flexible manner. Rather than the kind of "graduated sovereignty" suggested by Ong, the Thai state in its disguise is still "undifferentiated sovereignty" and continues to take the nation as its major concern as manifested in state ideology in which the king is directly associated with the nation. This is particularly the case if we take into account the ways the king's sovereignty is conceptualized in the country's polity. Instead of being placed under the constitution

according to the principle of constitutional monarchy, the king is placed above the constitution, as clearly stated in Article 8 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand: "The King shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship and shall not be violated. No person shall expose the King to any sort of accusation or action." What this entails is that the king is legally placed inside and outside the law at the same time. At this point, I find Agamben's discussion of sovereignty to be of great relevance.

Agamben argues that the problem of sovereignty is often reduced to the question of who, within the political order, is invested with what powers, whilst the threshold of the political order which he calls "the state of exception" is never called into question (Agamben, 1998). He argues that it was Carl Schmitt who established the connection between sovereignty and such a threshold of the political order (Agamben, 2005) as Schmitt defined the sovereign as the one who "decides on the state of exception" (Schmitt quoted in Agamben, 1998, p. 12). Agamben maintains that, according to Schmitt, the nature of the sovereign is paradoxical in that the sovereign is simultaneously inside and outside the juridical order, as having the legal power to suspend the application of law, the sovereign legally places himself outside the law (Agamben, 1998). Because the Thai monarch is constitutionally placed outside the law, or inside and outside the law at the same time, he is the sovereign in Agamben's sense.⁴

The Thai monarch's sovereignty in relation to the state of exception is therefore paradoxical. As a state of exception created in response to the question of ethnicity and religion, the Thai monarch is supposed to exercise his sovereignty in a flexible and fragmented manner. This would at least seem to be the case if we consider the Thai monarch's status of Upholder of Religions and Head of State – one that is flexible or fragmented enough to cover all ethnicities and religions. If we take into account the Thai monarch's juridico-political status as articulated in the country's constitution and code of criminal procedure, things appear to be slightly different. With an exclusive or exceptional power to suspend the application of law, indeed, the Thai monarch's sovereignty cannot be differentiated or shared. Paradoxically, it is these features of the Thai monarch's sovereignty that allow a group of Malay Muslims of southern Thailand to both craft their subjectivity and enact agency whilst engaging with the Thai state.

⁴ The Thai monarch's ability to suspend the application of law, which makes him the sovereign in Agamben's sense, can be seen in his prerogative to revoke the death penalty as stated in Article 262 of the Code of Criminal Procedure.

“Rao Rak Nay Luang”: Crafting Subjectivity and Enacting Agency through the Exceptional Sovereign

One day while we sat chatting at a roadside pavilion, I asked *Kak Dah* what she meant by the word “เรา” (Rao, or We) in the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” (Rao Rak Nay Luang), and she said that she was referring to “Malay people.” I then asked her if she felt uneasy, given that the sentence is seemingly designed primarily for Thai people, and she said: “No. It’s OK for Malays to love the king. We Malays can love the king too.” So I asked *Kak Moh*, who also helped make the ceremonial platter, if she agreed with *Kak Dah*, and she replied that she did. She added that “We reside in Thailand, so we are Thai too.” This position was shared by others at the pavilion. No one said that Malays do not like the king.

While the meaning of the word “เรา” (Rao) is straightforward, the phrase “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang) is not. Alone with *Mung*, I asked what he meant by “Nay Luang,” and he said he was referring to “the king.” When I asked him further what he meant by “นาย” (Nay), he explained that the term can have two different meanings, depending on the language that is used. In Thai, he explained, “นาย” (Nay) means “Mister,” and the phrase “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang) therefore means “Mister Luang,” which may or may not denote the king. In Malay, however “นาย” (Nay) is part of the word “Toh Nay” which refers to Thai Buddhist government officials from Bangkok or from other Thai Buddhist-dominated provinces. When combined with “หลวง,” (Luang) the Malay word “นาย” (Nay) gives the impression of the chief of government officials – that is, the king. However, *Mung* added that, given that “Toh Nay” is used by Malays from previous generations whereas many of the platter makers were young, it is more likely that what they meant by “นาย” (Nay) was “Mister.” And given that “หลวง” (Luang) is usually related to the king, *Mung* said it is likely that many of the platter makers meant “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang) “Mister King.”

With *Mung*’s explanation in mind, I asked other platter makers the same question and received similar answers. *Kak Dah* said what she meant by “นาย” (Nay) was “Mister,” because the king is “a man.” She also added that local Malays pronounce “Toh Nay” “Toh Nae” and that “นาย” (Nay) does not therefore refer to “Toh Nay.” Likewise, *Asroh* claimed he had hardly heard of the Malay terms “Toh Nay” or “Toh Nae,” and that, to him, “นาย” (Nay) is a Thai word which means “Mister.” In addition, both *Kak Dah* and *Asroh* agreed that “หลวง” (Luang) denotes either the king or something related to the king. As such, for these Malay platter makers, “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang) is a Thai phrase which, when translated word by word, means “Mister King.”

The fact that the phrase “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang) denotes the king but literally means “Mister King” is important. It illustrates how the sovereign monarch is put into an exceptional state which allows Malay Muslims to engage with him without compromising their religious

principles. That is to say, although constitutionally regarded as Upholder of Religions, the king is increasingly re-mystified as a god-like sovereign especially through royal ceremonies associated with Hinduism and Brahmanism. This mythical and theological feature of the king poses a challenge to Malay Muslims because, as Muslims they are not allowed to revere any supreme beings other than Allah. The sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” or “We love Mr. King” therefore makes it possible for them to engage with the king without compromising their religious principles. First, the word “love” denotes an intimate relationship and not an act of solemn worship or reverence. Secondly, the word “Mister” denotes a human being and not a god or a supernatural being. Taken together, “เรารักนายหลวง” or “We love Mr. King” is thus the expression of an intimate human relationship, and not a solemn reverence of the followers of a Supreme Being. The expression therefore puts the sovereign monarch into a state of exception by stripping him of his god-like features, in order to render such an intimate human relationship possible.

It should however be noted that the platter makers did not intend to “strip” the king of his god-like sovereign features in the first place, as they thought “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang) was an accurate spelling. Not only were they surprised when made aware of the mistake; they were also amazed when they heard me making sense of, or interpreting the word. Some said that, although they were not aware of the accurate spelling or its connotation, they agreed that that the word “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang) had nothing to do with a god-like sovereign, making it possible for them to engage with the king with intimacy. Others said they did not think that far. To them the king is a human being, regardless of what people call him. As one of them put it, “The king is a human like us. It doesn’t matter what people call him in Thai. He’s still a human. So we love him as a human and we don’t revere him as if he were God or as ‘Father’ as the Thais do.”

Whatever these Malay Muslims have in mind, the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” has practical effects. The district deputy who oversaw and coordinated the event greeted them with a smile when noticing what was inscribed on the platter. He, who seemed not to notice the awkward spelling, said the king, especially after the recent unrest in the region, was concerned about their safety and livelihood and that it was therefore appropriate that they made a ceremonial platter with words revering the king. He added that the king was concerned about all his subjects regardless of their ethnicity and religion. As a consequence, *Kak Dah* later commented that the group had made the right decision in inscribing the sentence on the platter as this made her feel confident in participating in the opening ceremony with many high-level government officials. She added that it also helped prevent her and other local Malays from being suspected of sympathizing with the movement. As she put it, “They [state authorities] like us to do that [to express their love and loyalty to the king] because they don’t want us to side with the movement.” The sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” then

allowed these Malay Muslims to engage with state authorities as royal subjects with authority and without having to pay allegiance to those state authorities with whom they are discontent. This subjectivity and agency is comparable to those discussed in contemporary anthropological studies of women in religious realms.

Frisk (2009) contends that the feminist notions of liberatory subject and subversive agency are inadequate, as they hide certain women's actions that are inconceivable by the logic of repression and resistance.⁵ Women's religious practices within orthodox Islam do not necessarily challenge patriarchal structure. Nor are women victims of Islamization. Rather than viewing Malaysian women's educative activities and their performances of religious duties as either resistance to male-dominated social order, false consciousness or internalized patriarchal oppression, she investigates them as a means through which Malaysian women develop agency within the orthodox Islamic context. She argues that, while acknowledging male dominance and authority, Malaysian women, by assuming the identity of *Mukmin* – pious person – at the same time emphasize men's and women's equal responsibility towards God and as such are enabled to challenge male interpretations of the Koran – especially those of their husbands. Likewise, Mahmood (2001; 2005) argues that Islamic virtues such as modesty, shyness and patience, which Egyptian women sought to cultivate and which are contradictory to the secular and liberal notion of agency, are in fact these women's form of agency.

In Christianity, Mack (2003) maintains that Quaker women insisted that their actions were performed not as acts of will but as acts of obedience to God. He argues: "If we think of agency as both the capacity for effective action and the free choice to act, we might say that Quaker women's actions were effective but not intentional. [...] Quaker women defined agency not as the freedom to do what one wants but as the freedom to do what is right. Since 'what is right' was determined by absolute truth or God as well as by individual conscience, agency implied obedience as well as the freedom to make choices and act on

⁵ Foucault (1997) proposes a notion of subjectivation, arguing that the technology to ensure the exercise of power also contributes to the formation of subject. Ong (2003; 2006) elaborates on such a notion pointing out that, while being subject to technologies of control, one is tied to one's own identity by a conscience of self-knowledge. Its contribution notwithstanding, certain observers find Foucault's notion of subjectivation limited. McNay (2000; 2003), for example, points out that such a notion is negative as the subject is understood in passive terms as an effect of discursive structures and actions, whereas a subject's agency is mainly understood as resistance to or dislocation from dominant norms. However, there are certain circumstances where the subject is crafted and agency is obtained and enacted in active and positive manners. She therefore proposes a generative paradigm of subjectification to examine the ways in which individuals negotiate with meanings and norms which do not necessarily fall into a dichotomy of domination and resistance.

them” (pp. 156-7). Likewise, Griffith (2000), in response to the assumption that North-American Christian women are participating in their own victimization and internalizing patriarchal ideas about female submission, argues that these women claimed that the doctrine of submission leads them to freedom and transformation. Through submission these women become God’s obedient daughters whose pains and sorrows were eased and whose marriage relations were transformed. It is a “mediated agency” through their reliance on the omnipotent God that enabled these women to attain freedom and effect change.

Taking cues from anthropological discussions of subjectivity and agency in relation to sovereignty, I maintain that the way in which Malay-Muslim platter makers crafted their subjectivity and enacted agency via the sovereign monarch through the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” is analogous to how women crafted their subjectivity and enacted agency through their omnipotent God. The king, as the Upholder of Religions and Head of State, is not a repressive figure for an ethno-religious minority like Malay Muslims of southern Thailand to resist. As the state’s sovereignty in a state of exception, the king can also be a means through which agency can be obtained and enacted. This must be read in tandem with the king’s loss of his god-like features, which render him a human being with whom an intimate relationship is possible. As such, rather than resisting, these Malay Muslims chose to “submit” to him as his subjects via the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง,” in effect enabling themselves to engage with state authorities with confidence.

I discussed the king’s sovereign power with the platter makers asking them what they thought about it. *Kak Dah* said that the king is the most powerful person in the country because, she reasoned, “the Prime Minister, the government, soldiers, and police - all those in power, respect and obey the king.” Likewise, *Kak Nah* said the king is very powerful because, she observed, “he can do what we ordinary people cannot.” Their position is in line with others in the village. *Suding*, the SAO vice president, said the king is not part of the government or of state agencies, but that he has power over both. Similarly, *Ma-muelee*, a SAO member, said the king is superior to the government, and added that “to be the king’s men helps protect us when dealing with the authorities.” These Malay Muslims are fully aware of the king’s sovereignty in relation to the state and at the same time seek to utilize it when dealing with state authorities, as demonstrated by their inscription of the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” on the ceremonial platter.

Conclusion

This article has examined the sentence “เรารักนายหลวง” (Rao Rak Nay Luang, or We love Mr. King) inscribed with cooked sticky rice on a ceremonial platter as the way in which a group of Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand crafted subjectivity and enacted agency

through the sovereign monarch in engaging with state authorities amidst the recent unrest in the region. Drawing on anthropological discussion of subjectivity and agency in relation to sovereignty, it argued that, as the Thai state in a “state of exception,” the Thai monarch is a sovereign through whom Malay Muslims can craft their subjectivity and enact their agency when engaging with state authorities. It also argues that being put into an exceptional state via the title “นายหลวง” (Nay Luang or Mr. King), the king is rendered human, enabling Malay Muslims to have an intimate relationship with him without compromising their religious principles.

However, while enabling Malay Muslims to engage state authorities with authority, to craft subjectivity and to enact agency through the monarch in a state of exception this way is self-contradictory, as the subjectivity was crafted by stripping the king of his god-like features, whilst agency was enacted by treating the king as sovereign. Moreover, the central feature of the king's sovereignty, which resides in his ability to suspend the application of law, implies privilege, whereas what Malay Muslims have been demanding is equality and justice. As such, rather than the king as the Thai state in a state of exception, it is the Thai state with fragmented and flexible sovereignty that should be a means through which Malay Muslims of Southern Thailand can realize their ethno-religious concerns and political aspirations.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Thailand Research Fund, Office of the Higher Education Commission, and Thammasat University for funding a research project called “*Khuen Ni Mai Mi ‘Dangdut’*”: *Amnat Nuea Chiwit Kab Kan Sang Tuaton Lae Kan Sadaeng Ok Sueng Sakkayapap Hang Ton Khong Chao Malayu Nai Changwat Chaidae Pak Tai*, from part of which the author has drawn data in writing this article.

References

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2005). *State of Exception* (K. Attell, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Anderson, B. (1996). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.
- Chaloemtiarana, T. (2007). *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism*. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications.
- Che Man, W. K. (1990). *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Chitbundit, C. (2007). *Krongkarn Un Neung Ma Chark Phrarajadumri: Karn Sathapana Phraraajumnartnum Nai Phrabahtsomdejphrachaoyuhua*. [Royal Initiatives: The Monarch's Royal Hegemony]. Bangkok: Social Sciences and Humanities Book Project Foundation.
- Dulyakasem, U. (1988). The Emergence and Escalation of Ethnic Nationalism: The Case of the Muslim Malays in Southern Siam. In T. Abdullah & S. Siddique (Eds.) *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia* (pp. 208-249). Pasir Panjang: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In B. Graham, C. Gordon & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (pp. 87-104). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1997). *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Vol. 1*. P. Rabinow (Ed.). New York: The New Press
- Frisk, S. (2009). *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Griffith, R. M. (2000). *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Haemindra N. (1977). The Problem of the Thai-Muslims in the Four Southern provinces of Thailand (Part Two). *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 8(1), 85-105.
- Handley, P. M. (2006). *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*. New Heaven: Yale University Press.
- Ivarsson, S. & Isager L. (Eds.). (2010). *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand*. (Nias Studies in Asian Topics). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Keyes, C. F. (1971). Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 30(3), 551-567.

- Keyes, C. F. (1997). Cultural Diversity and National Identity in Thailand. In M. Brown & S. Ganguly (Eds.), *Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific* (pp. 197-232). Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Keyes, C. F. (1995). Who are the Tai? Reflections on the invention of local, ethnic, and national identities. In L. Romanucci-Ross & G. A. De Vos (Eds.), *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict, and Accommodation* (3rd ed., pp. 136-160). Alta Mira: Walnut Creek.
- Mack, P. (2003). Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-century Quakerism. *Signs*, 29(1), 149-177.
- Mahmood, S. (2001). Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival. *Cultural Anthropology*, 16(2), 202-236.
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McCargo, D. (2005). Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crisis in Thailand. *The Pacific Review*, 18(4), 499-519.
- McNay, L. (2000). *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press; Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- McNay, L. (2003). Agency, Anticipation and Indeterminacy in Feminist Theory. *Feminist Theory*, 4(2), 139-148.
- Mérieau, E. (2016). Thailand's Deep State: Royal Power and the Constitutional Court (1997-2015). *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 46(3), 445-466.
- Nik Anuar Nik Mahmud. (1994). *The Malay Unrest in South Thailand: An Issue in Malaysian-Thai Border Relations*. Selangor: Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Ong, A. (2003). *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ong, A. (2006). *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Phongpaichit, P. & Baker C. (1997). *Thailand: Economy and Politics*. Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scupin, R. (1986). Thailand as a Plural Society: Ethnic Interaction in a Buddhist Kingdom. *Crossroads*, 2(3), 115-140.
- Suwannathat-Pian, K. (2003). *Kings, Country and Constitutions: Thailand's Political Development 1932-2000*. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Unno, A. (2011). "We Love Mr. King.": *Exceptional Sovereignty, Submissive Subjectivity, and Mediated Agency in Islamic Southern Thailand* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Washington.

- Unno, A. (2015). "*Khuen Ni Mai Mi 'Dangdut'*": *Amnat Nuea Chiwit Kab Kan Sang Tuaton Lae Kan Sadaeng Ok Sueng Sakkayapap Hang Ton Khong Chao Malayu Nai Changwat Chaidae Pak Tai*. ["There is No 'Dangdut' Tonight": The Southern Border Province Malays' Subjectivity and Agency in Relation to Sovereignty]. A Research Report submitted to Thailand Research Fund (TRF).
- Winichakul, T. (2008). Nationalism and the Radical Intelligentsia in Thailand. *Third World Quarterly*, 29(3), 575-591.
- Yegar, M. (2002). *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar*. Lanham: Lexington Books.