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Refereed article

Why We Should Not Cut Off the King's Head: Ritual Sovereignty and the "Moral Grammar" of the Thai State

Stephan Engelkamp*

Summary

The idea of the sovereign state has often been theorized as a set of practices that evolved as a specifically European solution to the problem of difference. In order to further "provincialize" this perspective, my paper proposes to approach the topic through insights drawn from Governmentality Studies and from Social Anthropology. Doing this brings into view different notions of the state as embedded in a "moral grammar" that comprises both the social and the cosmological. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, the paper develops a theoretical framework that conceptualizes practices of governmentality in terms of contending valorizations of exchange systems. Hence, the state is incorporated into a totality of transactions that is concerned with the reproduction of the social and cosmic order and that transcends the traditional domain of secular politics. How these narratives are structured by ritual practices and embedded in a particular sociocosmological order is illustrated through a case study presented on the transformation of ritual politics in Thailand.

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Keywords: Agamben, governmentality, ritual sovereignty, statehood, Thailand

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* This paper benefitted greatly from conversations with Jos Platenkamp as well as with my colleagues at the Institute of Political Science in Muenster. Iver Neumann provided valuable comments and suggestions on an earlier version that has been presented at the International Studies Convention in San Diego. I also want to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments. All remaining errors or mistakes are, of course, my own.

Introduction

The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is. (Abrams 1988 [1977]: 58)

If the state is not the reality, but merely a mask that may distract us from political practice, as Abrams' famous quote suggests, how can we then study political practice "as it is"? Previous research, especially in International Relations (IR), has tended to proceed from a foundational dichotomy between international anarchy and domestic sovereignty, where the state is considered the sole source of legitimate political authority that rules in a top-down fashion. In this perspective, the domestic is constituted by divisions such as the public and the private, the secular and the religious, local and national politics. On the international level, the state is regarded as the constituent unit that makes up the Westphalian international system (see, for example, Krasner 1999). In this body of research state sovereignty has been conceptualized as a set of international norms and practices that diffused from Europe to the non-Western world, with it now constituting how the world is ordered politically.¹

More recently, however, this way of looking at the world has come under critical scrutiny from postcolonialists, poststructuralists, and feminist scholars alike. Amitav Acharya, for example, has termed it a Eurocentric perspective stemming from a "narrowly Western social science" (2011: 620). Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney (2004), meanwhile, noted that the idea of the sovereign state evolved as a specifically European solution to the problem of how to deal with cultural difference under historically contingent circumstances. They criticize the Western notion of the sovereign state as an apparent normality and call for critical analyses of how a particular form of order became hegemonic across the globe. In a similar vein, other thinkers have cautioned against the political implications of generalizing the so-called "imaginary of Westphalia" — a particular understanding of world order as being constituted by sovereign states and their mutual recognition of each other the norm — to an apparently universal standard by which other systems are measured as the pitting of the "West" against the "rest" (Hutchings 2011; Ringmar 2012). While we continue to make knowledge claims about global politics, the Global South, or the non-Western world, local histories, narratives, contingencies, and perspectives themselves are often silenced or misinterpreted (Epstein 2014; Engelkamp, Glaab, and Renner 2012). Critics of this perspective underline the contingency of local contexts and thus call for a strategy of "provincializing Europe."² This requires an

1 There are numerous examples of this; classical texts from IR include Waltz (1979), Ruggie (1983), Finnemore and Sikkink (1999), Krasner (1999), and Wendt (1999). For critical reviews of this literature, see Ashley (1988), Walker (1991), and Weber (1999).

2 I do not consider „provincializing“ as necessarily leading to theoretical parochialism or the formation of fragmented "national IR schools" (Acharya 2011: 632–633), but as a strategy that might contribute to a larger project of decentering Western-centric IR theory (cf. Chakrabarty 1992).

approach that does not take sovereignty as an essentialist “thing,” but rather as the ontological effect of discursive practices that are performatively enacted (Weber 1995, 1998).

This paper proceeds from the assumption that political research, both in IR specifically or in political studies more generally, should take local dynamics and contingencies seriously, especially when it makes knowledge claims about the (non-Western) world. What has been labelled “Area Studies” — social science research that draws on specialist knowledge about a particular geographical area in the world — may help with broadening our perspectives on political practice in this respect. My paper proposes a conceptual framework for studying governmental practices in non-Western contexts, therein drawing specifically on the work of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben.³ More precisely, it discusses Foucault’s concept of “governmentality” and its subsequent refinement by Agamben — reflections that have received some degree of attention in social anthropological work on the (postcolonial) state. This body of literature proceeds from Agamben’s reading of Foucault, and draws from its emphasis on ritual performance and the bodily effects of sovereign power. This revisiting of sovereignty in both political research and Anthropology has implications for how we study political practice. It differs from previous work on this subject in two respects: First, it explores *de facto* sovereignty and its enactment in everyday practices, rather than sovereignty as grounded in formal ideologies of rule and legality. Second, this research focuses on the body “as the site of, and object of, sovereign power” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 297). This perspective is more useful than that of mainstream studies in IR research, because it does not proceed from the viewpoint of the state and sovereign power as a given and from the foundational dichotomies mentioned above — thus enabling an analysis to unfold that is more open to local contingencies and actual political practice. Moreover, it points our attention to embodied practices of resistance that may be overlooked in more traditional approaches.

To illustrate this framework my paper examines the case of a Buddhist state in Southeast Asia as a polity that is embedded in a transnational body of knowledge comprised of both the social and the cosmological domains. More specifically it looks at the case of Thailand, a constitutional monarchy since 1932 — one that has often been employed in IR research as an example of a state that has at times been successfully socialized into Western norms of sovereign statehood (Strang 1996;

3 Critics may rightly object at this point that this framework, once again, proceeds from the theoretical work of Western thinkers to analyze empirical contexts in the non-Western world. After all, Foucault developed his work through his analyses of predominantly Western European material. There are obviously pitfalls to the framework: I agree that Foucault’s writings draw heavily on Western contexts, but I contend that his conceptual approach is at the same time open to contingency and local circumstances as it avoids the bottom-up perspective and focuses instead on the actual practices and techniques of government as well as on local struggles of resistance. Moreover, I propose to refine Foucault’s take on governmentality through drawing on the work of Agamben and by scrutinizing the latter’s reception within Social Anthropology circles.

Lynch 2004; Englehart 2010). The case of Thailand is peculiar; even though the country has been frequently represented as a sovereign state in the 19th and 20th centuries, political authority in Thailand still seems to be divided into two contending logics that are nevertheless both simultaneously displayed. While the government claims supreme authority in political matters, it is actually the institution of the Chakri monarchy — represented by King Bhumibol Adulyadej — that is considered to be the spiritual and exemplary center of the state. Evading dichotomies such as private/public or secular/religious, the case of Thailand poses particular problems for a Foucauldian approach to governmentality: he famously stressed the need to conceptually “decapitate the king” in political theory in order to break with current foci on the state and sovereign modes of top-down governance (1980: 121; see also Kerr 1999). However my reading of anthropological studies on Thai ritual politics and the 1992 crisis cautions against the move toward “cutting off the king’s head,” as doing this may risk missing key aspects of what I call the “moral grammar” of the state in Thailand.

The paper is structured as follows: The next section introduces the theoretical approach utilized. It discusses Foucault’s concept of governmentality and its subsequent reformulation by Agamben. The ensuing section presents a heuristic case study on ritual politics in Thailand. The case is situated in its historical context and discussed against the more recent scholarship on Thailand that has been done in IR; after that, I illustrate my framework with a short study on the political relevance of the *kathin* ritual — and of its transformations and continuities — in order to illustrate how my conceptual framework can be applied empirically. The final section summarizes my findings and concludes the argument.

From the sovereign state to practices of governmentality

Both IR and Anthropology scholars have more recently started to develop new ways of exploring sovereignty as the “non-essentialist ontology of power beyond notions of origins and centers or the continuity of forms” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 296). Such perspectives call for an understanding of sovereignty as being not only grounded in notions of statehood that are laid out in state policies and fixed norms and institutions but also in discourse and social practices. They often proceeded from the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, which focuses on the rationality of government and proceeds from the viewpoint of an inseparable relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault 2007, 2008; see also, Rose and Miller 1992). Foucault refers to governmentality as:

[an] ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument (2007: 108).

In his lectures on governmentality, Foucault traces how power has been historically exercised and transformed in Western societies. He highlights the emergence of a particular rationality of rule in early modern Europe, in which the activity of government became separated from the self-preservation of the sovereign and redirected toward optimizing the well-being of the population as a whole (Foucault 1980, 2007). Crucially, Foucault introduces the term “biopolitics” to draw attention to a mode of power that operates through the administration of life itself — meaning bodies (both individual and collective), their health, sanitation, mental and physical capacities, and so forth (2008). In doing so, Foucault articulates a mode of political government more concerned with the management of the population than with the management of a territory (Jessop 2007). Foucault departs from practices of government as a rationalized technology; accordingly, “the ‘art of government’ is about the ‘introduction of economy into political practice’” (Neumann and Sending 2007: 692). With this transformation, another political shift in his theoretical focus coincides; hence Foucault designates in his famous lecture on “the modern political problem” that:

The privilege that government begins to exercise in relation to rules, to the extent that, to limit the king’s power, it will be possible one day to say, “the king reigns, but he does not govern,” this inversion of government and the reign or rule and the fact that government is basically much more than sovereignty, much more than reigning or ruling, much more than the imperium, is, I think, absolutely linked to the population (2007: 76).

Foucault seems to distinguish here between a rather ceremonial logic of rule that centers on sovereign power and an economic logic of government that revolves around the population. This distinction has since been taken up by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005, 2011).⁴ Agamben directs two related criticisms against Foucault’s genealogy of power: first, he draws attention to the interconnections between sovereign power to declare the Schmittian “state of exception” and what he calls “bare life” as the included outside upon which a society or community constitutes itself and its moral order. This aspect of Agamben’s work has received much attention in IR scholarship to date; especially his controversial studies on the state of exception and its implications for the so-called “War on Terror” (de Larrinaga and Doucet 2008; Edkins 2000; Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005; Vaughan-Williams 2009).

4 There are, of course, alternative approaches in governmentality studies beside that of Agamben, for example the work carried out by British sociologists such as Colin Gordon, Mitchell Dean, Nikolas Rose, and Peter Miller — which focuses more on various forms of new public management and the question of how governmental practices produce “docile” citizens under conditions of neoliberalism. Again other scholars study how governmental steering applies technics such as statistics or the open method of coordination in the case of the European Union (Walters and Haahr 2005). I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this fact out. I choose to draw on Agamben in this paper due to his explicit focus on bodily and ritual practices and their political relevance for governmental power, something that is not spelled out as clearly in other similar approaches to governmentality.

Yet apart from his widely discussed work on Carl Schmitt and the state of exception as a paradigm of modern government, Agamben's seminal *Homo Sacer* series also contains a study — *The Kingdom and the Glory, Homo Sacer II, 2* — that does not seem to fit in very well with his overall topic. Herein, Agamben does not focus much on the state of exception or on how power works on the aforementioned bare life (1998). Instead, *The Kingdom and the Glory* sets out to provide a correction of Foucault's genealogy of governmentality. Consequently, Agamben stresses the interrelationship between Christian theology and economics as two distinct yet simultaneously interrelated discourses. His aim in *The Kingdom and the Glory* is to investigate the ways in which power in the West has tended to take the form of *oikonomia*. Hence, Agamben goes beyond the contrast between power and authority in *State of Exception*, here termed the kingdom (*Regno*) and government (*Governo*), by investigating the contrast between *oikonomia* and glory. The resulting question is why power needs glory. According to Agamben, the relation between *oikonomia* and glory points toward the ultimate structure of the governmental machine of the West. In fact, Agamben states that glory is “the secret center of power” — because the center of the governmental machine, the “throne,” is empty, and spectacular practices of glorification are thus needed to conceal this very fact. Hence, ritual and performance become center stage for the analysis of governmentality (Agamben 2011: xi–xiii).

This approach enables the development of a non-essentialist perspective on sovereignty, one that accounts for the exercise of power in terms of practices of governmentality. Agamben uses his approach to clarify the symbolic politics of spectacle in modern Western democracies, but this angle appears also valuable for the study of sovereignty in postcolonial societies too. Another benefit of the governmentality approach as laid out by Agamben is its theoretical proximity to recent anthropological work on the state, for which Agamben's rereading of sovereignty has prompted a revisiting thereof.

Following Foucault's work on governmentality much recent ethnography has moved in the direction of understanding the workings of power in society as operative through discursive and regulatory practices “that inculcate power's machinations in individual bodies and subjectivities” (Goldstein 2004: 588; see for further examples Steinmetz 1999; Hansen and Stepputat 2001b, 2005b). In Hansen and Stepputat's words:

In order to assess and understand the nature and effects of sovereign power in our contemporary world, one needs to disentangle the notion of sovereign power from the state and to take a closer look at its constituent parts: on the one hand, the elusive “secret” of sovereignty as a self-born, excessive, and violent will to rule; on the other hand, the human body and the irrepressible fact of “bare life” as the site upon which sovereign violence always inscribes itself but also encounters the most stubborn resistance (2005a: 11).

The resulting work differs from previous approaches on this subject in two important respects: First, this research explores practices of de facto sovereignty — which is “the ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity wherever it is found and practiced,” rather than sovereignty as grounded in formal ideologies of rule and legality (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 296). With this move away from the institution of law and state practices sovereignty is no longer conceptualized as constituting “an ontological ground of power and order” but as “a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 297). Hence, this approach enables us to study actual political practice and its local contingencies and dynamics. Moreover it focuses on the performative and symbolic dimensions of government, which are not at the center of a Foucauldian approach to governmentality.

Second, this approach differs in its focus on the body as the site — and object — of sovereign power (Hansen and Stepputat 2001a, 2005a, 2006).⁵ Agamben (1998) draws on the work of historian Ernst Kantorowicz (1997 [1957]), who studied the idea in medieval political thought whereupon the king has two bodies: the natural body of the monarch as a mortal human being and a mystical body politic that represents the polity as a whole. The latter has been described as eternal; it represents the king’s office and the majesty of the royal institution. While Kantorowicz interprets the meaning of this idea as representing the continuity of sovereign power that transcends the finite human life of the monarch, Diana Saco (1997) notes, meanwhile, that in the context of Elizabethan England the juridical doctrine of “the king’s two bodies” served as a fiction to legitimize constitutional — as opposed to absolute — monarchism. In contrast Agamben’s reading of royal burial rituals reveals a much deeper meaning to the king’s political body, one that is inextricably linked to the notion of bare life:

What unites [...] *homo sacer* and the sovereign in one single paradigm is that in each case we find ourselves confronted with a bare life that has been separated from its context and that, so to speak surviving its death, is for this very reason incompatible with the human world. [...] [For] the sovereign, death reveals the excess that seems to be as such inherent in supreme power, as if supreme power were, in the last analysis, nothing other than *the capacity to constitute oneself and others as life that may be killed but not sacrificed* (Agamben 1998: 101; original emphases).

This duality is not only a feature of the king, Agamben argues, but also a generalized condition of the political subject. Stripped of the rights and political status that are granted to the citizen as a symbol of its inclusion into the political community, there is only the biological body left — what, as noted, Agamben (1998) terms bare life, the object of sovereign power. Agamben’s larger point is that

⁵ For the body as an object of study in IR, see Saco (1997), Weber (1998), Edkins and Pin-Fat (2005), and Neumann (2008).

the body has always been the site of performance of sovereign power. Foucault remarked in *Discipline and Punish* that the bodies of the condemned mark in their vulnerability “the symmetrical, inverted figure of the king” (1995: 29). For Agamben (1998), this relationship serves as a metaphor for modern practices of government; the working of power becomes most clearly visible under extreme conditions, such as in states of exception or in the subject’s total submission to sovereign power as in the Nazi concentration camps or the detention centers of Guantánamo Bay. He argues further that the state of exception constitutes not the exception to the normal state of affairs but rather reveals how governmental power really functions. It is through the study of those exceptional practices of inclusion and exclusion that we can understand how both political communities and their outsiders, the normal and the abnormal, are constructed and sustained.

How can this approach be applied for studying practices of governmentality? Following on from the assumption that societies can be studied “as a whole” by looking at their myths and rituals, I suggest that an appropriate way of analyzing the transformation of sovereign power is to study its enactment in ritual. Anthropologists who were interested in political authority had previously emphasized in their work the importance of kingship, sacrifice, and ritual (see, for example, Hansen and Stepputat 2006). One of the central concerns regarding the institution of monarchy in this research has been the problem of how to grasp the double nature of the king as both divine and impure, as locus of both power and glory, or, in the Thai context, as both world conqueror and world renouncer (Tambiah 1977).

This problem of duality has been conceptualized around two models that conceive of sovereignty as either intrinsic to the community/society (Durkheim, Rousseau) or as extrinsic and located in a force that needs to be domesticated (Hobbes, Schmitt). Yet, as Marshall Sahlins (1974: 149–183) points out in his essay on Mauss’ *Essai sur le don*, the apparent state of war is seen as an ongoing practice or tension that reproduces society; a potential that can be preempted through constant exchange and gift giving. However, this kind of anthropological work on the institution of kingship has been surprisingly silent on the more recent anthropology of nationalism, power, and the state (see Hansen and Stepputat 2006 for a literature review on this topic). This information gap thus calls for a “conceptualization of the deep importance of spectacle and performance in modern politics” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 301).

To be represented as sovereign, a state needs to be narrated according to a coherent sociocosmological model (Tambiah 1977; Anderson 2003 [1983]). Moreover, it needs to be enacted and performed: it is “represented and reproduced in visible, everyday forms” (Mitchell 1991: 81). Taking a holistic approach to the study of ritual performances must not imply the assuming of a cultural determinist view on the world. As James Fox (1980) has argued, instead of reifying certain

organizational models the aim should rather be to analyze the metaphors that structure a particular mode of perception and a specific set of practices. By this point, we come back to Philip Abrams’ quote above: conceptualizing the state as a discursive effect is in this respect a first and necessary step in order to study political practice “as it is.”

Sovereign power as ritual exchange

In the ensuing part of this paper, I will illustrate the interrelationship between contending narratives and practices of sovereignty with an analysis of the transformation and continuities in ritual politics in Thailand. This section looks at current political research on Thailand and contextualizes the transformation processes that took place there over the course of the 20th century. The following section focuses on ritual politics as a field that has rarely been the object of traditional modes of analysis; yet, it demonstrates aptly the tensions and dynamics of governmental practices. The political relevance of these transformations are highlighted in the Conclusion, which connects the analysis to the 1992 political crisis.⁶

Anthropologists like Charles Keyes argue that ritual performances play an important role in social, economic and political transformation processes (see also, Engelkamp 2008). Postcolonial governments and state elites promote selected ritual practices and even invent new rites in order to facilitate nation-building processes (Keyes 1994). Such practices refer to a strategy of contestation for ritual space and control over the representation of ritual practice (Anagnost 1994). Cosmologically reasoned concepts of moral order, which are persistently invoked for the sake of legitimizing political authority, are of special importance here (Caldwell and Henley 2008). In the Thai context, the government claims supreme authority in political matters — yet it is the institution of the monarchy, represented by King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX of the Chakri Dynasty, that is considered to be the spiritual and exemplary center of the state.

The case of Thailand has been quite often the object of academic interest in IR, as it represents a non-Western polity that has been more or less successfully socialized into what has been termed “Western modernity” (Strang 1996; Lynch 2004; Englehart 2010). The narrative of Thailand being a modern yet also Buddhist actor in international politics is straightforward: during the 19th century the former Kingdom of Siam was one of the few states that retained formal independence from Western powers. Since then, as the narrative goes, the country has been continuously successful in adapting — at least rhetorically — to changing global norms of democracy, development, and modernity. Throughout these readings of

⁶ It would be tempting to extend this analysis to events unfolding in Thailand after 2006. Unfortunately, for reasons of time and space, I restrict the case study to only an explorative illustration thereof so as to further clarify my conceptual framework.

Thai history we find enlightened kings from the Chakri Dynasty — and later modernizing military and bureaucratic elites — being the key agents of change, with them entering into a nation-building project in the late 19th and early 20th centuries so as to transform the (multicultural) Kingdom of Siam into modern (Thai-ified) Thailand.

In these accounts Siam/Thailand presents a case of self-induced social learning, undertaken specifically as a strategy for embracing global norms and practices. For Lynch, Thailand's imagined "national essence has been creatively recast to be, at root, consistent with the elemental rationalism and humanism of modern global culture" (2004: 347). Strang (1996) argues, meanwhile, that Siam's strategy of "defensive Westernization" in the age of colonial imperialism enabled the country to remain an independent state in spite of British and French incursions in to it. This is presented as an anomaly and, as Englehart (2010) claims, is particularly challenging to accounts based on coercion, since Siam entered international society without first developing significant military forces. In contrast, it entered so by "deploying and subverting norms associated with the standard of 'civilization'" (Englehart 2010: 419). According to him, Siamese elites explicitly drew on European notions of aristocratic internationalism; hence, its royal pomp and ceremonial ritual enabled the Chakri Dynasty to negotiate with European monarchs as members of a common class rather than in terms of race. While drawing attention to the Western pressures to modernize and Siamese creativity in adapting to these forces, I think that there are respective problems with each of these accounts — but one flaw that they all share is an underestimation of the historical continuity in Thai institutions and discourses.

In the 20th century, and increasingly after the Second World War, when the nation became the conceptual model for recognition as a legitimate sovereign actor in world politics (Anderson 2003 [1983]), Siam had to adapt to a new international environment (Wyatt 2003). The path taken here was paradoxical however: on the one hand, and following the dominant semantics of the time, Western-educated students who gained prominent positions in the military and civil bureaucracies as well as the members of a newly formed intelligentsia considered it necessary to abolish absolute monarchy in 1932 (Tambiah 1977).⁷ Formally speaking, the monarchy remained in place hereafter; throughout the 1930s, however, military and civil elites came to be the country's dominant political actors (Wyatt 2003).

At the same time, though, these modernizers also revived the historical legacy of the Buddhist monarchy in order to construct a more or less coherent narrative by which to define what it might mean to be a Thai state (Thongchai 1995). As a result, the reference to one religion (Buddhism), one language (Thai), and one (now constitutional) monarchy became the signifier for the nation's highest political and moral authority (Thongchai 1994). This strategy was coupled with the propagation

7 Seven years later, the country changed its name from Siam to Thailand (Tambiah 1977).

of the Thai language, the encouragement of Buddhist monastic orders, and the symbolic merging of state and Buddhism in the institution of monarchy (Croissant and Trinn 2009).

The 1940s and 1950s were characterized by a series of military coups and political crises that further aggravated the legitimacy crisis of the Thai government. From the late 1950s onward, Thailand became increasingly integrated into the global political economy. At the same time, the military and economic influence of the United States continued to grow in the midst of the intensifying Cold War with its regional sideshows in Thailand’s immediate neighborhood (Chanda 1986; Shawcross 2002 [1979]). In this context, the Thai government decided to revive the institution of the Buddhist monarchy as a source of legitimacy more openly (Tambiah 1977). Since neither the public nor the army would have stood for the return of royal absolutism, a “division of labor between king and military-dominated government” began to take shape (Wyatt 2003: 271). This coalition worked surprisingly well: both palace and government started to herald national unity and economic development as a distinctively Thai way toward modernity:

Thailand’s rulers held up to the world an image of the country as an Asian haven of political stability and dynamic economic growth, a nation that almost miraculously had managed to maintain its distinctive cultural identity, while its neighbors had slipped into seedy socialist decay or had so far modernized that they had lost their identity in a concrete maze of skyscrapers, fast-food palaces, and transistorized pop culture (Wyatt 2003: 266).

Its ability to successfully preserve a supposedly national identity seems to be a particularly noteworthy feature of the Thai case. Yet, strategies that aim at defining an apparent essence of the nation always by necessity entail the creation of outsiders. Hence, nationalist policies that focus on a presumed Thai culture and language tend to exclude (and produce) various non-Thai “others.” This pertains, for instance, to Sino-Thai persons of Chinese descent, geographically concentrated in the vicinity of Bangkok, as well as to Muslim communities in the south or to the Isan, the Lao people in the northeastern provinces. As a result, struggles about “the correct and legitimate meaning of Thainess” abound (Thongchai 1994: 11); in fact, one might argue that this topic has remained controversial right up till the present day.

Governmental practices became most visible in the country when the military government turned against these outsider groups. From the 1930s onward the most violent repressive measures were taken against the economically dominant Chinese in Thailand. Cloaked as “pro-Thai” measures and supposedly discriminating on the grounds of citizenship rather than of race, the government put into effect a series of anti-Chinese economic acts that were designed to “give the Thai control over their own economy and society” (Wyatt 2003: 244).

At this point, a more complete analysis would proceed by enquiring about the ways in which the Thai governmental machine exercises its power over the bodies of

these noncitizens. Thongchai, for example, gestures in this direction in his conclusion on the “geo-body” of the Thai nation, when he draws the reader’s attention to the discursive “enemy function” required for constructing a precarious identity:

The creation of otherness, the enemy in particular, is necessary to justify the existing political and social control against rivals from without as well as from within. Without this discursive enemy, all the varieties of coercive force, from a paramilitary organization on every border of Thailand to the professional army, would be redundant. In contrast to the general belief, the state and its security apparatus survive because of the enemy. Discursively, if not actually, what actively creates the enemy and produces most threats to a country if not the state’s security mechanism? The enemy must be presented, produced, or implicated and then discursively sustained. It is always projected — if not overtly *desired* (1994: 167; original emphasis).

An analysis of practices of governmentality inspired by Agamben’s notion of bare life might also look more closely at its full realization in the context of the refugee camps that have mushroomed since the mid-1970s along the Thai–Cambodian border (Shawcross 1984; Mysliwiec 1988; Thion 1993). Alternatively, it may cast an eye on former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s post-September 11 security policies against alleged Muslim insurgents in the southern provinces in the wake of the so-called “War on Terror.” Unfortunately, further pursuing these paths of inquiry is beyond the confines of this paper. Given the space restraints, I instead focus on the transformation of ritual performances and their relevance to governmentality practices. Arguably, these performances also have implications for the production and reproduction of otherness.

The royal *kathin* ritual: Transformations and continuities

In his genealogy of governmental practices in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011), Agamben shifts the analytical focus toward the transformation of the economy of religious thought and its enactment in ritual practices. This calls not only for looking at how the monarchy has been incorporated in state institutions, but also at the incorporation of new actors in the governmental machine. Especially in the course of the economic transformation of Thailand in the second half of the 20th century, social, economic, and political models of exchange were transformed in the course of their encounter with the global political economy. In the specifically Thai context, these transformations are enacted in Buddhist ritual — as a performative arena.⁸

The *kathin* ritual is part of the agricultural cycle in Thailand; it takes place throughout the country at the end of the rainy season and just before the beginning

8 This section builds on Tambiah’s seminal book on the Thai “galactic polity” (1977); it also draws substantially on Gray’s dissertation on the “soteriological state” (1986). Gray’s anthropological study is an invaluable source, as the author had the unique opportunity to undertake participant observation in royal *kathin* rituals. Her research thus helps us to grasp the complex interconnections of sovereign power, Buddhist narratives, and the globalized political economy.

of the rice harvest (usually around October of each year). It also coincides with the end of the annual pious retreat of Buddhist monks, thus signifying the period when asceticism yields its rewards of prosperity and social harmony. During the ceremony Buddhist laity presents robes and other gifts to Buddhist monks, who reciprocate these offerings with blessings and chants (Tambiah 1970).

Royal *kathin* rituals are powerful mediums of communication in Thai society. Gray calls the ritual cycle a “language of images” through which new values and standards of conduct are conveyed to the general populace: “In accordance with indigenous concepts of meaning, the king transforms new principles of order into social practice by incorporating them into the royal ritual repertoire” (1986: 11–12). As such, it is a fundamental mechanism for determining who may speak authoritatively about social change and “who must remain silent, mute witness to change” (Gray 1986: 24). The king’s visual potency is a discursive resource that gains its meaning from the fact that “seeing the king’s pure practice” is a type of religious experience in Buddhism related to the Theravada emphasis on communicative concepts of teaching through the senses. Gray notes that the ability to “assign meaning to symbols and ‘names’ to men, places, activities, and values” (1986: 23) is an important source of power in Buddhist polities: it not only defines “proper knowledge” but even proper emotional feelings. More generally, rituals are discursive performances, in which nature (meaning spirits and deities) is continually subverted to doctrine (*dhamma*). Hence rituals both display social order and reenact its institution, as a precondition for religion to flourish and merit making to become possible (Tambiah 1970).

In the royal *kathin* ritual, the king or his representative presents gifts to the monks at carefully selected royal temples (*wat luang*). Historically, royal *wat* are those temples that have been founded by members of the royal family and given royal recognition. In practice, nonroyal *wat* can be upgraded and become royal ones under certain conditions; their actual prestige depends, however, on the king or his representative who presents it with gifts or other royal endowments through the annual *kathin* ritual (Tambiah 1977). This leaves space for some peculiar transformations, as Gray notes in her description of Wat Mahathat, the so-called “democracy *wat*,” the first temple built by the Thai government (Gray 1986). Erected in 1932 after the abolishment of absolute monarchy, it is today the most important *wat* of the Thai Air Force.

The *kathin* ritual and the larger ritual system around it were since then continually transformed as a response to what Gray terms “antinomy problems” (1986: 21) between Buddhist and market economic values (see also, Tambiah 1970, 1977, 1978). The Buddhist king played a major role in promoting capitalist activities in these rural areas. The royal *kathin* rituals construct reciprocal relations between political elites/the monarchy at the center and the rest of the country at the periphery, but particularly with the Buddhist Lao-Thai population in northeast

Thailand. This region is the poorest and most politically unstable part of the country; moreover, the majority of Buddhist neophytes originate from this area (Tambiah 1977). The *wat* situated in this region have increasingly become the target of royal *kathin* rituals, taking place at government-sponsored “development temples” (Gray 1986).

In splendid ceremonies, the king and his entourage travelled throughout the country to visit the sites of his ritual acts. In doing so, the ritual dramatized “a perfect world of the past and present” in which economic and social development rises up not as part of government policy but “as a function of the religious piety of great monks and their followers: the latter further inspired by the sight of a great Dhamma King” (Gray 1986: 512). Gift giving to the *sangha*, the community of monks, and the participation in ritual practice were important redistributive mechanisms through which the laity reciprocally offered various gifts to the king. Large amounts of money were raised through the ritual, which were then channeled into communal development activities.

One aspect of this shift has been the direct incorporation of the state, as ritual participant, into the economy of merit expressed in the royal *kathin*. Since the late 1950s high-ranking government and military officials have represented the king in gift-giving activities; entire government departments, ministries, or even the armed forces have acted as sponsors (Tambiah 1977).⁹ Tambiah argues that in the Buddhist polity of years gone by, engaging in merit-making activities — and especially in patronage of the Buddhist *sangha* — was considered appropriate for those in power as a way to demonstrate the righteousness of political rule. At the same time, governmental support clearly suited the *sangha*; hence, Tambiah (1977) describes the relation between the leading monks and military elites as symbiotic: patronage was exchanged for political legitimacy.

Another aspect of the ritual transformation was the privatization of royal rituals by way of business sponsorship. Gray (1986) depicts the Thai-ification and legitimation of Sino-Thai capital and the normalization of capitalism in general by their articulation to monarchical prestige, mediated by rituals such as merit making by new capitalist elites in royally sponsored ceremonies. As Gray was exploring these issues from the early 1980s to early 1990s, a “re-hegemonizing of the Thai social field” around the constitutional monarchy was underway that culminated in the creation of a “fully blown celestial economy” that linked Buddhist rituals to the national and international political economy through a system of voluntary donations to royal charities and development projects (1986: 632). Yet, these ritual performances did not simply display the new power configurations; rather, they enacted a moral grammar of the Thai state which proceeded from an idealized

9 Platenkamp (2008) notices the same phenomenon in modern Laos, which is even more surprising given the fact that it abolished the monarchy completely after the Communist revolution in 1975; on Myanmar, compare Schober (1997) and Engelkamp (2008).

picture of a social harmony that worked to conceal governmental practices. Ritual performances did not openly display business power; instead, middle-class merchants were visibly incorporated into the ceremonies. Thus it was a play of presence and absence, of visible and invisible power structures, that characterized the significance of royal *kathin* rituals for the symbolic construction of this moral grammar. Moreover the development of “nonofficial” *kathin* rituals and their extension to the rural provinces represented an important means for companies to forge business alliances with rural residents. The dense structure of temple networks in northeast Thailand provided a channel for the economic integration of different social actors into the larger political economy. The apparently spontaneous and disinterested ritual integration of urban elites from the capital into the merit economy of the rural provinces concurred with a transformation of economic structures in these areas. While the *sangha* thrived due to unexpected inflows of financial and other resources into these provinces, farmers meanwhile found themselves increasingly landless and in poverty (Gray 1986).

The importance of Buddhism and royal authority for effective governmentality contradicts the previous area research that tended to downplay the political role of the monarchy in favor of that of bureaucratic and military elites (Riggs 1966). Hence the claim that Buddhist merit and ritual practices are central to the expansion of modern practices of government runs counter to mainstream knowledge, according to which ritual and kingship have become modernized and secularized ever since the 19th century — being “retained as part of Thai tradition but lacking the sacred overtones of the past” (Gray 1986: 22). Such studies typically “begin by acknowledging the importance of Buddhist kingship, cosmology, etc. on the social system, make an analytic distinction between political, economic, and religious data, and then exclude the latter from the bulk of their analyses” (Gray 1986: 29). One even finds Clifford Geertz taking the same line when he calls Thailand’s monarchy — for the reason that is supposedly not “practically powerful” — a “ceremonial hangover of a reclusive past” (2004: 581). In fact, one might argue that the king has no real power in the political system. As head of state, he undertakes merely ceremonial duties.

The current political crisis illustrates the power of the king as the ceremonial embodiment of Thai sovereignty and his key role in the symbolic construction of its moral grammar. Until 1997 the regime in power was governed by a powerful elite alliance comprised of parts of the administration, the military, and leading royalists. The practices described above stabilized the existing power structure; even if there were continuous power shifts taking place, overall the moral and symbolic order was relatively stable. By constantly invoking the overarching political role of Buddhist kingship, social actors in Thailand ritually reenacted mythical narratives of the country’s imagined past as a Buddhist kingdom. In effect, references to Theravada Buddhism and the monarchy as the ultimate holder and source of Thai sovereign

power work as social practices that are of paramount importance for all aspects of national social and political life (Pye 1995; Connors 2008).

The institution of Buddhist kingship and the related moral precepts for appropriate political behavior are an important resource for social actors seeking to construct political legitimacy in terms of a specific moral grammar. Connors summarizes the basic assumption of this structure as follows: “you [the king] perform the legitimacy function of symbolic unity and assume power of last resort. In return you are eulogized and made sacral, your earthly endeavors will be ignored” (2008: 149). This discourse was ritually stabilized by all kinds of everyday practice. For instance, images of the king and the royal family were constantly displayed in public and private buildings, in the electoral campaigns of every single political party, in public broadcasting, and so forth. Critiques of the monarchy are to this day punishable with charges of *lèse majesté* (Hewison 2008). These practices have led to the sedimentation of a regime that builds on a specific logic of moral authority to which social actors relate in their everyday behavior. This logic of legitimate authority, the state’s moral grammar, is closely tied to Buddhist models of morality and to the monarchy being seen as the ultimate source of sovereign power.

The economic turmoil that ensued in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis provided a window of opportunity for Thaksin Shinawatra and his party, who were now able to challenge this social logic of power. In this situation, political practices were articulated that aimed at reinscribing the actual content of the regime of sovereign power in Thailand. Thaksin’s rise was closely connected to the nationalist and communitarian discourses that he employed after the Asian Crisis. Criticizing the way in which the old regime dealt with the social and economic upheavals, Thaksin quickly gained a large following within the hitherto marginalized groups of society — especially in the country’s northern and northeastern provinces. However, this attempt at resignifying the logic of power entailed Thaksin jeopardizing the single most important symbol of the nation — the king, who quite literally embodies Thai sovereignty. Eventually the accusation that Thaksin was against the monarchy turned out to seriously threaten his claim to political authority. In fact, this narrative resource was strategically employed as part of the royalist campaign in which some of Thaksin’s former allies later participated after his government had failed to accede to some of Thaksin’s political goals. Thaksin himself seemed to have been well aware of the political force that the allegation of being against the monarchy carried; nevertheless, he was still unable to institute a viable discursive alternative to it.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to develop a non-essentialist approach by which to study the working of sovereign power in non-Western contexts. Inspired by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben’s work on governmentality and by Social Anthropology scholarship on ritual performance, it has explored the symbolic

construction of meaning in the context of Thai politics. It has argued against considering religion and royal ceremony as mere leftovers of a distant past, positing instead to see them as central for understanding the workings of power that is symbolically structured in terms of a moral grammar. The empirical part of this paper stressed two interrelated factors that structure practices of governmentality in the Thai context: a political coalition between the military, bureaucratic and commercial elites, and the monarchy on the one hand and a discursive performance of Thai identity that is centered around Theravada Buddhism and the ritual role of the king on the other. The focus on “arcane rituals” (Handley 2006: 4) has served to link religious belief and practice, thereby modernizing the efforts of the state to implement development policies based on the economic interests of elite groups in a larger context of governmentality practices. While it acknowledges the significant transformations that dominate in Thailand, the analysis has stressed the continuity of a moral grammar represented by the ongoing political relevance of ritual practices.

The relevance to politics of this apparently purely ceremonial institution became most visible in May 1992 in the context of student protests against the ruling military regime, which responded with violence against the demonstrators — killing scores and wounding hundreds, with televised images of Bhumibol’s intervention in a political power struggle astonishing a worldwide audience (Crossette 1992). The images showed both then Prime Minister and Four-Star General Suchinda Kraprayoon and opposition leader Major General Chamlong Srimuang prostrate on a carpet in front of the king, who scolded “his sons for fighting” and reprimanded them “for the damage wreaked by their personal rivalry and selfish desires” (Handley 2006: 1–2). Most stunning, however, was the fact that “within hours the violence ceased, soldiers and demonstrators returned home, and both Suchinda and Chamlong withdrew from politics” (Handley 2006: 2). Hence the institution of the monarchy, with its moral authority embodied and re-presented (made newly present) in the person of the king, should not be considered as some institutional residual category of an idealized past. Rather, it is suggested that these contending notions of sovereign power should be conceptualized as a “totality” (Tambiah 1977).

In the context of the Buddhist polity, the Thai state is incorporated into a totality of transactions that is concerned with the reproduction of a social and cosmic order that transcends the traditional domain of secular politics. The royal intervention in Thai politics in May 1992 highlights the political relevance of the monarchy and Buddhist narratives for sovereign power in the country. Looking at the transformation of royal ritual structures as constituting a particular moral grammar has illustrated how governmentality practices are represented as being deeply embedded in that Thai sociocosmological order. Within the context of the ever-increasing economic integration of the country into the global political economy, images and dramatized performances of the king in and through rituals serve to normalize governmental practices as being in harmony with a supposed higher royal morality derived from Theravada Buddhism. This discursive strategy helps to convert a governmental

exercise of power into a more encompassing spiritual one, thus constructing what Agamben calls “government by consent” (2011: 258).

For governmentality studies one larger implication of the political influence of this moral structure might be to be aware of the tenacity of apparently religious narratives and discourses, presumably not only in non-Western contexts (see Platenkamp 2010) but also, as Agamben (2011) has shown, in Western democracies. In this regard, this paper cautions against proceeding from dichotomous categories such as religious/secular or public/private too easily; instead, it proposes to study practices of governmentality in their totality. While it may have been useful for Michel Foucault to call for a conceptual decapitation of the king in political theory, my analysis suggests that we should rather enquire about the discursive moves behind reconstructing the image of the king — both in discourse and political practice. This is important ultimately because these practices can give us further clues about how the void of the governmental machine’s empty throne is filled by spectacle and ritual performance.

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