CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FIRE AND WATER: RITUAL INNOVATION, TOURISM, AND SPONTANEOUS RELIGIOSITY IN HAT YAI, SOUTHERN THAILAND

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Introduction

In April 2000 the streets of Hat Yai, southern Thailand’s largest city and “commercial capital,” were packed for the celebrations of Thai New Year, or Songkran. Best known internationally as a carnivalesque water festival cum water fight, Songkran had become the city’s biggest annual tourist event. A mixture of local residents and tourists were out on the streets enjoying the party atmosphere. Brandishing large brightly coloured water pistols, buckets, hoses and other weapons, they battled each other on foot or traded shots with people riding on the backs of pickup trucks that crawled along the city’s streets. Techno music pumped from the foyer doors of some hotels and crowds of soaking wet revellers gathered to simultaneously dance and douse. As a rite of reversal (see Davis, this volume), social norms and hierarchies were relaxed and everyone on the streets was a legitimate target. With the usual taboos regarding public inter-sex touching largely suspended, many participants, especially young Thais, smeared the faces of other revellers with a perfumed rice-flour paste and the air was full of the scent of jasmine.

For its part, the city’s Municipal Council had organised a procession through the central commercial district of town. Comprising mainly community groups or Municipal organisations, the procession was supposed to be an expression of the city’s civic identity and to provide extra colour to the celebrations. Included amongst the representatives of municipal government was one somewhat more anomalous group: a number of religious practitioners who were parading statues mounted on elaborately decorated red palanquin chairs (kiao). The use of such chairs to parade

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1 In some Songkran celebrations—for example in Chiang Mai—Buddha statues are processed. In 2000 I saw no evidence of this in Hat Yai, although each year the Municipality
deities is usually associated with Chinese folk Taoist rites in southern Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore alike, and is one of the most visible aspects of folk Chinese religiosity in the region. However, in this case it was not Chinese deities but famous Theravada Buddhist monks who were mounted on the palanquin. Furthermore, the ritual participants were not associated with any Chinese shrine or foundation but instead belonged to a group specialising in the tattooing of sacred designs (sak yan)—a popular religious tradition connected with “tantric” elements of Theravada Buddhism and mainly focused on protection from danger and bad luck (Tannenbaum, 1987; Reynolds, 2011). This ritual performance therefore combined an unusual blend of elements of Theravada Buddhist saint worship, popular Thai ritual practices, and Chinese folk religion.

If anyone on the streets of Hat Yai seemed to be surprised by this juxtaposition, however, it did not show. Indeed, most people showed more surprise and delight at the western anthropologist walking with the group, pointing and calling out “John!” or “farang!” if Thai, to attract my attention before gleefully letting me have it with a squirt of water between the eyes. By contrast, bystanders reacted to the procession of statues in more accustomed ways, though with equal enthusiasm. Immediately recognising the statues as sacred objects, many people interacted with them, the palanquin, and their bearers. These actions, while sometimes similar, also differed according to the ethnic background of the people involved. Both Thais and tourists pressed their palms together in gestures of respect towards the passing statues, though the way they performed this action—the graceful wai of the Thais or the stiff-armed gesture of Chinese Malaysians and Singaporeans—clearly indicated ethnic and national differences. Thais also tended to approach the palanquin to gently pour water over the statues or place jasmine garlands around their necks. By contrast, a number of Malaysian or Singaporean Chinese men rushed to the palanquin bearers and offered to help carry them for a time.

sets up a Buddha statue for lustrations (song nam). These were not, however, a part of the procession. This lustration of Buddha images marks Songkran as not only a national but also a Buddhist event. The equation of “Thai” with “Buddhist” is so taken for granted that it generally goes unnoted in Thailand. This is a point worth remembering in the southern Thai borderland, where Muslims make up a substantial proportion of the population, and indeed make up the vast majority in four borderland provinces.

2 The term itself refers to the tattooing of sacred patterns or yantra. This is often rendered in English as “sak yant,” which reflects the spelling in Thai. In this chapter I prefer a transliteration that reflects Thai pronunciation.