

Transformation of Buddhist-Muslim Coexistence in Southern Thailand

Alexander Horstmann

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The project is interested in those shared cultural institutions that provide mechanisms for local people to avoid religious conflict. Fieldwork explores the local structure and cosmology of Buddhist-Muslim relations and the vitality of cultural institutions in relation to processes of national integration and religious orthodoxy. Alexander Horstmann is interested in the interaction and competition of Theravada Buddhism and Islam in the everyday life of the villagers concerned.

Southern Thailand is divided in a Thai-speaking and in a Malay-speaking part. In these parts, inter-confessional relations are organized in a different structure: While Buddhists and Muslims coexist harmoniously in the provinces of Songkla, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Trang, Satun and Patthalung, and relations are characterized by ritual exchange, no such relations could ever develop in Patani, Yala and Narathiwat, where Southern Thai Buddhists settled in the wake of state military intrusion into Malay systems.

In the Thai-speaking parts, Buddhists and Muslims share a homologous structure and do not differ in the political, economic or social sphere. Social relations are organized according to local parameters of reciprocity and redistribution, whereas the integration of the stranger in local systems of exchange provides a crucial mechanism for the integration of the other within the self.

Besides historical factors, Thai-speaking Muslims are marginalized in the Malay-speaking Muslim public sphere. Malay-speaking Muslims often regard Thai-speaking Muslims as inferior and complain that Thai-speaking Muslims would eat unclean food, neglect the mosque and prayers. Thai-speaking Muslims are regarded as being polluted by Thai cosmological influences and are said of not being able to read the Qur'an in Arabic, Malay or Jawi language.

Conversion of the majority of the Thai to Buddhism and Malays to Islam has in no way replaced the local cosmology altogether. Local communities have integrated the book religions within their local systems, thereby remodeling them to their particular social needs. 30 years ago, it was hardly possible to distinguish Buddhist and Muslims according to their dress or houses.

In the eighties and nineteen-nineties, first tensions develop in the confessional mixed villages as villagers increasingly pronounce religious difference. Religious practices are re-examined under the pressure of religious purification and the participation in the rituals of the other are often stopped. Responsible factors for this transformation are agencies which insist on a more rigid, essential notion of ethnic and religious identity and ethnic boundaries. Especially, the state goes hand in hand with Theravada Buddhism in strengthening Thai identity and relating it to nationalism, while Islamic grassroots movements (Dahwa) are prone to support the idea of universalized Islam. For both sides, a homogenous and exclusive definition or redefinition of identity is in the political interest.

The traumatic experience which people experience at this moment in the war-stricken Patani-area pose the question if the integrative potential of local societies to incorporate - and modify in the process - ideas and ways of acting of 'foreign' origin has come to an end and whether the conflict may extend to Muslim communities in Thai-speaking Songkla. The fact, that Muslim communities in Songkla are not affected by civil strife is telling and shows the persistency of civil society institutions.

The significance of this capability of local communities to adapt and modify the tenets of world religion to local parameters of community life in Songkla is obvious for conflict resolution. Thus whereas orthodox purification movements from Theravada Buddhism and Islam may be identified as sources of socio-political disruption, the Southeast Asian forms of resisting orthodoxy, involving the adaptation of the tenets of world religions to the local parameters of community life, may in fact provide the basis for repairing broken social ties.

In the context of the research project, Alexander Horstmann is interested in the critical transition of identity and ethnic boundaries from solidarity to social construction of conflict. Under which conditions do those interactions manifest an antagonistic character? What kind of values, values and modes of action do determine the interaction of people of different religion? The answer to these questions lies in the erosion of the local system and its integrative capability through the parallel influences of the state, the expansion of the market and processes of cultural globalization. The social system collapses, when the foreign is or cannot be integrated anymore and when ritual and ritual exchange – fundamental to reproduction of Buddhist-Muslim coexistence – is vanishing or even persecuted.

In fieldwork, Alexander Horstmann explores the local history of the villages and their integration into larger circuits of change. Methodologically, the research work concentrates on all domains of interaction and crossings, e.g. familial and kinship relations, spirit worship, myths, feasts, market exchange, local traditions of Buddhist and Muslim villagers. Special attention is given to agents of religious or orthodox purification campaigns, e.g. Theravada Buddhism, Islamic grassroots movements and the state.