

## Appropriating a space for violence: State Buddhism in southern Thailand

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*In southern Thailand, monasteries once served as focal points for different communal identities to negotiate shared space and, with it, shared identities. However, since martial law was declared in 2004, Muslims in southern Thailand do not frequent monasteries. Instead, soldiers and police occupy monastery buildings and protect the perimeters from attacks. In addition, there are now military monks, soldiers who are simultaneously ordained monks, who work to protect the monasteries. This article argues that the Thai State's militarisation of monasteries and the role of Buddhist monks fuel a religious dimension to the ongoing civil war in southern Thailand.*

On 9 November 2006, the *Bangkok Post* published a brief article about 100 Thai Buddhist villagers fleeing their homes in Yala, one of the southernmost provinces in Thailand. Women, men and children, abandoning their homes and livelihood, travelled to their capital district where they found refuge in Wat Nirottsangkatham.<sup>1</sup> By the beginning of December their numbers had grown to over 228 people.<sup>2</sup> None of the Buddhist refugees felt they would be safe returning to their villages. Instead, they made a temporary home at the *wat* (Buddhist monastic compound). The villagers were not the only laity then residing at the *wat*. Thai soldiers were already living at Wat Nirottsangkatham, guarding the entrance and fortifying its perimeters.

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1 *Bangkok Post*, 'Yala Buddhists flee to temple safety,' 9 Nov. 2006.

2 According to the *Bangkok Post*, by 24 Dec. 2006, 161 people were at the *wat*. *Bangkok Post*, 'Buddhist "refugees" demand new home', 24 Dec. 2006. However, on 8 Dec. 2006 from personal communication with refugees and the abbot at the *wat*, I received different statistics. I was told that at the beginning of December, refugees numbered 228. This number decreased by 60 during the first week of December. Some moved away, others rented different places to stay, and about 14 moved back to their villages. On 8 Dec. there were exactly 157 people still present.

Drawing upon fieldwork in southern Thailand between July 2004 and August 2007, this article argues that the Thai State's militarisation of southern Thai *wat* and the role of Buddhist monks fuel a religious dimension to a civil war in southern Thailand.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to give an accurate account of the southernmost provinces' demographics. Thailand's government commits to a 10-year cycle in their census reports, and the next extensive report will not come for several more years. There have been smaller projects done by the National Statistical Office as late as 2003. Information from these reports indicates an 80 per cent Muslim majority in the three southernmost provinces as well as a substantial differential in Muslim/Buddhist growth rates; in each province Buddhist populations were shrinking as opposed to the growing Muslim populations.<sup>4</sup> Since the recent escalation in violence began in 2004, we can speculate that the Buddhist population levels have decreased even more.

Previously in southern Thailand, a *wat* signified a place for communal gatherings and Buddhist veneration. These shared spaces attracted Thai Buddhists, Thai Chinese Buddhists and Thai Malay Muslims. Southern Thai monks consider the space of the *wat* changed in the contemporary context; they feel locals viewed and used their *wat* in a distinctly different manner prior to 2004 (and the State's declaration of martial law). Emblematic of this, the abbot of Wat Kuannaw in Pattani province explained in a phone interview that before the increase in violence: 'Islam was just Islam and Buddhism was just Buddhism. They did not intermingle. But, whenever we had Thai cultural events like Mother's Day or Father's day, Muslims would come to our *wat*.'<sup>5</sup> Locals, whether they were Malay Muslim or Thai Buddhist, gathered together at *wat* for Thai national celebrations such as the Thai New Year (*Songkran*) and the Thai king's birthday.

In the past 50 years Malay Muslim attitudes toward entering a *wat* have fluctuated.<sup>6</sup> Chavivun Prachuabmoh noted in the 1970s that the majority of Pattani Malay Muslims felt that 'if they just watch or study [at a *wat*], it is all right because they do not participate in the religious ceremony'.<sup>7</sup> These Malay Muslims saw the *wat* as a

3 Throughout this article, State is capitalised in accordance with Antonio Gramsci's neo-Marxist concepts of domination and hegemony in his State/civil society dichotomy. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. xiv. While it is important to avoid homogenising state actors, as Peter van der Veer cautions, it is important to acknowledge the structural power implicit in the State and which is conferred through association to its agents. Peter van der Veer, 'Writing violence', in *Contesting the nation: Religion, community and the politics of democracy in India*, ed. David Ludden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 251.

4 Statistical information translated from Thai into English from the 'Population and households census 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000: Southern provinces', *National Statistical Office* (Bangkok: Prime Minister's Office, 2003).

5 Personal communication with Wat Kūaanai abbot in Khokpo district, Pattani province on 13 Aug. 2004.

6 Tamara Loos writes that the Siamese government used *wat* as government training centres during the reign of King Chulalongkorn — a practice that 'unsurprisingly failed to attract the local Muslim population'. *Subject Siam: Family, law, and colonial modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 22.

7 'Ethnic relations among Thai, Thai Muslim and Chinese in south Thailand', in *Ethnicity and interpersonal interactions: A Cross cultural study*, ed. David Y. H. Wu (Hong Kong: Maruzen Asia, 1982), p. 77.

communal resource: a place to sit and chat with other locals about everyday events, a space to use for celebrations or work (such as *ngaan wat*, *nora wayang kulit* and *silat* performances). Though engaging in Buddhist ceremonies at a *wat* was shunned, local Malay Muslims would come to borrow supplies or seek medicinal and charm-related help from the monks who resided at the *wat*, such as in the case of de-hexing.<sup>8</sup>

Southern Thailand has had a long tradition of Malay Muslim and Thai Buddhist interaction and co-existence. Kenneth Landon writes that in the early half of the twentieth century, 'older Malay communities have members who speak both Malay and Siamese and who follow their religion only to the point of refraining from pork-eating and wearing the tarboosh.'<sup>9</sup> A clear indicator of this surviving tradition is the record of Malay Buddhist monks in the southernmost province of Narathiwat, who are venerated for their spiritual achievements.<sup>10</sup> Further north in the southern province of Satun, familial ties to Buddhism are remembered in practice. Malay Muslims ordain as Buddhist monks in response to boons granted by their Buddhist ancestors. Anthropologist Ryoko Nishii found that in most cases, ordinations resulted from Malay Muslim children who had fallen ill. Their parents, believing that the illness was caused by their ancestors, 'prayed to the 'Buddhist' ancestors to cure their child. In return for the cure, the child was promised to become a Buddhist monk, novice or nun.'<sup>11</sup> These Malay Muslims embody the past unification of Malay-ness and Buddhism in southern Thailand.

Since martial law was declared in southern Thailand in 2004, Malay Muslims do not frequent *wat*.<sup>12</sup> *Wat* are guarded against power outages and armed assaults by covert operatives, soldiers and State police, who occupy some of its buildings. As a result, the State militarises Buddhist space and, with it, Buddhist identity.

8 Nearly every southern monk who has lived in the border provinces for more than a decade has mentioned the previous Muslim patronage to their *wat*. This comment was rather distinct in a phone interview done on 15 Aug. 2004 with the abbot at Wat Tanapimo. The abbot remarked about the difference in patronage since the recent surge in violence and how Muslims no longer come to his *wat*. 'Before this [recent surge in the conflict] began, Muslims used to come over and borrow things from the *wat*. But last year they stopped coming and stopped communicating with me.' Duncan McCargo also offers an example of Muslim patronage. He noted that Muslims still come to *wat*, such as one in Banare district, Pattani for religious problems; in this particular case, de-hexing. Refer to McCargo's article in this issue. For Buddhist and Islamic medicinal practices in southern Thailand, refer to Louis Golomb's *An Anthropology of curing in multiethnic Thailand* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).  
9 *Siam in transition: A Brief survey of cultural trends in the five years since the revolution of 1932* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 84.

10 Personal communication with Irving Johnson at the National University of Singapore, 10 Feb. 2007.

11 'A Way of negotiating with the other within the self: Muslim's acknowledgement of Buddhist ancestors in southern Thailand,' a working paper from *The Southern Thailand Homepage* accessed from [http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:pWfCvngTFuAJ:www.uni-muenster.de/Ethnologie/South\\_Thai/working\\_paper/Nishii\\_Negotiation.pdf+Nishii+%22A+Way+of+Negotiating+with+the+Other%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=3&gl=us](http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:pWfCvngTFuAJ:www.uni-muenster.de/Ethnologie/South_Thai/working_paper/Nishii_Negotiation.pdf+Nishii+%22A+Way+of+Negotiating+with+the+Other%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=3&gl=us) (last accessed on 13 Mar. 2008). Nishii also notes that Malays have a ritual to break their ties with Buddhism and rejoin the faith of Islam once they have defrocked. Ryoko Nishii, 'Coexistence of religions: Muslim and Buddhist relationship on the west coast of southern Thailand', *Tai culture: International Review on Tai Cultural Studies*, 4, 1 (June 1999): 88.

12 For purposes of this paper, the term 'southern' used in the phrases 'southern *wat*', 'southern Buddhists' and 'southern Thailand' refers to the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.

### Monastic to military compound

The most common place signified in Thai Buddhism has always been the *wat*, which has been often viewed by locals as a communal investment.<sup>13</sup> The significance of the *wat* has changed, however, due to the practices that take place in the *wat*.

The local investment in a *wat* can be measured from different vantage points. For the sake of brevity I will outline only two levels of analysis: the religious and the secular.<sup>14</sup> In religious terms, having a *wat* allows the surrounding religious community easy access to annual ceremonies and rituals, such as funerals, ordinations and holidays. Buddhist monks who live in the *wat* go out daily for morning alms (*binthabat*). This routine provides the local laity affordable and continual opportunities to make merit. But from a secular perspective, having a *wat* allows the community access to such common facilities as basketball and volleyball courts, schools, meeting areas, medicinal and therapeutic counseling for people of all faiths.<sup>15</sup> These two different communal functions lead scholars such as Donald Swearer to consider a *wat* the 'religious, cultural and social center of the community'.<sup>16</sup>

The State's implementation of martial law and insurgent violence within Buddhist villages in southern Thailand provoked a different function for *wat* in the area. Wat Nirottsangkatham serves as a striking example of this new appropriation. In an early December afternoon of 2006, I talked to the Buddhist abbot (*chao awat*) from Wat Nirottsangkatham. In his office, he explained to me that some of the current refugees living at his *wat* had donated money years ago in order to erect the very buildings in which they were now living: 'Now, the villagers want the *wat* to help them. It's like what they did in the past comes to help them now ... This building where villagers stay now was built by them.'

Thai and Thai Chinese Buddhist refugees from Yala's Bannang Sata and Than To districts see the *wat* as more than just a religious and national space; they have made the *wat* their home. Though many Thai Buddhists believe the *wat* to be sacred spaces endowed with protective powers, many of the Yala refugees chose the location for more mundane reasons: facilities and shelter large enough to accommodate them. In the middle of the day under one of Wat Nirottsangkatham's pavilions, a community leader for the refugees relayed some of the refugees' initial considerations for sanctuary, 'Other places were not big enough to fit all of us', and then added, 'and it is safer here because of the soldiers.'<sup>17</sup> The community leader's latter point speaks to an important social association concerning southern *wat* within violent environments.

13 The number of mosques and *wat* in a province reflects the religious populations. For instance, in 2007 Pattani province has registered 637 mosques and 81 *wat*. Statistical information translated from Thai into English from the 'Centralized practices in Pattani province', *National Statistical Office* (Bangkok: Prime Minister's Office, 2003); [http://poc.pattani.go.th/report.php?report\\_id=26](http://poc.pattani.go.th/report.php?report_id=26) (last accessed on 13 Mar. 2008).

14 In this paper, the term 'secular' is used to denote that which is not overtly or publicly recognised as religious.

15 This is comparable to the function mosques, churches and Jewish temples serve throughout the world.

16 Donald Swearer, *Becoming the Buddha: The Ritual of image consecration in Thailand* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 40.

17 Personal communication with a refugee at Wat Nirottsangkatham on 8 Dec. 2006.

In addition to their religious and secular significance, *wat* are now recognised as among the most militarily fortified areas in the three southernmost provinces.

One of the more recent and devastating attacks came right after the Chinese New Year in 2007 when there were a number of bomb attacks on restaurants, karaoke bars, shops and Buddhist homes in Pattani and Yala. The *Bangkok Post* considered this attack the 'biggest wave of coordinated bombings, terrorism and murders' for the border provinces.<sup>18</sup> It was during these attacks that I was staying in a *kuti* (monk's quarters) at Wat Chang Hai in Pattani province. On the night of the attacks, Wat Chang Hai as well as other buildings in Pattani and Yala provinces suffered a power outage due to the bombing of the centralised power stations.

Wat Chang Hai, known for its connection to Lūang Phō Tuat, is an internationally renowned Buddhist pilgrimage site. Commanding over 13 *rai*<sup>19</sup> of land that includes a school system and supporting amulet shops and restaurants that reside in its vicinity, Wat Chang Hai has become a local investment. The legacy of Wat Chang Hai is owed largely to the Hokkien Khananurak family, who financed the renovation of the *wat* in 1936. Patrick Jory writes that the Khananurak family supported numerous other Thai *wat* and stand as an example of Chinese families in the southern provinces that enjoyed good relations with Chinese, Thai and Malay communities.<sup>20</sup>

In 2007, I found that many shops were vacated. These empty stores were visible indicators of the economic impact of the violence in the southernmost provinces. A few restaurants remained open, but all closed their doors at 5:00 p.m. coinciding with the locking of the *wat's* front gates. Monks and locals explained that stores and restaurants used to stay open later than 5:00 p.m. before 2004. I frequented one of the restaurants that managed to get enough business to stay open. It is a small family-owned establishment with a dozen wooden tables and chairs, with a small television mounted on the ceiling in the back. The day after the organised attacks, I went to the restaurant in order to observe the customers and their conversations.

There were very few customers, and they spoke in hushed tones about specific bombings. The old man who owned the restaurant appeared to be more concerned about the lack of customers than about a potential attack on his restaurant. Wat Chang Hai is surrounded by the heavily Buddhist populated district of Khokpo. But this was only one of his reasons for feeling secure: 'There are quite a lot of [Buddhist] people in this area', he explained. 'I always leave the lights on at night. Many people walk past [my restaurant] at night. And the police and soldiers are also around. Terrorists would not dare to come here.'<sup>21</sup>

18 The article references 60 wounded and 8 dead. Casualties included: '28 bombs and three murders targeted foreign tourist sites, Thai-Chinese celebrating the Lunar New Year, hotels, karaoke bars, power grids, telephone lines and commercial sites in the country's southernmost provinces. Two public schools were torched.' 'Update: Extremists launch overnight wave of violence', *Bangkok Post*, 19 Feb. 2007.

19 *Rai* is the Thai unit of measure for 1,600 square metres.

20 'Luang Pho Thuat as a southern Thai cultural hero: Popular religion in the integration of Patani', in *Thai south and Malay north: Ethnic interactions on the plural peninsula*, ed. Michael J. Montesano and Patrick Jory (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

21 Personal communication with a Thai Buddhist store owner at Wat Chang Hai on 19 Feb. 2007.

Akin to the situation at Wat Nirotsangkaham and Wat Chang Hai, soldiers and national police have made *wat* throughout the southernmost provinces their primary base of operations as well as their homes. Thai *wat* have excellent strategic positions; they are near the highest population of Buddhists in an area, have access to an ample supply of food and water, and contain facilities large enough to accommodate the police and soldiers.<sup>22</sup> Abbots generally feel receptive to soldier and police needs and make an effort to accommodate them. One abbot from the capital district of Pattani explained that the soldiers at his *wat* had no daily stipends. ‘The soldiers need food and need to use the bathroom, so this is why they stay at my *wat*. [Thus] the soldiers depend on lay donations to my *wat* for food.’<sup>23</sup> As one policeman stationed at a *wat* noted:

There are many reasons [to be stationed at a *wat*]. One is to protect the monks. Another is to help in the development of the *wat*. And the *wat* is a convenient place for us as well. Because of the *wat*, we do not have to find somewhere else to stay.<sup>24</sup>

But the occupation of the *wat* is more than a pragmatic exercise of protection and sustenance. Pierre Bourdieu states, ‘Space can have no meaning apart from practice; the systems of generative and structuring dispositions, or *habitus*, constitutes and is constituted by actors’ movement through space.’<sup>25</sup> It is what people practice in the *wat* that shapes the significance of the *wat*. The practices within southern *wat* have changed dramatically — particularly due to the new military occupants.

It had been nearly 30 years since the Thai military began using southern Thai *wat*. Thai soldiers have a history of living in *wat* during times of crisis and conflict. During the Second World War, soldiers occupied *wat* in the northeast and southern provinces. Later in the 1970s, *wat* were used as training grounds for the Border Patrol Police’s Village Scouts, while simultaneously housing soldiers in areas considered hotbeds of communist forces in the southernmost provinces.<sup>26</sup> This military occupation of *wat* has recently resurfaced.

Since 2002, the Buddhist space has become militarised through military personnel working and living in these *wat*. The military residing at a southern *wat* usually raise the outer walls and stretch barbed wire around the entrance as well as the perimeter to protect the *wat*’s occupants from being observed and attacked. The military have converted Buddhist pavilions into barracks, transformed sleeping quarters into bunkers and created lookout posts near the entrances, such as in Figures 1–6.

22 According to the National Statistical Office in 2007 (2550 BE), Khokpo district had 30,934 Buddhists residents, making it the largest Buddhist populated district in Pattani. See [http://poc.pattani.go.th/report.php?report\\_id=10](http://poc.pattani.go.th/report.php?report_id=10) (last accessed on 13 Mar. 2008).

23 Personal communication with the abbot of Wat Kajorn in Pattani province, 8 Aug. 2004.

24 Personal communication with a policeman in Pattani province, 13 Dec. 2006.

25 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 214.

26 Information on the Second World War activities derives from personal communication with Irving Johnson, National University of Singapore on 27 Feb. 2007. Reports on military occupation during the 1970s come from personal communications with monks in Pattani province, Sept. 2006. For information on the Village Scouts, refer to Marjorie A. Muecke, ‘The Village scouts of Thailand’, *Asian Survey* 20, 4 (1980): 407–27 and Katherine Bowie, *Rituals of national loyalty: An Anthropology of the state and the village scout movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).



**Figure 1. Buddhist pavilion before militarisation**



**Figure 2. Buddhist pavilion after militarisation**



**Figure 3. Buddhist quarters before militarisation**



**Figure 4. Buddhist quarters after militarisation**



**Figure 5. Buddhist quarters before militarisation**



**Figure 6. Buddhist quarters after militarisation**



Some *wat* have over 40 police officers or soldiers living in them. Military personnel are armed with handguns and M-16s and wear camouflage uniforms. I had heard that there were both Muslim and Buddhist police and soldiers living in *wat*, but every *wat* I visited was manned only by Buddhist personnel.<sup>27</sup> This distinction of strictly Buddhist military personnel encourages locals to collapse religious and political identifications and view the Thai State as a Buddhist State.

Police, soldiers and government officials (*khārāchakān*) maintain that there is no religious preference or requirement for police and soldiers working at a *wat*.<sup>28</sup> This is an important stance for the State to take. Both Thai Buddhist and Muslim residents in the south feel alienated from the State due to reoccurring acts of corruption and illicit activity by government officials.<sup>29</sup> The notorious disappearance of Somchai Neelaphajit, a popular Muslim human rights attorney, symbolises the State's failure to honour and protect the rights of southern Thais.<sup>30</sup> Due to these and other examples, there is thus an acute need for the State to appear impartial. Hence, having Muslim soldiers and police working at *wat* might lessen the symbolic impact of having State officials living in a Buddhist *wat*. The absence of Muslim soldiers and national police, however, enhances the symbolism of a State Buddhism, the official religion of the Thai State.

Only a handful of large military camps exist in the southernmost provinces. For instance, in Pattani province, there are only two soldier units, one for combat and one for community support activities. Soldiers are sent to live in *wat* for as long as two years before relocating to another location. Once their superior officers issue commands for relocating, the new site is generally in southern Thailand.<sup>31</sup> The advantage of stationing soldiers in the south is that the extended duration allows soldiers to become familiar with locals and build up trust and contacts in the surrounding communities. When asked, monks often say they prefer soldiers rather than police living in their *wat*, although the decision-making ultimately is not theirs. They characterise

27 This information comes from personal communication with commanding officers at the *wat* I visited, and from Lt. Colonel Surathep Nukaeow of Ingkayut Camp, Pattani on 28 Dec. 2006.

28 Muslim soldiers are stationed around Islamic schools (*pondok*) and near Islamic centres. Authorities have explained to me that this is done in order to honour religious sensitivities. Though there has never been any explanation offered for why only Buddhist soldiers are present in *wat*, the same rationale (honouring religious sensitivities) could apply. However, because the national police and soldiers use the *wat* as a State facility and because there is no Buddhist interdiction concerning non-Buddhists living in a *wat*, the presence of only Buddhist soldiers results in an air of State preferentiality.

29 Amnesty and the International Crisis Group argue that the precedence for structural violence and disregard for human rights began before martial law with the Thai State's 'war on drugs' in the southernmost provinces. However, the violence and human rights' abuses have a current context and motives outside the 'drug' explanation. One of these is the murdering of monks. For an example of the recent State-sanctioned abuses, refer to 'No one is safe: Insurgent violence against civilians in Thailand's southern border provinces', *Human Rights Watch Report* 19.13C (Aug. 2007): 1–102, 38–47. Anthropologist Amporn Mardent offers local accounts of State brutality in 'From Adek to Mo'ji: Identities and social realities of southern Thai people', in *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, accessed at <http://kyotoreviewsea.org/Amporn.htm> (last accessed on 13 Mar. 2008). There are also reports of local Buddhists taking violence into their own hands, rather than State officials, such as Rungrawee C. Pinyorat's 'Thai Buddhist vigilante squads suspected', *Associated Press*, 7 Aug. 2007.

30 Human Rights Watch, 'Thailand: Government covers up role in "disappearance"', 11 Mar. 2006.

31 Personal communication with Lt. Colonel Surathep Nukaeow of Ingkayut Camp, Pattani, on 28 Dec. 2006.

soldiers as being hardworking and more respectful of the Buddhist precepts than police while living inside the *wat*. Decisions on deployment come from the military, which assesses each location's needs and importance in accordance with government funds.<sup>32</sup>

Many abbots in safer areas stress that they did not ask the State for protection and that the military is at the *wat* due to governmental concerns. Early one evening just before the Chinese New Year, I was sitting with an abbot in front of his monk's quarters (*kuti*). It had just finished raining and the abbot was smoking his cigarette and relaxing on his front step. He explained to me:

This *wat* is not in danger; it is not in any dangerous scenario. The *wat* didn't ask for soldiers, but the government sent them. The *wat* has never called for soldiers to be here. But the government felt worried, afraid that the *wat* will be destroyed. I'm afraid if I go outside the *wat*. But I think in the *wat* there is nothing [to be afraid of].<sup>33</sup>

This abbot's *wat* had over 20 soldiers patrolling its perimeters with entrenched stations at every entrance. The abbot's position on the violence changed considerably after the Chinese New Year, when his *wat* suffered a power outage for an hour and there was an arson attempt just a few kilometres away. Yet even during this heightened moment of fear and tension, the abbot's lack of appreciation for the soldiers differed greatly from abbots who lived in more isolated areas, with higher populations of Muslims and higher rates of murders and bombings.

Many of the soldiers I interviewed in the *wat* have had international work experience in areas such as Aceh. A few fought in Vietnam during the US War. They typically assist with the general upkeep of the *wat*, sweeping the grounds and cleaning the latrines. Although they make their homes in the *wat*, they keep their personal habits private within their quarters. Because of their respectful and helpful nature, and the long-term protection they bring, some abbots and monks have built bunkers and living quarters especially for them in their *wat*. While monks generally prefer soldiers to police, they are less enthusiastic about the military commanders who dispatch the soldiers and live outside of the violent climate. One abbot, sitting with four laity underneath his pavilion, relayed this with bitterness in his voice:

The military sent the soldiers here, but didn't provide them with a place to stay, so they have to sleep under the pavilions with the dogs and ants. Because of this, I built a shelter for them. The military officers are really bad. They call themselves men of honour but they sit in air-conditioned rooms while their privates, who have to follow orders, are sent to sleep with mosquitoes and ants. Military officers sent soldiers down here so these officers should care for their welfare. An officer came to check in on the situation once, but he left even before his driver came back from toilet! Didn't even walk around to see where the soldiers slept, how they were living, or what they eat. He just came and left.<sup>34</sup>

32 Monks have told me that it is more expensive to have soldiers stay in a *wat*, and if funding is cut for a specific area, police are usually brought in. Personal communication in the one of the southernmost provinces, 2006.

33 Personal communication with an abbot in one of the southernmost provinces, 2007.

34 Personal communication with an abbot in one of the southernmost provinces, 2006.

As the violence increases, there is more interaction between soldiers and monks within *wat*, especially those that are more remote and have a higher percentage of Muslims living in the village. Their shared isolation sometimes encourages a collusion of resources, with monks and soldiers exchanging information about locals around the area.

Police are brought in from different provinces throughout Thailand and live at a *wat* from 6 months to a year. The majority of the national police stationed in the southernmost provinces hail from central and northeast Thailand and have little experience or prior knowledge about southern Thailand. Rotating on and off duty within the *wat*, police have days or nights to relax and drink. Their conduct within the *wat* contrasts sharply with that of the soldiers. Soldiers generally keep to themselves and maintain strict vigilance while living in the *wat*. One reason for the monks' preferences for soldiers became apparent to me at one *wat* where I stayed: policemen had created an outdoor kitchen to eat their food and consume alcohol just metres behind the novices' quarters. After dinner, they end the night with a few hours of drinking whiskey and soda beneath the abbot's pavilion. This habitual behaviour has led to empty whiskey bottles overflowing from trashcans within the monks' quarters.<sup>35</sup>

Religiously transgressive actions such as drinking intoxicants within a *wat* are not the only military behaviour within a *wat* that is worth noting. In December 2006, I asked five policemen on duty within a *wat* if the police living at the *wat* make merit (*tam bun*). A policeman in his mid-30s gestured around at the barracks and his fellow policemen, armed with M-16s, and responded: 'Yes, we do. Actually, what we do right now is merit as well.'<sup>36</sup> The act of protecting monks and the *wat* becomes a means of making merit, a duty inherent in southern police and soldiers' responsibilities. This encapsulation of merit-making within military duties underscores the effects of colluding State and Thai Buddhist elements.

The State's appropriation of Buddhist space has altered the southern Thai *wat*'s spatial significance. Serving as a home base for the military, *wat* have lost some of their sacrality in exchange for a strident nationalism; hence, if one were to visit multiple *wat* in an area – a common act for Thai Buddhists on pilgrimages – locals might consider their actions indicative of military communication rather than religious devotion. This change in the *wat*'s spatial significance has impacted its patronage; Buddhist monks have reported that local Muslim officials in the three southernmost provinces try to avoid contact with the *wat* as much as possible. Ačhān Mahāwīchī, a former Secretariat to the Pattani *Sangha* leader who has been a monk for over 20 years in Pattani, explains that these days a trip to the *wat* is viewed by many Muslims as a sin:

Muslims have said many times it is a sin to come to the *wat* ... An Islamic village leader who has to sign a paper when someone dies, complains that when someone dies he has to come to the *wat* and get the thing signed, because it is a sin to come to the *wat*.<sup>37</sup>

35 In my own experience, I have found soldiers either refrain from drinking in the *wat*, or drink in the privacy of their buildings (thus in a more private and discreet manner).

36 Personal communication with police in one of the southernmost provinces, 2006.

37 Personal communication by telephone with Ačhān Mahāwīchī ['Mahāwīchī' is a honorific title bestowed on the Secretariat to the Pattani *Sangha* leader] on 15 Aug. 2004.

According to Aĉhān Mahāwīchī, the second highest monk at Wat Chang Hai, the *wat* has become a profane space for many Malay Muslims in the southernmost provinces. For the Islamic village leader, entering a *wat* meant entering a space of impurity, a profane as opposed to a sacred space. The association of coming to the *wat* with committing a sin, while not universally recognised, demonstrates a growing public consideration of what coming to a *wat* signifies within an area under martial law.

Local Malays' recent negative attitudes regarding *wat* have heightened the significance of visiting the *wat*. A person entering a *wat* may imply more than simply a visit; it could indicate one's adherence to Buddhism. As there is no specific ritual or official declaration for conversion to Thai Buddhism, the public and regular performance of visiting *wat* (and making merit) becomes an identity-making or identity-reaffirming exercise.<sup>38</sup> This emerging perception contrasts with local views prior to martial law. Before 2004, visiting a *wat* held fewer implications and Buddhist identity was largely denoted in two ways: by participating in specific merit-making exercises and, one could argue, eating pork (which is still a very powerful religious signifier).

The new significance of visiting a *wat* arises out of a violently charged environment coupled with the Thai State's militarisation of the *wat*. While the militarisation of Buddhist monasteries is not unique within Buddhist traditions, it is still important to assess its social implications in light of the current context.<sup>39</sup>

For safety precautions, religious practices and ceremonies at southern *wat* have either declined or stopped since martial law. The funeral rites, which usually occur in the afternoon or night, are now held during the day in areas outside of capital districts. In the more dangerous areas, the monk's practice of performing morning alms has stopped; monks in these *wat* rarely go outside. One 66-year-old monk, seated at a bench outside his monk's quarters explained:

I want to go out and meet people, give them blessings, all that and more. However, they forbid it because it is dangerous ... I listen and obey my abbot and the government, so I don't go out.<sup>40</sup>

The absence of monks going in and out of *wat* only accentuates the presence of the military, which regularly enter and leave to perform checks around the area. In addition, if a local walks past the entrance of a *wat*, instead of seeing monks performing daily chores, they will see fully armed uniformed military standing guard day and night. These habits and practices shape the significance of space and have an important effect on the surrounding Thai community. Monks are becoming less visible while the military become more visible in and around the *wat*. The stationing of soldiers and police, along with their military habits, has helped transform the *wat* into a military space and, in doing so, exacerbated relations between Buddhists and Muslims in the southernmost provinces.

38 I want to thank Irving Johnson for calling this to my attention.

39 Thai *wat* were used as military bases during and after the Second World War in southern Thailand. Personal communication with Irving Johnson at National University of Singapore, 27 Feb. 2007. Kamala Tiyavanich also noted the historical presence of the Thai military in *wat* during King Vajiravudh's reign, personal communication at Cornell University, 22 Apr. 2006.

40 Personal communication with a monk in one of the southernmost provinces, 2006.

The 228 Buddhist refugees who stayed at Wat Nirotsangkatham see the *wat* as a safer space than their villages, which according to the refugees, are over 95 per cent Muslim. According to the refugees, murders occur almost daily in their villages. When I came to visit them at the *wat*, there was a funeral for a man from a neighbouring village in progress. The sister of the deceased told me that in her village everyone is a target — from the elderly to two-year-old children. She is a farmer and just like the refugees, considers her village no longer safe to live in. Part of the refugees' decision to come to the *wat* derives from the recent conversion of southern monastic compounds into military compounds. Buddhist villagers stay inside the protective perimeters of the *wat* and leave as seldom as possible, only to buy food. Seeing a *wat* as a sanctuary from violence does not distinguish it from the violence; rather, it highlights the *wat's* role and preferential treatment by the State in a violent climate.

Southern Thai *wat* have taken on defensive functions for the Buddhist laity living in the surrounding areas. Much of this change comes about through physical changes to the *wat* grounds — barracks, wire, and blockades positioned at the entrance. Another factor in converting the public perception of the *wat* has been the visceral change in the occupants who enter and exit it. Instead of the *wat* acting as a base for monks to leave from for their morning alms, it is now a base for the military to leave from for their daily rounds. But has this militarisation enhanced the State's preferentiality toward Buddhism?

Since 2005, there have been more Muslims murdered than Buddhists in the three southernmost provinces.<sup>41</sup> Yet, with all the fortifications at *wat*, there is not one Muslim making use of a *wat* as a place of refuge.<sup>42</sup> Living under martial law in southern Thailand, *wat* have clearly become an exclusive military space for Thai and Thai-Chinese Buddhists.

### **Military monks: Buddhist secrets and justifications for violence**

In a school within a *wat*, a monk in saffron robes sat beside me in a corner of the room where, 20 feet away from us, another monk gave a Pali lesson to seven novices. We spoke in hushed voices yet our bodies were relaxed, our countenances devoid of emotion. The conversation was different from most conversations a layperson might have with a monk. Emblematic of this, I asked him: 'Why did you decide to be soldier?'

He explained that this was quite typical for a 21-year-old Thai man. We talked about the training exercises he went through, the places he stayed at, and then I paused. Clearing my throat, I turned to him and asked: 'When you became a military monk, did you have to train more?'

'No', he replied. 'I finished training when I was 22. Then I ordained as a monk. For this position we have to start as a non-commissioned corporal and work our way

41 It is also important to remember that the population of the southernmost provinces is predominantly Muslim. Hence, the number of Muslim deaths may be higher, but the percentage of casualties from the Buddhist population is still greater. Srisompob Jitpiromsri and Panyaksak Sobhonvasu, 'Unpacking Thailand's southern conflict: The Poverty of structural explanations', *Critical Asian Studies* 38, 1 (2006): 95.

42 It is important to note that Malay Muslims do still come to the *wat*, although their purposes, numbers and frequency have decreased dramatically since martial law was declared.

up from there.<sup>43</sup> Our conversation continued but I could not stop thinking about how publicly, yet at the same time secretly, we were discussing the militarisation of monks within this Pali classroom. It was with this conversation that I realised that a new space for violence had emerged in the Thai *sangha*.

The path for violence in the Thai *sangha* comes from a long-held relationship with the State. Buddhist States throughout South and Southeast Asia have enjoyed a healthy relationship with monastic Buddhism. This extended tradition led scholars such as anthropologist Stanley Tambiah to argue that Buddhism was not merely centred on enlightenment, but also kingship and a principle polity.<sup>44</sup> The design and infrastructure of Buddhist principles and rules were amenable to political application. The role of the early Indian Buddhist Mauryan emperor Aśoka was an actualisation of the religion's political design, not an aberration or evolution of the religion.

However, as the structure of polities changed, so did the State's application of Buddhism. One important and significant change occurred in the early 1900s. As nation-States developed in Europe and colonial pressures beset States in Southeast Asia, a new form of religio-political Buddhism surfaced in Siam: State Buddhism. Historian Kamala Tiyavanich applies the term State Buddhism in reference to Siamese nation-building under King Chulalongkorn, which created and perpetuated a new form of Buddhism in order to centralise and unify the country.<sup>45</sup>

Stanley Tambiah,<sup>46</sup> Somboon Suksamran,<sup>47</sup> and Yonei Ishii,<sup>48</sup> provide detailed accounts of bureaucratic parallels and political applications of the Thai *sangha*. In each instance, the State was an active force in shaping and utilising the power of the Thai *sangha*. Peter Jackson, examining the role of Thai Buddhism in Bangkok, considers this use of legitimating a bureaucracy endemic to Thai administrations throughout the twentieth century:

[E]ach new political regime in the past century has attempted to restructure the organization of the order of Buddhist monks in its political image in order to maintain a legitimacy [sic] parallelism between the symbolic religious domain and the secular power structure.<sup>49</sup>

According to Jackson, twentieth-century Thai political regimes applied symbolic capital from State Buddhism to buttress its own capital (and insure their legitimacy).

43 Personal communication with a monk in one of the southernmost provinces, 2006.

44 Stanley Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 515.

45 For Kamala, modern State Buddhism was a product of the Chulalongkorn administration (1873–1910). It treated Prince Wachirayan's printed religious texts as authoritative, which determined degrees, examinations and ranks in the *sangha* hierarchy. State Buddhism also focused on Bangkok interpretation of sermons, using Bangkok Thai and stories about the Buddha's last life, as opposed to using local dialects and stories about the Buddha's previous births. Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest recollections: Wandering monks in twentieth-century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), pp. 8, 9, 34.

46 Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer*, p. 368.

47 Somboon Suksamran, *Political Buddhism in Southeast Asia: The Role of the sangha in the modernization of Thailand* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), p. 44.

48 Yoneo Ishii, *Sangha, state, and society: Thai Buddhism in history*, trans. Peter Hawkes (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), pp. 40–52.

49 *Buddhism, legitimation and conflict: The Political functions of urban Thai Buddhism* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), p. 2.

The intimate relationship between State and *sangha* becomes accented in the southernmost provinces due to the violence. The most visceral and symbolic collapsing of distinctions between Thai Buddhism and the State, comes in the State's advent of the military monk (*tahānphra*). Military monks are fully ordained monks who are simultaneously armed soldiers, marines, navy, or air force personnel.<sup>50</sup> Military monks, while embodying the interconnection between State and *sangha*, also reflect the violent dimension inherent to the amalgam.

For many non-specialists in Buddhist studies, the idea of a militarised monk conflicts with basic Buddhist principles. A monk's purpose is to avoid life's vulgarity, to aspire toward enlightenment. A soldier's lifestyle is virtually the opposite – they are committed to a job that requires them to confront the vulgarities of life. Beyond the ideological complications, there is the ecclesiastical interdiction that prohibits soldiers from becoming monks. However, as anthropologist Hayashi Yukio explains in his study of the Thai-Lao of northeast Thailand, people's religious practice is always rooted in experience. Buddhism 'does not consist merely of cultivated knowledge sealed in texts, or of its interpretation. Rather it consists of practices that live in the "here and now"...' <sup>51</sup> While the Buddhist textual tradition clearly disallows the presence of a military monk, Buddhist traditions on the ground demonstrate a different attitude. Throughout the development of Buddhisms in countries like China, Korea and Japan, we find that similar to Thai Buddhists, these Buddhist traditions also had military monks.

In Thai society it is common for Thai Buddhist men to ordain as monks for a short time at least once in their lives. The Thai Theravāda tradition is unique in allowing men to temporarily become inducted into the *sangha* (monastic institution). Other Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions treat ordination as a permanent life decision. Anthropologist Charles Keyes notes that Thai men gain considerable esteem through temporary ordinations; these short periods generally occur during *khaophansā* (Buddhist Lent). Through entering the Thai *sangha*, men regardless of class have access to education and a means of increasing their social status.<sup>52</sup> In addition to its social benefits, it is also popularly believed that by becoming a monk a son grants his mother the merit to enter heaven.

According to the *Vinaya* there are certain interdictions surrounding ordainment. Many of these interdictions revolve around physical or social characteristics, such as if a person has a disease, is a criminal or is handicapped. Most of these guidelines are the result of the historical Buddha trying to cope with specific socio-political and economic dilemmas. One of these prohibitions relates to the ordaining of soldiers:

During the time of the Buddha there was a war on the border of the northern Indian kingdom of Magadha, one of the primary supporters of Buddhist monasticism.

50 Military monks continued to receive monthly salaries for their connection to the military. Typical salaries range from 9,000–10,000 *baht* a month, roughly USD 250. While there are military monks who come from the Thai army, navy, air force and marines, the majority of military monks works for the army (and comprise the data for this paper).

51 Hayashi Yukio, *Practical Buddhism among the Thai-Lao: Religion in the making of religion* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2003), p.1.

52 Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist kingdom as modern nation-state* (Boulder & London: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 138 and 139.

Several generals who did not want to join the battle entered the Buddhist Sangha. At the request of the king, the Buddha declared that henceforth soldiers were not allowed into the Sangha.<sup>53</sup>

Since this historic incident, active soldiers have been prohibited from entering the *sangha*.<sup>54</sup> The Thai State has acknowledged and supported the ecclesiastical interdiction toward ordaining soldiers. In order to avoid the overlapping of duties to the State and *sangha*, the Chulalongkorn administration in 1905 created a legal provision called the Thai Military Service Act, which made monks exempt from military service. This provision eliminated the tensions of monks enlisting in the army. And so, in accordance with ecclesiastical restrictions, the Thai Military Service Act sought to avoid the monk-to-soldier process. However, we find later in contemporary Thai society that the tension is not in the monk-to-soldier process, but the reverse: soldier-to-monk.

The Thai Buddhist tradition, through its temporary ordinations, has allowed manoeuvrability around these guidelines for Buddhist soldiers. According to stipulations articulated by the Office of National Buddhism, soldiers are allotted one four-month paid leave of absence to ordain at a local *wat*. Soldiers generally take their leave during the annual period of *khaophansā* and return to duty after the rains retreat has ended. That leniency surrounding ordination has extended even further by another and more covert exercise regarding the new status of military monks.

A covert military unit authorised by a confidential department began assigning Buddhist soldiers to ordain while remaining on active duty as early as 2002. Every year since then, there have been groups of military monks assigned to specific posts. According to military monks, the secret military unit operates semi-independently. Its operations are unknown to most of the military in Bangkok, although there have been numerous reports that implicate the Thai monarchy, especially Queen Sirikit (such as reports of ordaining groups of military monks for the Queen's birthday).<sup>55</sup>

It is difficult however to determine how many people in the military truly do not know about the military monks versus those who refuse to disclose what they know. As the State-appointed guardians of Thai monastic lifestyles and activities, the Office of National Buddhism does not acknowledge the presence of these military monks. When asked about the presence of military monks, the Director of the Office of National Buddhism dismissed the issue, explaining:

53 Mohan Wijayaratna, *Buddhist monastic life: According to the texts of the Theravāda tradition*, trans. Claude Grangier and Steven Collins (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne & Sidney: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 15.

54 Monks are clearly prohibited from interacting with or becoming involved with the military in the *Vinaya* (Buddhist Monastic Code). Under The Etiquette of a Contemplative, it is a *pacittiya* [within the Buddhist Monastic Code, the term *pacittiya* refers to rules involving confession; it is also a name of one of the books within the *Vinaya*] offence for monks to go to a battlefield, see a review of the battle units or even watch a field army – or similar large military force – on active duty, unless there is a suitable reason, *Vinaya texts part I: The Pātimokkha, The Mahāvagga, I–IV*, trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg (Delhi, Varanasi & Patna: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), 43, #48 and #49.

55 I learnt from Duncan McCargo, a specialist on southern Thailand, that 75 soldiers were ordained together in a ceremony for the Thai Queen's birthday in 2005.



Why would soldiers have to dress like a monk? In dangerous *wat*, we have soldiers there to take care of them. And this point is a really serious point in Thai Buddhism. We can't let something like this exist. The monk can't fight and can't have weapons. People may think this is possible, but it's not.<sup>56</sup>

The official stance of the Office of National Buddhism mirrors that of the Thai Buddhist *Vinaya*, which, as Thai historian Craig Reynolds notes, goes so far in distinguishing monks from soldiers that it forbids monks from even observing an army in battle dress.<sup>57</sup> Although the Director from the Office of National Buddhism argues emphatically that military monks do not exist, they are a very real and active part of many *wat* in southern Thailand.

Accounts of military monks in southern Thailand are cloaked in rumours and secrecy.<sup>58</sup> In numerous interviews with abbots, journalists and local Buddhists, there are allusions to military monks — at times, short but direct confirmations of them, but always these discussions follow under an air of hesitation and reluctance. If not for interviewing military monks themselves, I might have taken their depictions to be a communal fabrication.

To dismiss this atmosphere of secrecy would be to dismiss the very ideological efficacy of the military monk. Thai Buddhism is viewed as a peaceful, meditative and supportive tradition that is bereft of violence. Monks, as embodied agents of this tradition, are considered diametrically opposed to agents of war, i.e., the military. Hence, there is a reluctance to talk about military monks. Anthropologist Michael Taussig postulates that truth comes in the form of a public secret. The importance of this public secret is *knowing what not to know*.<sup>59</sup> Living in an environment that normalises bombings and armed attacks, southern monks and some privileged Buddhist laity are aware of military monks, but they know they should also not openly talk about them.<sup>60</sup> Discussing military monks would bring together elements that are socially considered opposites: Buddhism and violence.

56 Personal communication with Nopparat Benjawatthanant, Director of the Office of National Buddhism, in Nakhon Pathom on 25 Dec. 2006.

57 Craig Reynolds, *Seditious histories: Contesting Thai and Southeast Asian pasts* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2006), p. 237.

58 There are no official reports on military monks, the only substantiations of their existence coming from interviews, personal observations and local rumours in southern Thailand. Part of the process of unraveling the mystery of the military monk is explicating the secrecy behind these rumours. As Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben note, ethnographers cannot discount rumours, especially in violent contexts:

One of the most common and also complicated problems of fieldwork on violence is how to deal with *rumors*. Every field-worker runs across a good deal of gossip, hearsay, slander, rumor, and even character assassination, but they acquire inordinate importance in violent situations in which access to such information can make the difference between life and death, safety and injury. Rumors are often the only source of ethnographic information available to the anthropologist under rapidly changing circumstances.

*Fieldwork under fire: Contemporary studies of violence and culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 15.

59 *Defacement: Public secrecy and the labor of the negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 2.

60 It is important to distinguish my use of the public secret from Michael Taussig's. In this specific scenario, I apply Taussig's idea of the public secret as a less encompassing and overarching social

One clear indication of this is from many interviews with abbots in the southernmost provinces who claim to know nothing about military monks. Contrary to these abbots' assertions, a high-ranking monk in the southernmost provinces confided that abbots throughout the region met in 2004 and discussed the issue of military monks receiving military stipends.<sup>61</sup>

The very concept of military monks represents a powerful clash between Thai Buddhist doctrine and practice. This conflict between praxis and doctrine, when made public, creates discomfort for a Thai Buddhist. One example of this came during an afternoon interview with Phra Nirut, a high-ranking monk in southern Thailand. The interview was light-hearted and relaxed until I asked him about military monks.

Phra Nirut paused for a few seconds and sighed. Almost reluctantly he nodded, confirming that he knew a little about them. To press the issue a bit more, I asked his opinion about military monks — were these gun-wielding monks legitimate or not? After the question was posed, Phra Nirut squirmed a bit in his chair, smiled faintly, and let out a series of filler words. He finally replied, 'I cannot say. It depends on many things.' He paused again and I decided to let the silence linger. Frowning slightly, Phra Nirut spoke again, this time in a soft voice, 'For me, it is not ok. For me, it is not ok.'<sup>62</sup>

Phra Nirut's inability to condone military monks could very well be a reaction to their changing role in southern *wat*. Starting in 2002, military monks went, with limited guidance by the Thai *sangha*, to areas that were lacking monks.<sup>63</sup> Their stay at their assigned post was indefinite and depended upon the longevity of the circumstances surrounding their assignment. If a military monk decided to quit his post, another would come and take his place.

*Wat* need a minimum of five monks in order to perform crucial ceremonies, such as the annual *Kathin* ceremony during *khaophansā*. Populating these understaffed *wat* with military monks enabled the *wat* to perform important rituals, thereby granting Buddhists in these areas a chance to make merit, while simultaneously augmenting the State's presence through its interrelationship with the Thai *sangha*.<sup>64</sup>

However, the situation changed when Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra declared martial law in 2004. The Thai State found a new use for them. Instead of using the military monks to fill voids in the monastic infrastructure, military monks were stationed in particular *wat* in order to bolster their defences. In the

phenomenon. Public in this context is the military monk's specific community. The identity of the military monk is a public secret for his immediate community; it is not a public secret for an entire district, province, or region. Most people in a district, province, or region are unaware of military monks.

61 Personal communication with a high-ranking monk in one of the southernmost provinces, 2004.

62 Personal communication, 2007.

63 It is difficult to ascertain how much the Mahātherasammakhoṇ [generally translated as the Council of Elders and is the supreme council of monks within the Thai *sangha*] or the overall Thai *Sangha* knows about the military monks. What is for certain is that the *sangha* has never been informed of their existence and certain related internal policies. According to Aḥān Mahāwichī at Wat Chang Hai, there was a regional *sangha* meeting on 5 May 2004 concerning the military monks receiving a salary. Personal communication by telephone on 15 Aug. 2004.

64 Another State-sponsored programme similar to this was the Thammathud, launched in 1964. For more information on this project, refer to Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer*, pp. 434–56.

late evening, one monk sat at a table outside his monk's quarters with me and relayed what he had heard about military monks:

A *wat* in Narathiwat had a few monks. When insurgents attacked, the monks moved to stay in the city. The *wat* became abandoned. Muslims went to the *wat* to destroy the Buddha images, buildings, pavilions and the monk's quarters. The Queen ordered soldiers to become monks and go stay in the abandoned *wat*, to guard the *wat* and its religious objects. In this respect, I agree that there has to be military monks.<sup>65</sup>

One clear indication of this strategy of stationing military monks is their commissioning throughout the three southernmost provinces. The majority of military monks are sent to Narathiwat, the second largest group to Yala and the fewest to Pattani. These proportions match the level of violence and instability in these three provinces. In 2006 and the early half of 2007, there were not many military monks in the southernmost provinces and no confirmed networking among them.<sup>66</sup> Typically, soldiers training in southern Thailand are selected before they graduate to become military monks — going through full ordination at a local *wat* from their home neighborhood, or at more clandestine locations in southern Thailand. Nonetheless, they are active and vigilant protectors of the *wat* and their monks.

Early one evening, while smoking his hand-rolled cigarette within the *wat*, one military monk, whom I refer to as Phra Eks, proudly opened up his saffron robes to reveal a Smith and Wesson tucked beneath the folds around his waist. Although he keeps his M-16 hidden in his sleeping quarters, at night he generally carries the handgun in case of trouble. For Phra Eks, a military monk's primary duty is to protect monks from terrorists (*phūkokānrai*):

We need to disguise ourselves as monks to protect [the monks]. If we don't do this, in the future, there will be no monks in the three provinces. We need to give them moral support, to serve our nation, religion, and army, to foster harmony, to prevent social disruptions (discord), and to prevent people from abusing others.<sup>67</sup>

Phra Eks's disguise is more than a superficial undercover persona or a means of preserving a public secret. Seemingly contradicting himself, he also asserts that he is not merely acting as a monk, he is a real monk (*phra čhing*).

Phra Eks is 30 years old and comes from a poor Thai Chinese family of nine in one of the border provinces. His father, who died when Phra Eks was very young, served as a soldier in southern Thailand. Being one of seven children, Phra Eks helps his mother take care of his siblings by contributing part of his salary each month to the family.<sup>68</sup> In this way, he is able to confer both merit and money to his mother.

65 Personal communication with a monk in one of the southernmost provinces, 2007.

66 Military monks have offered estimates as to the number of currently active military monks dispersed throughout the three southernmost provinces. The numbers are around 200, although this number is in flux and changes according to the level of violence and the need for them.

67 Personal communication in one of the southernmost provinces, 2006.

68 Monthly salaries differ for soldiers. Every month, an electronic transfer of 9,000 *baht* is deposited into Phra Eks account (nearly USD 250).

Phra Eks considers himself to be both a soldier and a monk. When I pressed him as to his ultimate allegiance, he replied that his job as a soldier simultaneously fulfils the duties of a monk. For Phra Eks, his duties do not conflict with one another. In the event that the *wat* was attacked and he killed an attacker, although this would transgress the most important of the *parajikas* (severe offence to violating Buddhist law) by killing a human being, Phra Eks would remain a monk.<sup>69</sup> Realising that such a circumstance could be quite complicated, he explained that there are certain people present who would ‘clean up’ the situation in order to allow him to remain at his post.

Although Phra Eks recognises the gravity of murdering a terrorist, the defence of the *wat* and its occupants overshadows it. I asked Phra Eks on several occasions why the existence of military monks was necessary. He explained:

Buddhism as a religion helps to clean the heart and shape the mind. Buddhism teaches people to abandon their greed, anger and obsessions, to live moderately. If there is no Buddhism to teach and guide people it would be a nation of chaos filled with selfish people ... I will use a gun whenever I see someone who tries to kill or harm anybody or a monk here. I will shoot.<sup>70</sup>

Phra Eks sees a Muslim terrorist attack on Buddhist monks as emblematic of an attack on the nation’s moral integrity. If there were no military monks, Thailand would sink into chaos and its people would become selfish. Phra Eks rationalises that this ideological threat of moral turpitude justifies the use of violence. His stance on terrorists is reminiscent of the rhetoric that ultra-conservative monks used to describe communists in the 1970s. For staunch Thai nationalist supporters like Phra Kittiwuttho, a communist challenges the nation and religion and is the living embodiment of *Māra*, the manifestation of desire. Phra Kittiwuttho justifies violence against communists as well:

...because whoever destroys the nation, the religion, or the monarchy, such bestial types (*man*) are not complete persons. Thus we must intend not to kill people but to kill the Devi (*Māra*); this is the duty of all Thai.<sup>71</sup>

Kittiwuttho’s justification in the 1970s against the communists rests on two concepts: the antagonist to the State is a manifestation of *Māra*, an embodiment of moral depravity; and, killing such a manifestation is not the same as killing a ‘complete person’. While Phra Eks does not go so far as to articulate a dehumanisation of Malay Muslim terrorists, his justification for violence is similar to Phra Kittiwuttho’s. Phra Eks will attack those who seek to bring about a chaotic and selfish nation, a nation which Kittiwuttho would consider dominated by *Māra*. It is the ideological threat to nation and Buddhist principles that provokes both monks to condone the use of violence. But unlike Phra Kittiwuttho, Phra Eks’s rationalisation enables him to personally enact violence.

69 In ch. 4 of the *Vinaya* (Buddhist Monastic Code), the third *parajika* for a monk is depriving another human being of life. The offence is so specific in this rule that to merely insinuate or persuade a person to end their life constitutes such an offence and results in permanent excommunication from the *sangha*.

70 Personal communication with a military monk in one of the southernmost provinces, 2006.

71 Charles Keyes, ‘Political crisis and militant Buddhism’, in *Religion and legitimation of power in Thailand, Laos, and Burma*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg, PA: ANIMA Books, 1978), p. 153.

This rationale of justifying violence may be endemic throughout various Theravādin traditions. In Sri Lanka, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has blurred the lines between sacred duty and murder. Sri Lankan JVP monks have rationalised the violence they commit through Buddhist justifications and a legacy of precedence. Their precedence is traced back to the Sinhalese mytho-historical chronicle called the *Mahāvamsa*. In this work, the Buddhist King Dhutthagamani wages a sacred war against foreign invaders led by Tamil King Elara in the second century BCE. The killing of heathens did not constitute murder, since the Tamil warriors were neither meritorious nor, more importantly, Buddhist.<sup>72</sup>

During the 1980s, the JVP monks re-conceptualised Dutthagamani's cause within the ethno-religious war between the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the Sinhalese Buddhist State.<sup>73</sup> In 1988, JVP monks waged a rash of violent attacks upon police, teachers and politicians as their demands for President Jayewardene's resignation. Their threats, brutal physical assaults and an attempted assassination all became means to a more important and justifiable cause: the preservation of the nation and Sri Lankan Buddhism.<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, the rhetoric employed by JVP monks is similar to that of Kittiwuttho's regarding Communists, and is not too different from the mentality of the Thai military monk, Phra Eks. This commonality suggests a uniform latent tendency in Theravādin traditions for justifying violence.

Yet the Buddhist justification for violence and the advent of militant monks goes beyond the borders of Theravāda Buddhism. Historically in East Asia, under the canopy of Mahāyāna Buddhism, there were cases in which both monasteries and monks were militarised.<sup>75</sup> In China there are many instances of soldier-monks who led revolts and rebellions, such as the Maitreya Messianic rebellions during the Sui and Tang Dynasties (613–26). During the course of defending its borders Korean armies enlisted monks as soldiers to fight off the Jurchen, Mongol, Japanese and Manchu invaders.<sup>76</sup>

Japan has also had a long history of militarised monks. As early as the tenth century under the abbotship of Ryogen, Tendai armies marched into battle. These soldier-monks were well aware of their transgressive behaviour and, because of their actions, were dubbed 'evil monks'. Regardless of the immorality, they saw their tasks as necessary. Christoph Kleine explains that once the purpose became cosmic in importance: 'Armed monks had an important task to fulfil, for the sake of

72 Monks explained to the Sinhalese king that 'Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken on himself the five precepts. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts.' *Mahāvamsa: The Great chronicle of Lanka from 6<sup>th</sup> century BC to 4<sup>th</sup> century AD*, trans. Wilhelm Geiger (New Delhi & Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1993), p. 178.

73 For a comprehensive background to this, refer to Stanley Tambiah, *Buddhism betrayed? Religion, politics and violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

74 Abeysekara, Ananda. 'The Saffron army, violence, terror(ism): Buddhism, identity, and difference in Sri Lanka', *Numen*, 48, 1 (2001): 31 and 32.

75 Although Chinese Buddhist scriptures prohibited the retaining of arms within monasteries, Christoph Kleine notes that spears, bows and arrows, and shields were discovered in Chinese monasteries as early as 446 CE. 'Evil monks with good intentions?' in *Buddhism and violence*, ed. Michael Zimmermann (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006), p. 76.

76 For detailed accounts of these and other examples, refer to Paul Demieville, 'Buddhism and war', trans. Michelle Kendall, in *Buddhist warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Buddhism and thus the sake of all sentient beings.<sup>77</sup> During the Warring States Period of the 1500s, the Japanese warrior monks (*ikko-ikki*) became prevalent and as late as the early 1900s, Japanese Zen monks marched at the front of the lines during the Russo-Japanese war (1904–05).<sup>78</sup>

The rationale for violence in Theravāda Buddhism may be a latent tendency in the actors of its performances and rituals; one that is not awakened until a specific situation triggers this defensive yet aggressive reaction. I assert that the current violence in southern Thailand, much like the ethnic fratricide during the 1980s in Sri Lanka, or the violence committed by the Khmer Rouge (which, according to Kittiwuttho, awoke in him the need to defend Buddhism) is activating the latent tendency for militant Buddhism in southern Thailand.

In the southernmost provinces, many monks have stopped their morning alms, lay attendance at the *wat* has dropped and dozens of monks reportedly have been killed. Ordinations, which are uncommon due to the low population of Buddhists in the southernmost provinces, have decreased in number. One district I visited had had only one ordination in over a year. He was a young teacher who decided to ordain for a few weeks before defrocking and returning to lay life.

Those who remain see the existence of Thai Buddhism in the region endangered. For them, the violence is not merely about worldly existence and all its mundane matters, but rather about the survival of the *dhamma*, the Buddhist doctrine. One monk in favour of military monks explained that this militancy was a necessity:

It is beneficial to have military monks in order to protect *the* religion. I mean to protect religious rituals, the *dhamma*, artifacts and people ... Buddhist artifacts have been destroyed. It is good to have a guard to keep an eye on these things. The Buddha's teachings, i.e., the books, are still here. The religious people are still here. If you are asking about the military monk's importance, I would like to ask you back – what if this there were no military monks? What would happen? The *wat* might be attacked and destroyed. When the *wat* are destroyed, what would happen then?<sup>79</sup>

It is in this respect that military monks and some monks regard Thai Malay Muslims as their enemies. Phra Eks, when asked to define Thai-ness (*kwāmpenthai*) articulated this polemical perspective:

Thai-ness means good human relationships [that are] gentle, [in which each] helps the other. But now it's not like that here. Thai Buddhists are still the same; they are gentle like [Thai-ness prescribes] but Thai-Muslims have only violence.<sup>80</sup>

Violence against monks and their *wat* has provoked a latent tendency in Thai Buddhism for demonising the Other and justifying violence. It is this mentality that has spurred irregular behaviour for Thai monks, such as some abbots who go to sleep at night with guns next to their beds.

77 Kleine, 'Evil monks with good intentions?', in *Buddhism and violence*, ed. Zimmermann, p. 74.

78 Brian Victoria, *Zen at war* (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1997), p. 137.

79 Personal communication with a monk in one of the southernmost provinces, 2007.

80 Personal communication with a military monk in one of the southernmost provinces, 2007.

Caught between the jaws of socio-political circumstance and Buddhist doctrine, a few high-ranking southern monks offer doctrinal justification for the military monks. Although the *Vinaya* (Buddhist monastic code) strictly prohibits monks from using any aggressive force, it does allow for them to defend themselves. The advent of the military monk position is an application of this allowance.<sup>81</sup> Looking across different Buddhist traditions, Richard Jones gives a slightly different view that could justify the Thai Buddhist State's creation of military monks. According to Jones, the monk's most central social obligation is to teach the *dhamma*. Any action taken to preserve this primary social responsibility is secondary in importance to the repercussions of not teaching the *dhamma*.<sup>82</sup>

Under this rationale, military monks are present in order to ensure that monks still exist in southern Thailand to teach the *dhamma*. Military monks may be doctrinally and patriotically justified in their actions, but their purpose still must be concealed. I once asked Phra Eks if I could take his picture. He refused, explaining, 'This would be too dangerous.' Phra Eks needs to be concerned about exposure. A photograph of him brandishing a gun would expose the secret and lead to his alienation and possible death.<sup>83</sup>

Anthropologist Stanley Tambiah argues that militancy separates a monk from his sacred identity. Referencing the militant activities of the JVP monks of Sri Lanka, Tambiah explains, 'The monk who has finally taken to the gun can no longer be considered a vehicle of the Buddha's religion...'<sup>84</sup> In this vein, a picture of Phra Eks with a gun would expunge him of sacrality, destroy the pacifistic view of the southern monks, and undermine the clandestine nature of the military monk programme.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this article, this study looks at the militarising of *wat* and monks. Buddhist *wat* and monks are targets for violence in the southernmost provinces. Recent examples of this start in 2002, when there was a bomb threat at Wat Chang Hai in Khokpo, Pattani. This attack in many ways represented the nascent policy of targeting monks and *wat*. One high-ranking monk explained this motivation to me in a phone interview:

81 Although southern monks conceded in interviews that it was appropriate for military monks to exist and to live within the *wat*, they did not, however, condone the military monk remaining armed in the monks' quarters. Personal communications in one of the southernmost provinces, 2004.

82 Richard H. Jones, 'Theravāda Buddhism and morality', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 47, 3 (1979): 383 and 384.

83 It is of the opinion of military monks that most parties and individuals involved in the military monks' daily lives are aware of their true identity and help to conceal the secret, but those outside of their shared habits and lifestyles are oblivious to their existence.

84 Tambiah, *Buddhism betrayed?*, p. 99.

85 The public secret is now shared by more than just the monks and some Buddhist laity. Phra Eks told me in 2007 that the terrorists (*phūkōkānrai*) now know he is a military monk. According to his friend who has contacts with militant groups, the terrorists are now watching him very closely. Because of this, he has to be constantly vigilant. So far no military monks have been reportedly killed in southern Thailand; with regards to Phra Eks, there is no confirmation that his identity has been compromised.

People attacked Wat Chang Hai in order to destroy the morale of the Buddhist people. Because people believe that Wat Chang Hai is sacred and since [it is] sacred, bombing it might decrease the degree of sacredness; people might lose their belief in the *wat*.<sup>86</sup>

While the militarisation of *wat* serve the military, it has also enhanced the protection for some *wat*. But the militarising of *wat* also heightens the association of Thai Buddhism with the State. In light of the current violence and martial law, this militarisation of *wat* both raises the *wat*'s political value and gives rise to further local Muslim resentment of Buddhism in the Thai south.

Another State action that has led to the militarising of Buddhism comes in the form of the military monk. Where the militarising of the *wat* increased the politicisation of the *wat* and has led some Muslims to view it as a taboo space, the militarising of the monk is a covert exercise and has yet to produce a similar impact upon how Muslims view monks.<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, military monks embody the nexus linking the militant State and Thai Buddhist principles.

Working undercover in *wat* as ordinary monks, military monks fulfil obligations to both the Thai *sangha* and the State. Their roles are not publicised, at times not even disclosed to the very monks who ordain them. Violence in southern Thailand is saturated in secrecy: anonymous militant actors, disparate grievances and victims from both sides that often go unnamed. Yet out of this blend of secrecy and violence comes another form of secret, a group secret. Some Buddhists living and working alongside military monks are aware of military monks' identities, but choose not to publicise them. Their decision to protect the secrecy of the military monk may be an indirect result of the religious angst many feel concerning the presence of military monks.

In the current Thai milieu and Buddhist doctrine there is a dearth of support for military monks. This lack of support derives from Buddhist interdictions dating back to the time of the Buddha. One of the earliest canonical sources prohibiting military ordination derives from a time when soldiers eschewed their military duties by entering the *sangha*. Ironically, the circumstances have inverted, providing the near-opposite reaction. Hand-picked Buddhist soldiers of the army, wishing to perform their duties, now receive a salary, a handgun, an M-16 and admittance into the Thai *sangha*. The contradictions embodied in the military monk engender a secret that, if publicly disclosed, would probably yield intense reactions from Thai Buddhists — and, from the local Malay Muslims.

During the past four years, attacks on southern monks represented attacks on innocent victims, pacifists operating outside of the violence. But this representation is changing in southern Thailand. One clear example of this is Phra Eks's *wat*, which is now a fortified and heavily guarded military base. Police living inside his *wat* collaborate with the abbot and monks. And then there is Phra Eks, a soldier doubling up as an ordinary monk. These components are a powerful influence on the

86 Personal communication by phone with a high-ranking monk in one of the southernmost provinces, 2004.

87 However, it could be argued that the targeting and killing of monks on their morning alms rounds already signify how southern militants see monks.



local community. As Buddhist spaces and monks become associated with the Thai military, they increase the religious divide between Buddhists and Muslims. And, in the end, we find that State actions assist in converting the southern conflict into a religious conflict: a transformation from a civil war between militants fighting for an independent region and the central government into a Malay Muslim insurrection against a Buddhist State.