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Performing Multi-Religious Ritual in
Southern Thailand



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Abstract

In this article, I follow two ethnographic examples of multi-religious ritual in Southern Thailand in order to show how bodily expressions of identity constitute a privileged terrain for understanding the dramatic performances in which social hierarchies and normative orders are expressed and identities negotiated. Bodily expressions, such as physical movements of the body, gestures, chanting, etc. comprise part of the cultural memory that is inscribed in a participants' body and communicated in the context of a performance. I use the case of the exchange of prayer gestures and chanting in the "ritual of two religions" annually held in Tamot, Patthalung and the case of a Muslima who wants to cure her child in a Buddhist temple in Songkhla to illustrate what Hayden has called the simultaneous presence of antagonism and tolerance in multi-religious ritual spaces. Thus, rather than a remainder of solidarity and cohesion, I regard the exchange of bodily expressions as transgressions in a life world where religions are increasingly separated. Following Lambek's notion of polyphony, I maintain that people in Southern Thailand navigate between the conflicting claims that traditional and orthodox beliefs make upon them without making a final decision for either system.

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Introduction

In this article I explore the exchange of bodily expressions in ritual space as it unfolds between Buddhists and Muslims in shared neighbourhoods of Southern Thailand (see also Horstmann 2004). ‘Multi-religious neighbourhood’ refers to the sharing of physical space, the development of local knowledge, regular investments into relations beyond religious divides and, consequently, a sense of belonging to a commonly identified social entity.¹ The use of bodily expressions in ritual space constitutes a privileged terrain to understand the dramatic performances in which social hierarchies and normative orders are expressed and identities negotiated.² Bodily expressions, such as physical movements of the body, gestures, chanting, etc. comprise part of the cultural memory that is inscribed in a participants’ body and communicated in the context of a performance. In ritual space, and through bodily performance, identities and social positions are legitimated, challenged, negotiated, reflected, expressed and transformed through markers of identity like food and dress. My thesis is, then, that the performance of bodily expressions in ritual space opens a fascinating window on the negotiation of Buddhist-Muslim relations in the Songkhla Lake Basin, where multi-religious rituals occur frequently and have a long history. The exchange of prayer gestures in mortuary ritual, in particular, connects to the moral economy of exchange between Buddhists and Muslims and the rationality behind it. In the following, I show that the exchange of bodily expressions of identity provides a dynamic and highly indicative perspective on current competitive sharing of religious sites evolving between Buddhists and Muslims in the Songkhla Lake Basin, as identity is increasingly becoming separated along religious lines.³

Despite a recent hardening of religious identities, southern Thai ritual traditions continue to provide a forum in which the nostalgia of the past can be reinvented and where relations from the past can be recovered. Instead of representing unchanging values that are cosmologically legitimated, I argue that the symbolism of ritual

1 Investing into relations can be conceptualized as “organic solidarity” (Gomes, Kaartinen, Kortteinen 2007; Horstmann 2011).

2 For the study of gesture, see, for example, Jan Bremmer and Hermann Roodenburg, *A Cultural History of Gesture. From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

3 See Hayden for a comparative perspective on the competitive sharing of religious sites (Hayden 2002). In these sites of multi-religious ritual, both antagonism and tolerance are present.

behaviour shows us how the cosmological beliefs of the people in Southern Thailand articulate in modernity.⁴ It is this aspect of a construction of an alternative modernity that shapes the identities of Buddhists and Muslims in Southern Thailand today.⁵

I present two example cases in which embodied markers of identity are dramatically exchanged and put on display. The first example comes from ‘the ritual of two religions’ in Tamot Patthalung, the second example comes from the Manooraa tradition and concerns the performance of a Manooraa dance-drama ceremony in the Buddhist temple of Ta Kura in Satingpra, Songkhla province. I argue that the exchange of bodily expressions such as prayer gestures between Buddhists and Muslims in Tamot and of beliefs in a spiritual cure in the case of a Muslim mother who brings her ill child for healing to a Manooraa master in a Buddhist temple, in very interesting ways represent transgressions in a politicised interreligious environment that cannot be explained away by conceptualizing these dramatic manifestations of identity as either syncretic or hybrid. I argue instead that these bodily expressions represent a dramatic performance of the cosmological beliefs regarding ancestor spirits that people of modern times continue to maintain. In putting forward this thesis of an entangled, alternative modernity, I am neither choosing the ahistorical perspective of a constant structure, nor the postmodern perspective, in which traditions simply dissolve or wither away, but I am interested in their adaptation to modernity. I argue that in the context of a politization of religion in southern Thailand, chauvinistic communal mobilizations and acute violence, the exchange of prayer gestures and the presence of a Muslim jilbab in a Buddhist temple provide telling transgressions against the process of normalizing and disciplining religious boundaries. These transgressions are not expressions of communal harmony or unchanging values, but show how autochthonous ideas and conscious strategies are used to communicate

4 For a perspective on the articulation of tradition with modernity, see, for example, Alexander Horstmann and Thomas Reuter (eds.) (2009): *The Postmodern Shift*. In: *Asian Journal of Social Sciences*. Special Focus: Revitalization of Tradition and New Forms of Religiosity: Perspectives from Southeast Asia. 37, 6, pp. 853-856.

5 See Bruce Knauff, *Critically Modern* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002). Knauff suggests that alternative modernities “happen” in a “multivocal arena” that is delimited and framed by local cultural and subjective dispositions on one side, and by global political economies (and their possibilities and limitations) on the other. The model thus emphasizes the interwovenness of local and global processes through which political, economical, societal and cultural interests are articulated and negotiated. At the same time, it underscores the dialectical relationship between *past* and *present*, or *tradition* and *modernity*, and thus allows modernity to become “spirited” – a feature that was once thought to be modernity’s very antithesis.

the processes of rationalization, normalization, social control, inequality, dislocation and cultural fragmentation. The re-enchanting of modernity revitalizes religious beliefs and keeps modernity spirited.⁶ Religious traditions are here not simply reproduced or even reinvented, but provide a resource pool for enchanting the post-modern condition (Horstmann and Reuter 2009: 853-856). I regard embodied markers of identity as signs and symbols that are used to mark ethnic and religious affiliation and identity.

Both of these case-studies involve symbolic exchanges that transgress the social order in very interesting ways.⁷ First, in a cosmological sense, they would represent the traditional social order. But in recent years the normalization of religion has engendered a process, in which the boundaries of religion have been reinforced more rigidly and cross-cutting ties between Buddhism and Islam have become taboo. In such a context, which Mary Douglas would call 'purity and danger', these liminal spaces have become polluted and polluting (1979). It is very important to note that the actors who perform the ritual behaviour clearly identify and mark themselves as Buddhists or Muslims. In this sense, the exchange of prayer and healing bodily expressions represent transgressions in a public space where Buddhism and Islam are newly but clearly separated from one another.⁸

In the following section of this article, I provide some background information on the area in which these ritual traditions developed and are taking place. In the principal section, the exchange of bodily expressions in the two cases will be discussed, before analyzing and interpreting these exchanges in the concluding section. I then engage in a theoretical discussion of the development of ritual space in Theravada Buddhism and Islam and argue that a focus on embodied identity markers adds new

6 By "spirited modernity" I want to say that spirits are revitalized in highly modern contexts.

7 For a theoretical perspective on transgression, see Ursula Rao and John Hutnyk, *Celebrating Transgression. Method and Politics in Anthropological Studies of Culture* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2006).

8 Rituals are effective and transformative rather than stabilizing and traditionalizing. Köpping, for instance sees rituals as moments of intensified communication, which address contingency in the human world and through their performance open up contingent processes themselves that have the potential to transform perception. As rituals pronounce the relativity of any particular order, they may initiate meaningful transgressions that can only be partly contained within a set frame and may trigger radical reorganization of perception and social context. See Klaus P. Köpping, *Shattering Frames, Transgression and Transformations in Anthropological Discourse and Practice* (Berlin: Reimer, 2002).

perspectives to this debate. A few remarks on transformative character of ritual in the complete sharing of the ritual space conclude this article.

The Research Context

The research area at stake is located in the Songkhla Lake Basin which is comprised of the provinces of Songkhla, Patthalung and Nakhonsrithammarat. Tambralinga, as the area was once called, is one of the oldest kingdoms in Southeast Asia. The Isthmus of Kra on the West Coast of Southern Thailand was a very important trade route from mainland to insular Southeast Asia and a carrefour of culture.



The region is also a point where Buddhist culture and its sphere of influence meets and overlaps with Islamic spheres. With the centralization of the Thai state, the Songkhla Lake area became dominated by Theravada Buddhism. Some of Thailand's oldest and most sacred temples can be found in this area. These temples played an important role in the process and narrative of state building in Southern Thailand. Muslims were settling in the Songkhla Lake area as migrants and sometimes as slaves and filled there a marginal and subaltern role. Thus, Songkhla, Patthalung

and Nakhonsrithammarat are primarily Buddhist provinces with Muslim minorities. However, in some districts, Buddhists and Muslims are equal in numbers, live in mixed neighbourhoods in a context of day-to-day co-existence. However, in recent times, these communities have become more clearly separated internally along religious lines. Increasingly, Buddhists and Muslims distinguish themselves from one another by adopting a more conspicuous religious dress code and identity. In Tamot, for example, Ban Tamot is a Buddhist community, Ban Hua Chang is a Muslim community. But the history of these communities is inter-twined. The Buddhist temple is constructed on the remains of a Muslim cemetery and Surau (Islamic prayer hall), while Ban Hua Chang used to be a Buddhist settlement with a Buddhist cave. The cemetery of Tamot used to be a Muslim cemetery, but has gradually been taken over by the Buddhist villagers. Ban Tamot and Ban Hua Chang switched completely: The Buddhist villagers settled in the fertile valley, while the Muslims settled in the less fertile hills. In this sense, the religious landscape and the use of resources reflect the power relationships in the area. In Tamot, conversions in both directions did occur, from Buddhism to Islam and from Islam to Buddhism. However, I found that the noble elite in Tamot tended to convert to Buddhism at the time when the presence of the Thai state was growing. The reason may well be that conversion to Buddhism facilitated upward mobility and integration into the local power elite. Today, Islam, under the influence of transnational reformist forces, no longer accepts conversion to Buddhism.

Buddhism and Islam coexisted in the Songkhla Lake region for several hundred years and they can both be considered as indigenous religions. Both of these world religions articulated with the earlier indigenous ritual and belief system of the Songkhla Lake region. Hundreds of years ago, the villagers primarily believed in the power of nature and ancestor spirits. These beliefs in ancestor spirits hold until today. In the Thalesap Songkhla region, a very interesting tradition of Buddhist saints exists and some of these saints enjoy great popularity among Southern people, in the manner of prominent ancestors. Both Buddhism and Islam developed interesting syncretistic variations in the Songkhla lake region and incorporated ancestor spirit beliefs. In Southern Thailand, only the most recent ancestors are remembered except for individual persons who were known to have accumulated a lot of merit. The anonymous ancestors are conceptualized as a collective who, on their way to heaven, help the living and keep away malevolent spirits. Only a few receive the title of “great ancestors”. These great ancestors were known for their power, charisma and merit and are remembered by personal name. Buddhist saints, Muslim governors and the

first teachers of the Manooraa count among these great ancestors. Southern Thailand thus developed a unique ritual culture and arts that combined elements of local religion, Theravada Buddhism and Islam. However, the influences of the national Sangha and, more recently, the rise of transnational Islamic missionary movements have divided the villagers and sometimes forced them to live a contradiction. Some religious leaders have striven to continue old traditions, while also being under the strong influence of forces that claimed to represent modernity. People thus find themselves in a situation, where traditional beliefs coexist with newer, more orthodox ideas. In more recent times, the circulation of media images of inter-religious community violence in the three border provinces has engendered a discussion on the feasibility of Buddhist and Muslim co-existence in Thailand. On the one hand, Buddhist villagers express solidarity with the Buddhist minority in the border provinces, as Thai Buddhists continued to migrate to safer places in the Songkhla lake region. On the other hand, minority Muslims in the Songkhla lake region have joined Islamic da'wa movements, such as the Tablighi Jama'at and travelled to the Tabligh's centres in Yala and Bangkok. These developments have to be contextualised in a discussion of the dynamics of Theravada Buddhism and Islam in Thailand as a whole.

The ritual of two religions in Tamot, Patthalung

In the fifth lunar month, the people in Tamot celebrate a ritual at the cemetery just after the important *phi may* New Year celebrations to symbolize the renewal of social relations. The feast is characterized by plenty of activity, hundreds of visitors and much noise. The cemetery is a shared cemetery where Muslims and Buddhists are buried. Originally a Muslim cemetery, it was taken over by Thai Buddhist and Chinese villagers to the extent that the majority of tombs are now Buddhist. The tombs of the Thai and Chinese are very conspicuous with shrines and photographs, while the Muslim tombs are very plain. The Muslims established their own cemetery in Ban Hua Chang, a Muslim community that was formerly Buddhist, but has changed with Ban Wat Tamot. The temple of Wat Tamot is built on the remains of a Muslim cemetery and a Muslim Surau. The Muslim tombs are supposed to be very old.

While the Muslims are now very marginally represented at the common cemetery, their participation is necessary for the ritual of unity to function. Without their participation, the renewal of communal relations would not be complete and tensions

and rifts would be possible. The guardian spirit of the community is believed to be Muslim from the Malay Archipelago and a religious elder, a pattern repeated in other localities in Southern Thailand. The founder of the community and owner of the land is a stranger and pioneer settler. Not much is known however, about him. A cohesive creation narrative of Ban Tamot is missing, although the Buddhist elders of Tamot began to write their version of the history of the temple and the history of the community only ten years ago.

Participants in the Ritual

The most conspicuous element of the ritual of two religions is the presence and visibility of the religious leaders, Buddhist abbots and Islamic imams, from Ban Tamot, Ban Hua Chang and surrounding communities. It is not the only place in Southeast Asia, where Theravada Buddhism and Islam come together in ritual in this way. Hinduism and Islam also coexist in Northern Bali and in Lombok in very similar ways, with similar recent tensions and changes (see Reuter 2002). The Buddhist monks establish themselves in a large prayer hall on the hill and physically dominate the landscape, while the imams settle in a much smaller building. The day before the ritual, Buddhist and Muslim women begin actively cleaning the tombs, decorating them with flowers and candles and presenting offerings to the guardian spirit. Every family busily cleans the tombstone of the family lineage, replaces flowers and provides fresh water.

The guardian spirit is living at a Hindu fertility shrine, owned by God Shiva. The phallus symbol of Shiva (*lingam*) is decorated with golden ornaments, flowers, and lamps, and is covered by a Buddhist robe. A plate consisting of sticky rice, roasted chicken and sweets is also offered to the shrine. Betel and betel-nuts are never missing, since betel is the item that represents the ancestors. The ancestral spirits are welcomed by noisy fireworks, festive Manooraa-dance and music, creating a carnival atmosphere. The terrain of the guardian spirit is demarcated by four posts and a white thread signalling a sacred space, and it is forbidden to enter this terrain during the ritual. Apart from the religious leaders, crowds of laypeople join in as families and gather around the tombstones to participate in the ritual. They join the prayers, exchange food and consume the food on site in a picnic-like atmosphere. Participating Buddhists and Muslims are distinguishable by their festive and religious dress.

Whereas the Buddhist elders wear traditional cotton formal dress, the Buddhist lay-people dress in casual and informal clothes. Muslim men dress in Malay-Islamic attires, wearing sulongs and turbans. Muslim women on the other hand are dressed more formally and wear colourful veils. When the ritual prayers start, hundreds of people have congregated on the small hill, the large majority being Buddhist.

Exchange of Prayers

The ritual of two religions begins with the chanting of the *Du'a* verses for the dead in the small building where the Muslims imams and their associates place themselves. Something spectacular happens in this ritual space at this point in time. When the Muslim imams and Muslim villagers chant their *Du'a* prayers in the Muslim shrine, the Buddhist monks, the Buddhist elders and some Buddhist villagers who have Muslim ancestors join them and exchange praying gestures with them, holding up their hands to worship Allah and to praise the dead. However, the imams never join the Buddhist monks or Buddhist elders for their prayers, but walk in the early morning



Figure 1: The Buddhist abbot joins the Islamic *Du'a* prayer for the ancestral spirits.

through the cemetery to greet the participating Buddhist families. While the Buddhist abbot would never emulate Islamic prayer, he respects the religious practice of the Buddhist elders. The presentation of the Du'a chants is relatively modest and is even done in reduced form. After the chants in the small Sala, the imams also chant Du'a prayers at the graveyards where they assume their founder is buried.

The exchange of prayer is a dramatic manifestation of conciliation and solidarity and an acknowledgement of the fact that the Buddhist elders and even the abbot are linked by cross-cutting kinship ties to the imam in Ban Hua Chang. The exchange of habitual prayer gestures is embodied in the sense that it is expressed through the emulation of physical prayer and bodily expression. After the Muslim prayer, there is loud chanting of Buddhist sermons in the Buddhist Sala propagated by huge loudspeakers. Hundreds of Buddhist people who have arrived and who sit in a picnic-like atmosphere around the graveyards join the Buddhist sermons in a Buddhist chorus. The Muslims remain silent.

Exchange of Foodstuffs

After the exchange of prayers, the most important act of the ritual takes place: the exchange of foodstuffs. Food is among the most important items to be offered to the ancestral spirits. Women are particularly active in the preparation as well as in the exchange of foods. The women prepare delicious selected traditional dishes the whole day before the day of the ritual to be ready to serve and to exchange with other households. The food entails tasty curries, rice dishes, vegetables and fruit platters. Pork and every item associated with pork are carefully avoided as the Muslim food taboo has gained in importance in recent years. A similar taboo concerns liquor, but while liquor is not on the list of exchange, nobody can really stop the youth from consuming beer at the graveyards. Women present their foodstuffs to their relatives, friends, and women groups. Buddhist and Muslim women groups actively exchange information about the foods prepared, which are then exchanged between the groups. There is a lot of joking, laughter and bargaining between the women's groups in festive atmosphere, but also hard work, as the food has to be prepared in advance and in great volumes. The fact that the Muslim families accept the food of their Buddhist neighbours and consume it in the shrine should not be taken lightly, since food is one of the main boundaries between the groups. Apart from liquor and pork, there is no

obstacle to food exchange and the food is consumed in a picnic style, whereby Muslims sit down with their Buddhist friends and relatives to enjoy the food. The food is first of all offered to the ancestors. People believe that the spirits have to be fed before the participants are allowed to consume the remainders. Second, food is offered to the religious leaders of the groups. While the imams and their associates consume the food together in a relaxed climate, the Buddhist laypeople have to wait until the Buddhist monks have completed their sermons and the subsequent consumption of all foodstuffs, fruits and desserts carefully presented on platters to the monks. Only then, is the general feast allowed to start. During the picnic-style consumption of foods, the families are visited one by one by Buddhist monks and young novices who chant additional sermons. The family members stop eating during the chants and continue eating only after the monks have left for the next family. The selection of traditional foods is part of all important ancestral ritual: it is also offered to the great ancestors of the Manooraa-teachers on a special shrine constructed specifically on that occasion. Thus, food is indispensable for the reproduction of social relations in the village.

Declaration of Religious Harmony

Finally, one imam selected by the Muslim community Imam Leb from Ban Klong Nui is invited to address the audience in Southern Thai dialect in front of the Buddhist *Sala*. He begins his presentation by praising Allah (during which he is stopped by the Buddhist abbot). Interestingly, the Buddhist abbot refrains from giving a similar presentation as this is not deemed to be necessary. “Dear Brothers and Sisters (*pi-nong*). We come together here to demonstrate unity. In Tamot, Buddhists and Muslims live in peace. There should be no separation of Buddhists and Muslims, because we are tied by common blood relations.” After his speech, nowadays, the imam is interviewed by journalists as the “ritual of two religions” is considered unique and receives substantial media interest from outside. Local leaders and politicians visit the ritual of two religions to learn about interfaith dialogue in Tamot. Tamot is considered to be a model of peaceful co-existence. After the speech, the ritual of two religions is closed and everybody returns home.



Figure 2: The Islamic Imam in front of the Buddhist Sangha.

Manooraa as Spectacle and Pilgrimage Centre

Manooraa Rongkruu literally means Manooraa-Stage-Teacher: The ancestors are elevated to the highest position of deities and teachers who transfer their knowledge to the living and who enter the stage from heaven. While Manooraa represents the general performance and art tradition, the Manooraa Rongkruu encompasses the full ritual cycle and spirit possession ritual. Typical occasions for this type of Manooraa ritual include social or family functions, conflict within the family, miraculous healing of an illness, or a vow fulfilment ceremony. The dances performed by the possessed spirit mediums are also called vow-dances (cf. Butsararat 1992, 2003; Hemmet 1992: 276; Isaradej 1999, 2003). The Manooraa Rongkruu ritual will be prepared months or even years in advance, because it is crucial that all of the family members are present, and to complete all associated financial and organizational arrangements. The head of the family will set a date in the period from May to September with the trusted Manooraa master (*nairong Manooraa*). The Manooraa mas-

ter seeks intensive communication with the host family, which is indispensable for the preparation of the ritual and especially its ancestor-part. He will inquire about every single deity and ancestor spirit in the house. Not all of the deceased have the privilege of receiving ancestor status and only very powerful people who accumulated a lot of merit receive the status of great ancestors. The *nairong Manoora* is not able to contact the ancestor spirits of the house directly, but he can mediate between the ancestors of the first Manoora teachers and the ancestor spirits of the house. He will also be responsible for the call to the ancestor spirits and for the control of harmful spirits who may enter the stage through the back-door. During the consultations, which precede the performance, the *nairong Manoora* also inquires about the motivation of the family to invite the Manoora band. The host family will place photographs of their ancestors on the shrine in the house, prepare the offerings, food, and drinks for all the visitors for the three days and build a temporary ritual stage on a lawn near the house. The stage serves as a ceremonial space as well as a performing area for Manoora. The *palai* (spirit shrine) is a small elevated platform on the right side of the stage. It represents a high house where only *Manoora* ancestral spirits reside, the shrine for the host family's ancestral spirits is in the main house. During the ritual, a white sacred string (*saisin*) will link the *palai* by the stage to the shrine in the host family's house. The *palai* serves as the link between the god-like realm of the Manoora spirits and the host family's ancestors. The performance space for a Manoora-dance-drama varies. Traditionally, it was a makeshift space on the ground, with only four bamboo pillars and a roof signifying the performance boundaries. The Manoora Rongkruu is performed in the intimate compound of a private house and is available only for invited family members, relatives and good friends. The stage (*rong*) is constructed only for the duration of the performance and will be completely dismantled afterwards. Music and dance play a very significant role. A Manoora dancer's costume is layered with a chestpiece, a neckpiece, and a shoulder ornament; all are made from strings of colourful small plastic beads. Other unique features are the golden crown (*soed*), the silver wing ornament, the birdlike tail, and the long, bent fingernail extensions. A *soed* crown is considered sacred; only those who have gone through a *krob-soed* initiation ritual are allowed to wear it. It is not uncommon in the Lake Songkhla area to observe a multi-religious ritual, in which spirit possession blends with Theravada Buddhism or Islam (Horstmann 2004, 2008).

A public performance in Takae, which I witnessed in May 2007 attracted hundreds of participants and onlookers who hoped to benefit from the presence of Si Sata's spirit and his power to heal. In the first week of May, another grand cere-

mony attracted thousands of pilgrims who flocked in as families to participate in the merit-making activities at the temple of Takura in Satingpra. The ritual in Satingpra was also organised by a committee consisting of local bureaucrats and the Buddhist abbot of Takura. The ceremony transformed the sleepy village of Ban Wat Takura into a huge feast in which large crowds were attracted by the healing power of the Buddha image that is stored in a box behind two temple doors. The unwrapping of the small Buddha image under the music of the Manooraa musicians is the highlight of the festival.

The Manooraa Rongkruu in Takura was a hybridization of Theravada Buddhism and Manooraa. Basically, two mythological events happened in Takura at the same time: First, Takura is an important place in the Manooraa-myth. According to the old people, Mae Simmala donated the gold that an elephant had found in a bamboo tree to the temple of Wat Tatura to distribute it among the people in one narrative, or donated it to the abbot to have it transformed into the holy Buddha image according to another. The Buddha image was presented in a cage to the pilgrims who waited for hours to catch some holy water and sprinkle it on the Buddha image. The unwrapping of the Buddha image was preceded by the intensive chanting of Buddhist monks in the sacred language Pali, and drum playing by selected Manooraa musicians located in the temple hall in front of the door. Male dancers wearing the ancestor Manooraa mask of the hunter danced wildly in the smaller pavilion. A special stage was again erected for the *Manooraa Rongkruu* performance. Hundreds bought a ticket for 50 Baht to enter the stage and to dance along the music transmitted by audio-cassettes on loudspeakers. The dancers wear only individual parts of the Manooraa costumes or the hunter-masks. After 5 minutes, the music stopped and the *nairong Manooraa* sent the dancers from the stage. He got ready for the next ritual, the *yiap sen* (stepping on the sore). Again, people bought their ticket for 50 Baht and in this case mothers brought their children onto the stage. Before curing the babies with his foot, the Manooraa master inquired with the mother about the illness of the child. Just as in Wat Takae, numerous families flocked to the temple in the hope of a cure.

Another event brought hundreds of young women to the temple festival at Takura. Young women were ordained as fulfilment of a vow they made to the mother of the Manooraa. In contemporary Thailand, women are marginalized with regard to ordination into the Buddhist *sangha*. In Takura, women had the special opportunity to be ordained for one day. The young nuns-to-be were eager to perform the ordination ceremony, but because of the sheer number, the ceremony was carried out in a very concise form. Every 30 minutes, ten women were ordained in a row. The young

women identified with the female hero of the Manooraa epos. They regarded their ordination to the status of Mee Chi in Takura as a meritorious act and as a way to reciprocate their vows. The sprinkling of the Buddha image, the dancing in the viharn, the *yiap sen* on the stage, the healing activities of monks, and the mass ordination of young nuns all took place in an atmosphere of a popular festival with numerous market stalls selling food, drinks, Buddhist amulets, handicrafts, fake hunter-masks and musical Manooraa instruments. The commodification of the Manooraa Rongkruu, its hybridization and postmodernization, was thus brought to a climax in Takura.

On the second day of the ritual, on Thursday, a striking scene unfolded: A young mother with a black *jilbab* pushed her way through the crowds. The *nairong Manooraa* nodded and ordered her baby on a pillow. He slowly rotated, put his foot into the holy water, the fire and on the face of the crying baby. In her desperate need for a cure, the young Muslim mother had come all the way from the province of Chumphorn. Ready to find her way to the *nairong Manooraa*, she ignored the Buddhist environment. Because of her veiling in a black *Hijab*, everybody recognized her as a modern Muslima. Some of the Muslim participants may have not put on Islamic clothes and were not recognizable as Muslims. This woman made a case in showing



Figure 3: The Manooraa master puts his bare foot on the children's face to cure the Muslim child.

off her Islamic affiliation, but made a desperate move to find a cure for her baby. She was received by the *nairong Manoora* who put his foot on the baby's face under loud music from the drums. The Muslim woman was unaware of the commercialization of the ceremony and deeply uncomfortable in the crowd. Finally, she bought the ticket and her right to see the Manoora master for five minutes. This case shows that even as a modern Muslima, the woman hoped to receive a cure from the great ancestor spirits, in whose power she clearly believed.

Theoretical Considerations

Religion in Thailand today is characterized by contradictory trends: while conventional Theravada Buddhism seems to have lost much appeal with the younger generation, Buddhism is also being revived in new forms. The worship of Buddhist saints, the booming cult of Buddhist amulets, and the presence of magic monks show that a reconfigured Buddhism is able to thrive in particular niches in modern urban society (Jackson 1999b; Kitiarsa 2002; Taylor 1999, 2008). The expansion of the capitalist market economy in Thailand has resulted in a deeply polarized society and in a widening gap between the poor and the very rich. Religious forms are not essential phenomena, but have reacted with flexibility to the conditions of dislocation, rapid social change and social uncertainty, and developed niches in the religious market. There are religious forms catering to the poor, the lower middle class and also to the very wealthy (Guelden 2007 [1995]; Morris 2000). Taylor argues that Buddhism has been commodified (Taylor 1999 2008; Kitiarsa 2008). In Bangkok, for example, wealthy patrons donate lavishly to the *Buddhist sangha* (order of monks) for the robe-presentation ceremony *kathin* and other ceremonies as a means to enhance their social prestige. Merit-making is only possible for the wealthy.

Meanwhile Islam, the second religion in Southern Thailand, is rapidly globalizing. As a result of exposure to transnational Islamic missionary *da'wa* movements, many Muslims withdraw from multi-religious rituals, such as the Manoora Rongkruu. They become involved in transnational flows, mobility and movement and consume Islamic images that are produced by the global media, such as the internet. But Islam is also fragmented. The traditional group is rivalled by new Islamic movements, such as the *Salafiya* or the *Tablighi Jama'at* from North India (cf. Horstmann 2007). This fragmentation of Theravada Buddhism and Islam in Southern Thailand creates

space for the rise of spirit mediums as a third force. While the capitalist economy and the growing nation-state weakened ancestral traditions and traditional authority in the village, the same forces also propelled the dramatic expansion, presence and visibility of spirit mediums in urban areas, that are often possessed by royalty and thus can speak to all manner of clientele, including the highest members of the political elite (Kitiarsa 2005b; Morris 2000; Tanabe 2002). These urban spirit-mediums and prosperity cults coexist and hybridize with the revitalized and fragmented Theravada Buddhism (Kitiarsa 2005a, 2008).⁹ Morris (2000) ties the rise of spirit possession in contemporary Thailand to the political economy of a modernist Thai state that has commodified spirit possession, and re-packaged it through electronic mediation on video and television as an object of desire and longing. Morris shows that the process of mediation through new media technologies is crucial for the rise of new configurations of spirited modernities. Video technology and modern media images have also played a key role in the revitalization of public ritual in the local context.

Modern media images help to revitalize the autonomous tradition as an imagined community of the Southerners in which the Southern arts come to the fore. It is not the first time that Manooraa performances are recorded by modern mass media. The state has attempted in the 1950s to instrumentalize the Manooraa medium for the mediation of government propaganda. Famous Manooraa artists were encouraged to perform in military uniforms and were recorded by state television. While Manooraa today is part of the folklore by which the South is imagined as local culture in the nation, political liberalization and video-technology provide the means for an autonomous drive to enhance the confidence of modern Manooraa artists.

In Southern Thailand, regional differences in mediumship reflect the ethnic and religious composition and cultural diversity of the South. Thai Buddhist, Malay Muslim and Chinese mediums are being possessed by different classes of spirits. The issues brought to mediums concern adultery, financial problems, and various ailments that might be caused by black magic. Despite the existence of numerous clinics and hospitals in the South, healing of physical ailments, including chronic health

9 See Pattana Kitiarsa (2005): *Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand*. In: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36, 3, 461-487. Pattana Kitiarsa develops his argument about hybridization by using the example of diversified and stratified order of hybrid religious beliefs becoming increasingly visible not only in the temples, but also in the media and in the marketplace. Apart from the articulations of prosperity and commercialized religiosity, it is however not quite clear to me how the concept of hybridity contributes to the understanding of the place of religion in modernity or negotiation, legitimacy, and conflict about it.

problems, are still a major issue brought to mediums in parallel with mental problems (Golomb 1985). Such ailments are also the triggers that urge people to host a Manooraa Rongkruu performance. Again, the healing power of specific Manooraa masters is transmitted through media images into every corner of Southern Thailand. People thus bear the longest possible journey to the Manooraa ceremony, if they hope that the power of this master is sufficient to heal their ailments. This power of charisma transcends ethnic and religious boundaries.¹⁰ Apart from the notion of hybridity, the postmodernist lens has been used by scholars to refer to current developments in Thai religion that already seem to have passed beyond the modern stage. Peter Jackson argues that “the modern phase in Thai religion refers to following a path of doctrinal rationalization accompanied by organizational centralization and bureaucratization whereas the postmodern one is characterized by a resurgence of supernaturalism and an efflorescence of religious expression at the margins of state control, involving a decentralization and localization of religious authority” (Jackson 1999a). In other words, religion can assume many different forms, from being a commodity, political ideology, marker of identity or marketing technique to an object of worship (Jackson 1999a).

Conclusionary Remarks

The revitalization of popular ritual traditions in Southern Thailand enables people to negotiate their synergies and interactions between religion and the informal and formal market economy (Kitiarsa 2005: 485). I would like to highlight the effective and transformative type of ritual in which the authenticity of a ritual cannot be taken for granted but is culturally contested. I argue that the concepts of syncretism, hybridization and postmodernism lack a focus on agency. I therefore concur with Köpping that the exchange and encounter in ritual space is a moment of intensified communication, where the social order and modernity can be stabilised or contested (Henn & Koepping 2008, Koepping 2002). In the two-case studies I presented, the multi-religious exchange of symbolic bodily expressions and interactions illustrates the articulation of ancestral power with the normalization processes of Buddhism and Islam. Lambek (2000: 70) has called this a process of “polyphony” in which people have to “navigate among the various claims that both ancestral power or modern

10 For a similar healing spirit possession cult in Sri Lanka, see Kapferer, Bruce (1983).

religion makes upon them and in which they are not in a position to make a decision in favour of one or the other". I think that people in Southern Thailand very much find themselves in the same polyphony, in which they have to navigate between ancestral beliefs and the claims that normalized religion and the state makes upon them without being able to choose exclusively between them.¹¹

In the present case, the exchange of food and prayer gestures is a space in which religious boundaries are maintained rather than transcended. However, while the imitation of Islamic prayer is done by Buddhists (laypeople only) who want to contact their Muslim ancestors, this is not reciprocated by Muslims. The exchange of food is therefore not always singularly indicative of inter-group relations.

The continued presence of religious leaders in this transgressed space is remarkable in a context of growing orthodoxies. The exceptional practice of exchanging food, prayer gestures and other bodily expressions in ritual space transgresses the norms that operate in the space of everyday life, where cultural boundaries are now guarded more tightly. The ritual emphasizes a sameness based on common ancestry, while the strengthening of boundaries in everyday life shows the growing relevance of religious difference. The tensions between orthopraxis and orthodoxy that characterize multi-ritual space in Southern Thailand mirror the encounters of the local and the global. The global has arrived in the form of revivalist movements and has not left the cosmology of the community untouched. People and religious leaders in the community have become deeply involved in global revivalist movements. Some of the religious leaders have withdrawn from the ritual as a result of their exposure to the global, while others remain committed to the ritual as they do not see a contradiction between local practice and global ideologies. Theoretically speaking, two different cosmological belief systems coexist, and the leaders of both religious communities compromise their dogma for the time of the ritual by giving priority to local political and cultural issues. The tensions between the local and the global are negotiated in Islamic ritual as well as in Buddhist ritual, whereas the national perspective manifests in Buddhist ritual. The ritual of two religions is just one ritual among many, and other rituals – global Islamic rituals and national Buddhist ones – exist in parallel. The ritual of two religions successfully resists the growing normalization

11 Barraud and Platenkamp (1990), for example, maintain that in East Indonesia, the system of social relationships corresponds to a system of circulation in which food circulates between the people involved. While the systematic circulation of food in ancestral ritual is clearly important, this model underlines the reproduction of social relations but is not open for the changes, ruptures and conflicts in relationships between groups.

and politicization of religion in the public sphere. By participating in the ancestor cult, religious leaders do not necessarily compromise their orthodox understanding of religion, but see ancestral religion and world religion as being complementary. Whereas other works on Southern Thailand and beyond emphasize the localization of Buddhism and Islam, ritual practice in Tamot at once reflect the growing separation of religious life-worlds and the tireless efforts of religious leaders to maintain a peaceful relationship with the religious other. In many ways, the local art form represents Knauff's articulatory space of alternative modernity where customary production and exchange meets capitalism. The market economy brought new energy and in turn provided the means of keeping modernity spirited. This means that dramatic bodily expressions of identity that related to the spirits articulate with the forces of modernity and become re-enchanted and certainly transformed.

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