“WATER IS LIFE, LIFE IS WATER”

Environmental Engagements in Thailand

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Master thesis submitted to Department of Social Anthropology,

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Spring 2020

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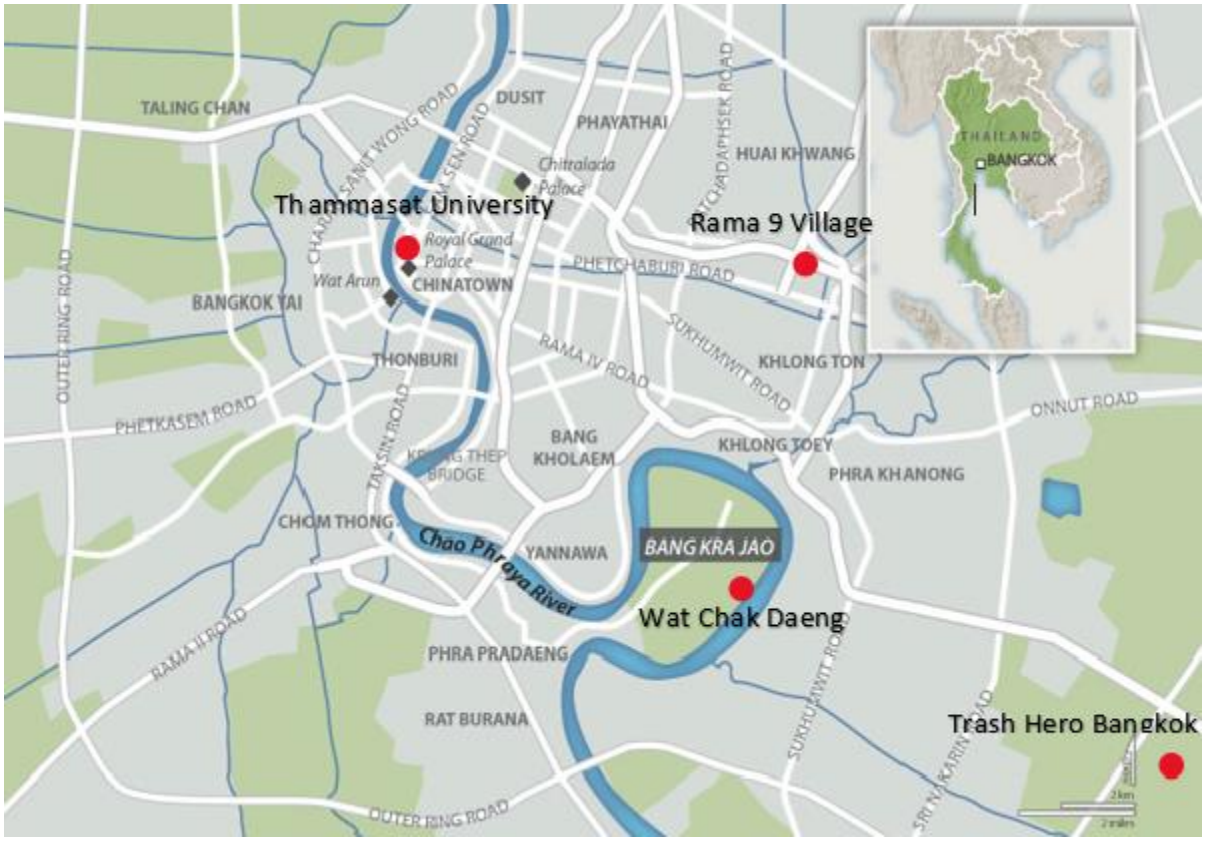

Figure 3 - Map of Bangkok - red dots indicate Thammasat University and field sites.

Acknowledgements

When I first visited Bangkok as tourist in 2012, I was taken aback by its sheer size and fast-paced environment. The immense heat, foreign smells and not to mention pollution and trash was too much for a Norwegian to bear. I remember waking up the morning of our last day in Bangkok, gleeful that I was leaving this dreadful city and head south for highly anticipated leisure on the beach. As I laid in bed looking out the window, I could see a river behind all the skyscrapers – and thinking to myself that it felt odd seeing this slice of nature amid the concrete city steaming with heat and noise. Little did I know, that in a few years, I would study at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, little did I know that I would come to comprehend, somewhat, the Thai language, and I surely did not know, that one day I would come down the very same river by kayak, accompanied by Thais and others that I today call my friends. Safe to say, I would come to love Bangkok in all its glory and with its fantastic people I got to know during my time in Thailand, both as a student and researcher. This thesis would not have been conceivable without your help.

I want to extend my gratitude and thankfulness to all who made my research possible, such as Trash Hero Bangkok that warmly welcomed me. I am awed by your relentless pursuit in trying to help Thailand and the world. The same goes for my informant and friend Ananda. I admire your stamina and work ethic, and I'm nothing less of certain that your involvement in the Thai environmental movement has had, and still has, a great impact. Thank you for showing me your world, and for being so patient in answering my infantile questions. The latter goes for many I interacted with.

And to my interpreter, although I could never fully convince you that you were doing a terrific job in assisting me, I will still give it another try. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Without your help I would have been lost. But, most importantly; thank you for your friendship and great conversations on the river and elsewhere.

I want to thank ajahn Prinya for letting me join not only his campaign but let me take part in trying to fulfil his vision of a Green Thailand. And to all the other kayak team members, those on water and land, thank you for letting me take part in your journey, and for all the laughter.

Too all others that made my research possible, and my stay in Thailand so pleasant; thank you.

In addition, I want to thank my academic supervisor Olaf Smedal. Thank you for being patient when I unleashed a string of thoughts about my fieldwork and countless ideas, but even more so for helping me stitch it back together again. I would like to thank Michael Herzfeld. Our conversations helped me make sense of Bangkok and inspired me to venture on. You certainly broadened my knowledge about Thai cuisine, as well. In addition, I would like to thank Centre for Development and the Environment at the University of Oslo for letting me join their master seminar, and for all the constructive feedback. I also thank Vestland Fylkeskommune for their financial support.

I want to thank my father and his wife for all their support. When I was struggling to see an end to this thesis, you would always lift me up with encouragements (not to mention treats). Finally, it is finished. Next time I come visit I promise that I will be in a vacation mode. Also, thanks to my brother for cheering me up when needed – now we'll go fishing.

Lastly, I would like to thank my love Guro. Thank you for your boundless love and support. It would not have been possible without you. Thank you for all our conversations, but most of all, thank you for showing me the world. I will forever be grateful for having you in my life.

Too all others, those at the anthropology department, fellow students, and the ones that my brain currently rejects to conjure up due to fatigue – thank you.

All the shortcomings in this thesis are entirely my own.

Daniel Oliver Paulsen

28th June 2020, Voss.

Introduction

In this thesis I aim to shed light on how environmental engagement can unfold in Thailand – in an authoritarian regime with insufficient waste management infrastructure and lack of well-organized environmental regulations. I present three environmental campaigns in Thailand that transpired during my fieldwork in Bangkok, from July to December 2018. First is Trash Hero Bangkok, a volunteer-based NGO that arrange weekly trash clean-ups in Bangkok. The second is a trash clean-up event organized by Thammasat University in Bangkok, which lasted for fourteen days. Third, is Chak Daeng monastery in Bangkok, where the monks have built facilities to reprocess waste into new commodities and educate the local community about sustainability and environmental awareness. All the campaigns aspired to change Thai's mindset about the environment and inspire increased environmental awareness and action to mitigate Thailand's waste leakage by encouraging people to reduce, reuse and recycle.

By drawing on Thomas Hylland Eriksen's analysis of environmental engagements in Gladstone, Australia, I assess in each abovementioned case, what type of environmental engagement is practiced and their level of ambivalence in confronting a double bind. The double bind when performing Thai environmentalism, I argue throughout this thesis, is as an environmentalist being acute to the fact that without being able to scrutinize the authoritarian Thai leadership in a call for systemic change and end to corruption, the environmentalists' efforts may all be in vain. In this regard, I examine five typologies of environmental engagements that I observed in the field, and its level of inherent ambivalence in addressing the double bind. In chapter two, The Fifth Tiger, I detail the emergence of the hegemonic ideology of 'Thainess', in which I argue plays a decisive part in the framing and practice of environmentalism in Thailand. Chapter three details the current state of pollution in Thailand. In chapter four I present how Trash Hero organized their events, in addition to a large event in an urban village in Bangkok named Rama 9 Village. Chapter five details the Thammasat University campaign and the practice at Chak Daeng monastery. Furthermore, I discuss the Thai educational system in relation to Thai conceptions of environmental problems by drawing on interviews with informants and interlocuters. In the thesis

final remarks, I end with a discussion of the events as sites for a possible reimagining of ‘Thainess’ in relation to environmentalism by drawing on Victor Turner’s liminoid event.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Introduction

Within environmental anthropology literature, what is referred to as 'environmental anthropology' is typically defined as a subdiscipline of anthropology, that is, the general designation for the anthropological investigation of human-environment relationships. The range of topics that form as basis for analysis are widespread, ranging from adaptation and resource management to environmental values and religion; from cognition and perception to global climate change, from conservation initiatives and their impact upon populations to urban environments; from human rights and social justice to international agreements (Brondizo, Adams and Fiorini, 2016: 10).

A central aspect of analysis common in not only environmental anthropology, but also among other social sciences dealing with the environment (e.g., political ecology[1]) is the emphasis on the use of scale, as to develop theory for thinking about the relationship between land, degradation and social change at multiple scales. How different actors, at different scales, intersect in these systems – taking into consideration local, regional scale, at the national scale and/or at the global scale (Elinoff, 2020).

This thesis takes a similar aim in its analysis of Thai environmentalism by utilizing scale and type of engagement to, as Kay Milton (2002) suggests, analyze environmentalism as a cultural practice. The events detailed in this paper all have in common the pursuit of encouraging public

[1] In Political Ecology, the work of Eric Wolf (1982) influenced an analytic shift from seeing the 'local' as a bounded and isolated social entity; to rather studying the 'local' as interrelated to a wider range of globalized processes. Political Ecology has inequality at its base; how it is affected by structural entanglement. Changes due to larger forces taking place on a larger scale affects inequality, affecting power relationships on a smaller scale.

environmental awareness in order to overcome the challenges caused by the Anthropocene. The events under study were organized as an effort to mitigate the impact of an ongoing environmental *crisis* - therefore the analysis will take the detailed events as a product *of* an emergent crisis – examining the practices taking place in the events and the inherent possibilities for change that can prevail as a result.

Events in Anthropology

The study of events and situations has for a long time been a subject of interest within anthropology, and according to Bruce Kapferer (2016: 1), is usually performed in two main and frequently combined ways; 1. As exemplifications or illustrations, either by presenting case studies, or more general ethnographic descriptive of theoretical assertions. 2. As happenings or occasions, slices of life, that establish a conundrum or problematic that the presentation of an ethnography and its analysis will solve or otherwise explain. Within the Manchester School, the work of Max Gluckman and other scholars to follow, a keen interest was given to events that were atypical – events or situations that erupted and disturbed the apparent calm or routine of everyday life. Max Gluckman assessed that events should not only function as 'apt illustrations' in which cases were to depict larger systems – instead he selected events that were atypical and crisis-ridden (Gluckman, 1961; Kapferer, 1987). It was the disruptive elements found within an event that was of interest – situations that arose and broke or challenged the fixed and reproductive qualities of events. In the event, Gluckman assessed, social action was situational and not fixed, thus a person could undergo a multitude of different roles and statuses depending on the circumstances (Kapferer, 2016: 9):

> Germinal to both Gluckman's and especially Mitchell's situational orientation is a shift away from a totalizing concept of society (or community) as bounded, integrated whole. Furthermore, the critical focus of analysis was not society but rather the event or situation as entities of practice. These were not necessarily microcosms of the macrocosm or particular expressions of the social whole as some kind of static social order but aspects (or moments) of its continual historical formation. In other words, the social whole itself is relative and dependent on the kind of issue being addressed. Thus, certain problems

> might see the social whole as related to global processes that are very distant from particular events or situations of ethnographic description and involve processes that affect, but are not integral within, the social institutions or relations that are characteristic of a particular social order.

In agreeance with Deluze and Guatteri (1987, 1994), Kapferer shares their notion of events as "the critical site of emergence, manifesting the singularity of a particular multiplicity within tensional space and opening toward new horizons of potential". In this sense, "the event, in their analysis, is a wellspring of emergence that is not merely a reflection (or illustration) of the world around it, as this may be described independently of the occurrence of the event, but is itself a creative crucible of new, hitherto unrealized potential" (Kapferer 2016: 16).

The structure and promulgation of the events during my fieldwork varied from localized efforts, such as in the case of Trash Hero, to regional in the Kayak Event. Lastly, the events organized by the Chak Daeng monastery included a spiritual element as well – connecting the practice of environmentalism with an 'out-of-this-world' dimension. All the events were by many informants considered to be connected to a wider globalized event of environmentalism taking place in a multitude of different forms and places.

The events organized by Trash Hero and Kayaking for Chao Prya shifted locations for their cleanup – and location played a vital part in framing their message. In particular, the Rama 9 Village Event organized by Trash Hero and Ananda made use of the latent values and symbolic power of location and connecting their effort within the Thai royal moniker. The Kayak Event connected imaginings of a past where Chao Prya river was deemed as cleaner and more vibrant in the daily lives of Thais – but also by linking the cleanups to the (at the time) upcoming coronation of the new King Maha Vajiralongkorn, and that would take place by royal barge on the Chao Prya river. Thus, the location of events functioned as important backdrops for framing their message of environmentalism – connecting localized conceptions with larger transnational structures of mitigating the impact of destructive human practice on the environment. Although the events under study made use of what could be considered as a reflection of 'fixed' ideals emanating from the macro and thus reproduced at the micro – there were instances that brought to the surface a critique

of naturalized and taken-for-granted notions of the virtues of being a Thai – also known as 'Thainess' or 'Thaiism': an ideology that constitutes proper Thai conduct which has been promulgated abroad and domestically by the Thai elite since the mid-19th century. The aim of analysis is to investigate what sort of change was made possible in the event, or its potential as a 'generative moment'. Of interest in this thesis, is whether the events made possible to perhaps achieve unrealized potentials of new imaginings as to how the 'Thainess' ideology and its perceived conduct may affect environmentalism and possible outcomes.

In this regard, anthropologist Peter Jackson (2004) makes a salient point to bear in mind when observing an event in Thailand - as will be further elaborated on in chapter 1. In brief, Jackson argues that the empirical and logical forms of modes of Thai power – what he calls the *Thai regime of images* – is an internally differentiated form of power that exerts systematically different types of policing and control over actions and discourses in the private and public spheres, respectfully. Actions performed and statements made in the public domain are more monitored by the regime than that of identical actions and utterances made in domains that are not necessarily less visible but are culturally labeled as private. Statements or representations that does not conform with idealized forms are perceived as disrupting what the regime call 'the image of smooth calm'. This can lead to both formal (legal) and informal (cultural) modes of power being mobilized in order to muffle unwanted representations emanating from the public sphere. Jackson argues that this regime of power/knowledge has epistemological implications that determines what can and cannot be articulated as public knowledge in Thailand.

In this case I attempt to investigate Jackson's notions, as it turns any attempt at scrutinizing Thai behavior or systemic discrepancies into a delicate matter given that one must balance the construction of an image and its practice, such as environmentalism, to fit with preexisting notions of 'Thainess'. Hence, the social practice of environmentalism in Thailand becomes much broader, since the inherent practice in environmentalism must be aligned with expectations emanating from the ideology of 'Thainess', and not only with ecological concerns. Thus, the social practice of environmentalism has the potential to not only inspire contemplation among the participants with regard to their own ecological impact, but also the system that they operate within as virtues connected to 'Thainess' is adapted to the practice of environmentalism.

Liminoid Event

Victor Turner proposed an approach to how to view a modern event and its inherent possibility for change. Building on the work of Van Gennep ([1909] 1960), Turner modelled a theoretical approach that would incorporate an understanding of certain events taking place in contemporary time as having the qualities of a rite of passage – in what Turner labeled a liminoid event. The rite of passage in a liminoid event, in Turner's view, followed what Van Gennep detailed a ritual of transition as consisting of three phases: (1) separation, (2) liminality, and, (3) reintegration.

Liminoid and liminal events had in common an ambiguous middle period of being 'betwixt and between' where the norms and practices of everyday social life is suspended, upending statuses and symbols. The persons in the liminal(-oid) event was neither here or there; leaving behind a given status or role, but not yet transitioned to what was to come of the liminal(-oid) phase. A key difference between Van Gennep and Turner is that the former claimed the practice did not constitute a change to the structure of society, but rather enforced or reaffirmed its structure and thus returning to an unchanged, or unchallenged society after its completion. For Turner, the upending of practices and symbols taking place in the liminal phase did not necessarily reinforce or reproduce a society, but could very well challenge it altogether as the liminal phase created a space for the participant to not only view him/herself from an outside perspective – but society as well. Society risked having the individual oppose it – even distancing him-/herself from society or scrutinizing its inherent central values.

The events taking place in this thesis will be analyzed as liminoid occurrences, although it will incorporate what anthropologist Andrew Spiegel (2016) suggests is a continuum Van Gennep's liminal and Turner's liminoid are not as categorically different as Turner would have it; that modern liminoid events may very well fluctuate between attributes associated with both liminal (pre-modern) events and liminoid (modern) events.

Scales and typology of engagement

The events that unfolded during my fieldwork included participants and observers from all walks of life. The events were open for all members of Thai society creating a venue of diverse people and their social position was immensely varied. Furthermore, the organizers and a portion of the volunteers considered themselves environmentalists, concerned and engaged in mitigating the effects of the Anthropocene – with varying degrees of environmental activism in regard to criticizing the government, the industry and others deemed as a source for environmental degradation. Some volunteers did not even consider themselves as environmentalists, but were only interested in helping the organizers.

I find inspiration from Thomas Hylland Eriksen's (2018a, 2018b) fieldwork in the industrial city of Gladstone, Australia, and how he utilizes scales in conjunction with a typology of environmental engagement and level of ambivalence. In brief, Eriksen explores typologies of environmental engagement among the inhabitants of Gladstone, in addition to the engagement of NGOs and others taking place beyond the locality of Gladstone. He explores what he assesses as an ambivalence in juxtaposition with engagement as «ambivalence can usefully be juxtaposed with engagement, which signals certainty and willingness to oppose dominant tendencies in society through critique and by proposing alternatives" (Eriksen, 2018a: 425).

Ambivalence among residents of Gladstone is tied to their engagement with the fossil industry in Gladstone, as many are either employed or associated with the industry in some manner. Confronting and scrutinizing local ecological damage that originates from local industrial activity is by many residents considered almost sacrilegious, given the fact that a critique against the industry might affect the livelihood that most depend on to pay their mortgage, school intuition fees for their children, and so forth. Though most of Gladstonites are aware of the global environmental crisis and its connection to the fossil fuel industry (such as their local industry) and do not refute this claim, "the scale, and form, of their environmental engagement, and the way in which they read their surroundings, depend to a great extent on their relationship to the industry" (Eriksen 2018a: 426) – creating a double bind:

> A double bind is a self-refuting kind of communication, as when you say two incompatible things at once. A person trying to act on the basis of a double bind will never be able to do it right, since no matter what they do, it can be objected to. In the contemporary world, the world of the Anthropocene and neoliberal runaway growth, the double bind of growth and sustainability is a fundamental contradiction. It seems impossible to have it both ways (…) business leaders and politicians have begun to talk about sustainability and climate politics, while simultaneously favoring economic growth, which nearly always implies increased energy consumption.[2]

In Gladstone, Eriksen argues that public engagement for ecological sustainability tends to be cautious and circumspect due to their dependency on the industry, thus "few talks about the environment and many talks about their mortgage" (Eriksen 2018a: 430). He goes on to emphasize that this does not mean they are not aware or concerned with climate change and ecological challenges, "rather, they are difficult to reconcile with the lifeworlds inhabited and therefore tend to be channeled in non-confrontational directions" (ibid). The double bind in Gladstone, then, is the fact that most inhabitants rely on the local industry, but understand it is also the cause of local ecological degradation, and a contributor to global climate change. Thus, when Gladstonites engage in environmentalism, types of engagements differ in how it confronts the double bind. Some seemingly caught in a state of *ambivalence*, reluctant to address the double-bind.

In this thesis, I take a similar approach as outlined above by connecting a typology of environmental engagements in juxtaposition with level of ambivalence and how engagement differ in addressing a double bind.

[2] Cambridge dictionary defines a double bind as "a difficult situation in which, whatever action you decide to take, you cannot escape unpleasant results." (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2019). In a simpler sense, you're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't.

Ambivalence and double bind in Thailand

As mentioned, the events under study all had in common that they campaigned for behavioral change among Thais, and the organizers aspired that individual change would lead to collective change. This was also the message conveyed by the government and corporations. What I take to be a double bind is that individual change alone is not enough, but in order to be successful it must include a systemic change as well, as reasoned by Isenhour (2016: 236):

> The devolution of responsibility for environmental welfare away from states and toward individual actors constricts the state's primary role to that of an information provider. If consumers or producers do not respond to social marketing campaigns, the state isn't implicated. Rather, it succeeds in having promoted both environmental welfare and the interests of the market. Yet this strategy puts a lot of pressure on caring individuals when many contemporary environmental problems have roots that grow far beyond the consumer's sphere of influence and control (…) Further, if our actions become overly intimate and limited to the private realm, they become "silent routines".

This creates for environmentalists in Thailand a double bind; the problem of waste does in fact stem from individual consumption, but decades of negligence from the government has resulted in insufficient infrastructure to deal with the effects of economic growth and affiliated consumption. Thus, if an effective change is to take place, one must include a warranted critique of the political and economic system as well. This may become a slippery, and even dangerous, road to take by not only the organizers, but the volunteers as well, given that Thailand is an authoritarian regime and riddled with corruption that intermingle business with governmental affairs. By not doing so, individual and group efforts may not be enough – a fact that the organizers and many other interlocutors were acutely aware of.

The types of environmental engagements I encountered in the field approached this double bind differently, but one general tendency was quite prevalent; the events organized by Trash Hero addressed the double bind indirect whilst both the kayak event and the monks did so directly. The question then is, why are some comfortable to engage critically with the double bind, whilst others operate with differing degrees of ambivalence?

Scales

In anthropologist Reidar Grønhaug's article «Scale as a Variable in Analysis» (1978) he asks which units should be used in validly characterizing 'society' in terms of scale. As he further points out; it is nearly impossible to know beforehand which level of scale has the most determinants that affect overall social life in an observed population (Grønhaug 1978: 78). He further emphasizes "that we should be prepared to expand or contract the scale of the area and population under study if we can thereby more clearly understand the initially observed regularities" (ibid). Grønhaug defines 'scale' as the extension in social space and number of personnel in a social system – each social system within this scale has a level of complexity that relates to the degree of role differentiation and the varieties of role permutations. Thus; "in each case [one should] identify a social 'proper dynamics' that generate the organizational and statistical pattern in question. The idea is to look for the social dynamics that create direct and indirect links and repercussions within a population so that it emerges as an aggregate entity with attributes of scale and complexity" (Grønhaug 1978: 81). An organizational unit, therefore, entails a structural implication that affects the individual social person, and the societal system as a whole – creating super-individual systems "conditioning the lives of individuals, whatever the subjective hopes and strategies of these individuals may be (…) The units differ in form and scale, but they display in common certain basic features allowing for a uniform terminology (Grønhaug 1978: 82). Units of systems of social interconnections may be regarded as 'social fields', such being an activity as well, and "the aim is to find their organizational patterns, levels of scale, and interrelation with each other [and] try to describe and evaluate the order among social fields, in the sense of their relative weight or dominance within the processes of maintenance and change of general social life (Grønhaug 1978: 81).

In Grønhaug's analysis of Herat, Afghanistan, he takes locality to constitute a social field – but it does not necessarily conform to only locality. Social fields, such as an activity or event, contain "the potentialities of tension and fission; there is continuous need for negotiation and the establishment of agreement" (Grønhaug 1978: 87). Each social field has distinctive organizational patterns, values and symbols, tasks, challenges that must be resolved, forums, situations, networks, groups and rules of inclusion and exclusion (ibid).

Grønhaug defines a 'society' to be «the whole that contains the total set of social prerequisites and determinants for individual lives, the social production and destruction of human beings» (Grønhaug 1978: 82). Within this society, there are several overlapping social fields, each an aggregate of social relationships entailing a set of complementary roles. These social relationships are "interconnected in the social person in the sense that a number of roles are combined in the person that is a part of the totality of fields making up his society" (ibid). I use the term 'social position' to reflect the socioeconomic background of individuals and/or group involved in the events. Type of environmental engagement and level of ambivalence seemed to be influenced by social position when entering the social field of environmentalism. As to social, temporal and cultural/conceptual scale, I take inspiration from Eriksen (2018a: 425 - italics made by author):

> Scale can usefully delineate cultural and individual representations of society, the world or the cosmos, and there is no necessary congruence between social scale and cultural scale (…) The temporal scale is important, not least in the context of environmentalism and industry. Environmentalists often assume that industrial capitalism is shortsighted, while only ecological thought takes the long, planetary perspective (…) it is difficult to document large-scale environmentalist movements where actors take decisions based on assumed consequences that will only become apparent years after their own demise. The *temporal scale* on which people take decisions is therefore relevant in comparable way to the *cultural scale* by which they orient themselves and the *social scale* in which they are integrated through networks and social organization.

Furthermore, I take the essence of 'Thainess' ideology to be a proper dynamic that plays a part in regulating not only activities within different social fields, but also bridges them together by its connection to an imagined community, making for a discourse that is recognizable regardless of social position. The ideology of 'Thainess' (and as will be made clear it is far from a rigid ideology) plays a part in delineating the social, temporal and cultural/conceptual scales of those involved in the events – and its effects on addressing the double bind and level of ambivalence. In this regard, it serves to assist in ways similar to what Eriksen proposes as to contribute to a discussion of the possibilities and limitations of critical environmentalism and to "shed light on more general knowledge regimes and their relationship to lifeworlds and power" (Eriksen, 2018a: 425).

Typologies of environmental engagement

Eriksen proposes four different typologies of environmental engagements in Gladstone, (1) loyal, (2) specific (3) critical and (4) expanding. I add the following engagement; (5) religious. The attributes of loyal, specific, critical and expanding engagement have been altered to fit with my fields of interest but bear familiarities with those of Gladstone (Eriksen, 2018a, 2018b).

Loyal

Eriksen takes loyal engagement to reflect environmentalism in terms of their loyalty to the fossil industry in Gladstone. The ones that practice loyal environmental engagement are concerned with local ecological problems, but due to their dependence on the industry for various economic and social factors, they exhibit an ambivalence to its contribution to the ecological problem – both locally and globally.

I take loyal engagement to embrace a broader practice of Thai nationalism and to reflect virtues connected to 'Thainess'. As such, loyal environmental engagement is inspired by wanting to contribute to help Thailand as a concerned citizen, in many instances 'doing good for Father', that being the late King Bhumibol (cf. chapter 1). During my fieldwork, the problem of excessive

waste, as conceptualized within loyal engagement, was due to individual negligence stemming from careless and 'bad' Thais, and the double-bind was not addressed – at least not in the public sphere.

Specific

Specific engagement, as proposed by Eriksen (2018a: 431), is rooted in individuals and groups that have been directly afflicted by ecological change due to human intervention and thus become engaged in environmentalism. Their engagement is invoked by a local specific cause, such as deforestation or loss of local marine life, but it does not necessarily entail systemic implications that goes beyond their particular concerns (ibid). In my case, a small river community I visited during the Kayak Event, the fishers were mostly concerned with local water quality and connected this with trash and industrial waste in the region but did not necessarily go beyond this conception. Whilst the provincial leaders, e.g., local governors and village leaders would vent their frustration with the central government in Bangkok and their lack of imposing proper regulations and/or economic funding – but then again, some officials would also claim there was no problem. A denominator for this category, as in Eriksen case as well, is that they professed more distrust in authorities and corporations than the loyal category, but their conception and engagement was mostly of local concern.

Critical

Those involved in critical engagement confronted the double-bind head on, even making it their central argument on the origin of environmental problems and other social implications. In Gladstone, some engaged citizens would base their intervention on a fundamental critique of the fossil fuel industry and scrutinized the close collaboration between politicians and corporations (Eriksen 2018a: 432). Furthermore, they were familiar with the global discourse of climate change, fossil fuels and economic processes and as such, "the political scale of their engagement may be local but is integrated cognitively with a global analysis" (ibid: 433). In my case, Friends of the River and Greenpeace Thailand were vocal in making systemic critique in conjunction with environmental challenges in Thailand. They also conceptualized the local issues onto a global

scale, drawing on transnational connections and comparing Thailand with that of other countries progress in mitigating the effects of the climate crisis.

Expanding

Expanding engagement begins due to a local problem but expands conceptually to include larger processes taking place elsewhere and connecting it together. In Gladstone, Eriksen notes the engagement of a local woman who had little or no interest in environmentalism. Her engagement was provoked when she became aware that dredging of the local harbor caused ecological changes that she could not ignore any more and was possibly initiated on 'undemocratic' terms. The provocation was caused by, as she said, the 'NIMBY syndrome'; Not In My Back Yard – giving rise to an environmental engagement that developed over five years, "beginning with a very localized problem, experienced-based anxiety over the future of her own lifeworld, she soon began to widen her scope, both in broader context of Australia and internationally" (Eriksen 2018a: 434).

Trash Hero related local waste to individual and community behaviors, but also included a call for systemic change in the form of improved waste management facilities and more regulations. Though they never formulated this as a direct critique towards the government, or military junta as most people will have it, they nevertheless acknowledged that until the government stepped up their game, Trash Hero would have to keep trying to influence Thais as a second measure. Among the volunteers and speakers, local problems were often connected to global trends in varying degree and in differing conceptions.

The inspiration for the Kayak Event was sparked by a localized problem and a case of 'NIMBY syndrome' but expanded conceptually and practically to a larger scale within a relative short period of time. It went on to include not only Thailand, but its place in the global efforts to mitigate environmental problems. In addition, attaining and teaching knowledge gained from experience was improved and shared. The double-bind was addressed, but it varied in levels of being scrutinized depending on situation and locality.

Religious

A religious engagement connected the practice of environmentalism to virtues found in Therevada Buddhism – and proposed that the necessary behavioral change could be achieved through the teachings of the Buddhist Dhamma. The double bind was addressed but was somewhat constrained due to the inherent individualism in attaining enlightenment and being responsible for your own karmic actions. Although most, if not all, my Thai informants found motivation and source for reflection in Theravada Buddhism, some of them as will be made clear, were only motivated by a religious perspective inspired to make merit through their environmental engagement.

The government and private businesses

I choose not to include corporations and the government as having their own typology of environmental engagement, but rather I will include their participation in and effect on each mentioned typology when it is relevant. Nevertheless, some words on the matter may be useful.

Government environmental engagement was not absent, but largely based on promotional campaigns and discussions as to what measures needed to be implemented. Although governmental officials, including Prime minister (and former military junta leader) Prayut Chan-O-Chan, accepted that Thailand was lacking proper infrastructure, and until it was in place, Thais had to improve their behavior in order to assist their government, they did not connect the lack of infrastructure to any wrongdoings due to past governance, thus neglecting the fact that the problem had been overlooked, or ignored, for a long time.

Environmentalists placed much emphasis on large corporations and their willingness to incorporate changes to their business structure. In particular, the CP ALL Public Company Limited that owns the franchise rights for 7/11 was often a focus of discussion among my informants, and many Thais in general, as being too lenient in their distribution of plastic bags and straws. During my fieldwork, CP implemented changes in order to accommodate protests, such as donating all money saved from not handing out plastic bags to local health initiatives. Despite their cooperation, one of my informants experienced an attack from what he called ‘the 7/11 Facebook

Squad' when he posted a critical question about 7/11 on their Facebook page – by a paid group of CP warriors he insisted made comments on any critique against CP made on social media into a question of the critics level of proper 'Thainess' – trying to create an ulterior source of motive for their critique.

Methodology

This master thesis has been realized by use of the classical principles of participatory observation, except for not living with my informants (O'Reilly, 2012). Most of my conversation with interlocuters were either informal or semi-structured interviews. When I arrived in Bangkok, my field site being a megacity, created an overwhelming sensation of not knowing where to begin. My initial foci of interest were forceful eviction of urban poor dwellers due to a riverfront project. Though, just prior to my arrival it had come to a sudden halt. To my despair, an informant at Bangkok Post told me that the project had been postponed indefinitely, and the people I was interested in had already moved on, as to where, nobody knew. This required me to realign my foci of interest while in the field, and I found inspiration from Kerry Chance's (2015) fieldwork in South Africa, where she unraveled local societal conceptions by focusing on a material object, in her case a box of matches. This got my on the idea of doing a similar approach by using trash as a prism in unraveling Thai sociality and sociopolitical conceptions.

I first came across Trash Hero Bangkok on Facebook, perhaps due to my multiple searches with keywords related to Bangkok and environmentalism, as it was eventually proposed as a group that might be of interest to me. It certainly was. I had noted other Thai environmental organizations, but I was compelled by Trash Hero Bangkok's seemingly bilingual approach of English and Thai.

Besides joining Trash Hero's weekly cleanup at Taco Lake, I kept a watchful eye on other events going on in Bangkok at the time. I visited panel-debates organized by universities and other environmental organizations, workshops, a second-hand store initiative that employed residents from the largest slum in Bangkok; Kloeng Toei. Even tagging along on a research project organized by the Mahidol University on the island Koh Sak, just outside the tourist hotspot Pattaya in Chonburi province. At every turn, my aim was to gain more information and a broader

conception of Thai environmentalism, and to connect with Thai environmentalists. In this sense I relied on the snowball method of finding suitable informants that would help illuminate my research topics, a method that eventually led me to the Kayak Event (cf. chapter 5).

In conversation with my informants, many spoke about their late King Bhumibol, or Rama 9. Drawing on Sherry Ortner (1973), I assessed that the monarchy was influential in my informants' lives, and thus is part of my analysis of how environmental engagements unfold in Thailand. Sherry Ortner details possible effects certain symbols can have on a people – although not necessarily in a deterministic manner – adding that she is not assuming that there is only one key symbol to every culture, but nevertheless, certain symbols among groups within a society, such as the public symbol system may function as a source from which the natives themselves discover, rediscover and transform their own culture, generation after generation. As to whether certain symbols are a cultural focus of social interest may be signaled by more than one the following five indicators (Ortner 1973: 1339):

(1) The natives tell us that X is culturally important.
(2) The natives seem positively or negatively aroused about X, rather than indifferent.[3]
(3) X comes up in many different contexts. These contexts may be behavioral or systemic: X comes up in many different kinds of action situation or conversation, or X comes up in many different symbolic domains (myth, ritual, art, formal rhetoric, etc.)
(4) There is greater cultural elaboration surrounding X, e.g., elaboration of vocabulary, or elaboration of details of X's nature, compared with similar phenomena in the culture.
(5) There are greater cultural restrictions surrounding X, either in sheer number of rules, or severity of sanctions regarding its misuse.

[3] On two separate occasion, with two separate Thai environmentalists, both got goosebumps on their arms while speaking about King Bhumibol – and eagerly showed it to me as confirmation about how much they admired the late King.

Language Barrier

I enrolled at AUA Language Center in Bangkok in January 2018, completing roughly 280 hours of Thai language classes, although I learned much, I did not comprehend the language adequality as to carry an in-depth conversation with interlocuters. Therefore, I engaged an interpreter to assist me in the field, a Thai male university student. Whenever my interpreter was not available, I was assisted by other volunteers speaking English, but I made sure to record most conversations so that my interpreter could translate them properly later on. Most interlocuters did not seem to mind me taping our conversations, but I do suspect that for some, their answers might have been compromised due to being recorded, as many fear repercussions if they are deemed as too critical. One notable example was when visiting Pollution Control Department. After an hour of conversing with a high-level employee that spoke good English, her/his English language skills became suddenly lost when I asked why the government had not resolved the problem of waste earlier on, before becoming such a big problem. Though I did not get an answer, it certainly gave an indication of the workings within an authoritarian regime.

I also benefitted from my conversations with anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, that was in Bangkok at the time of my fieldwork. His vast knowledge about Thailand, and Thai governance and the public, provided me with much food for thought. He encouraged me to talk with the head of Thammasat University's anthropological department. Unfortunately, the day before my visit to Thammasat University, the head of the anthropological department was arrested by the junta because he had partaken in a non-violent demonstration to promote civil rights.

Ethical concerns

As detailed above, Thailand is an authoritarian regime, and I was worried that my thesis would perhaps create problems for my interlocuters if deemed too critical of the regime. I followed guidance from the Data Protection Services, in which I agreed to follow terms in accordance to protecting my informants. All audio and visual recordings were transcribed and deleted after completion – all information, including media, was stored on a encrypted hard drive until I had no more use of it. I was rather fortunate that my field interest was public events, which gave me a

somewhat easy access to interlocuters. At every clean-up, I partook as 'just another' volunteer, picking trash and conversing with others – though certainly asking more question than the average volunteer – always informing that I was doing a research project and asking if they wanted to partake. The latter was always informed to anyone that I spoke with, and I would also ask if it was okay for them if I recorded our conversations when necessary. In addition, I carried with me business cards that I had help translate into Thai. The business card explained who I was, what institution I represented and about my research questions. It also included my Thai phone number and an email address if the person wanted more info, or to withdraw from the research. Nobody contacted me. Nevertheless, the most critical statements have been anonymized, except for those made in public appearances, such as on television or in speeches. Each person in this thesis has been anonymized and their names have been altered, except for ajahn Prinya, who's campaign was well known in Thai media at the time.

Ending remarks

It should be noted that my intention is not to portray the typologies of environmental engagement as bounded groups of engagement, as will be made evident by empirical examples, but rather as typologies that may merge, or transition from one typology to another. In Gluckman's assessment, social action and inherent norms and values vary in diverse situated circumstances and are far from homogeneous (Kapferer, 2005: 88). This serves as a reminder to not consider the typologies of engagement, nor their ambivalence, as bounded, and should not be regarded as a 'taxonomy' of social specific environmental engagements in Thailand, but rather as more fluid and overlapping concerns. Some of my informants would oscillate between types of engagement, others would exhibit less or more environmental engagement and level of ambivalence depending on situation and role. Furthermore, certain typologies, such as religious engagement, were enacted and conceptualized differently depending on scale, i.e., the social, temporal and cultural/conceptual scale. A general Thai Buddhist engaged in environmentalism due to religious devotion was not like that of a Buddhist abbot within the Sangha - although there were similarities (cf. chapter 5).

In addition, although some engagements confront the double bind less, or not at all, this does not necessarily suggest that people are *not* aware, or care, about it. As will be explored in this thesis,

the reality of the double bind would always simmer beneath the surface, but depending on social position, speaking in public, or with me, about the double bind was associated with a risk of gaining unwanted exposure and possible repercussion, sometimes generating an ambivalence that maybe was due to fear.

In brief, this thesis details five typologies of environmental engagement and how they address the double-bind. I aim to use social positions in conjunction with social, temporal and cultural/conceptual scales, in order to shed light on possible proper dynamics at play when performing environmentalism in Thailand. To further assess the events as a cultural practice, in particular the Rama 9 Village event, I will evaluate them as social practice reminiscent of a liminoid event to explore potentials for (perhaps unintended) social change – and hopefully not 'just' as an apt illustration or a slice of Thai life presented as a conundrum to be solved.

Chapter 2

The Fifth Tiger

" *Wake me up when Thaiism rings true (...) Assigning it a proper definition, Thaiism (or Thainess, mind you) should in fact be a positive word: it should mean our ability to adapt, to appropriate foreign elements and make it local without bastardising the original spirit. It should mean our ability to be excessively resilient, to weather the hardship through hard work and stubbornness, through smiles and if necessary, through luck. It should mean action and not rhetoric, truth and not lies, reality and not fiction. Wake me up then*." - Kong Rithdee, Editor of 'Life' in Bangkok Post (Rithdee, 2018).

Introduction

The national motto of Thailand – *nation, religion, and monarchy* - represents three interrelated social fields that have had an immense impact on the construction of an imagined community starting in the mid- 19th century. The motto constitutes a generalization of being *a* Thai and is further detailed within the nationalistic ideology of 'Thainess' – and its inherent meaning has been reshaped by shifting Thai rulers to conceptualize and legitimize hegemonic conceptions of class structures and 'Thai democracy'. There is a growing consensus within environmental politics literature that democracies and its characteristic values and institutions are currently the most efficient way to implement environmental policies. When compared to autocracies, studies have shown that democracies tend to cooperate with international environmental treaties, implement stricter environmental policies and reduce their carbon dioxide emission to a larger extent than its counterpart (Dryzek et al., 2003; Hay, 2002; Paehlke, 2005; Simpson, 2015). Studies indicate that the level of success relies on democratic key features, such as press freedom and freedom of expression, that in turn tolerate the media and civil organization's effort in increasing public awareness about environmental issues. Freedom of association and civil organization with fair elections allow green parties to form and partake in the political process - and civil organizations

to form and operate. This makes it possible for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) to participate in public life, conduct informal campaigns and to consult decision-makers. Free public expression leads to increased environmental consciousness that engenders the public to make environmentally friendly decisions, both in terms of individual and group activities. Furthermore, it may also help voters illuminate which political party that has the most efficient environmental policies, or not (Povitkina, 2018: 413). Democracies also display a higher commitment to follow the rule of law, thus tend to participate more frequently in international environmental agreements and comply with international treaties (Bättig and Bernauer, 2009; Weiss and Jacobsen, 1999).

On the other hand, democracies may experience populist and short-sighted movements that undermine efficient environmental protection policies. Environmental policies usually require commitments to reduce consumerism and other human habits that negatively affect the environment – therefore, politicians risk-taking an unpopular road in their bid for votes and financial donations. Large interest groups may compel politicians to respond to short-sighted interests that may go against environmental protection and the long-term benefit of the public (Bättig and Bernauer, 2009). Furthermore, corruption is prevalent among democratic countries as well (Povitkina, 2018).

Since the 1932 Revolution that abolished absolute monarchic rule, Thailand has so far struggled unsuccessfully in achieving a transition to democracy in terms of the abovementioned features. The level and institutional quality of democracy in Thailand today is questionable – its inherent meaning conflates deeply rooted social hegemonic constructs of military nationalism, Buddhism and traditional hierarchical belief systems – and has throughout Thailand's recent history been contested and scrutinized domestically and abroad. The result is what has been termed "Thai-democracy"; an amalgamation of authoritarianism and parliamentary system – in which has endured 19 coup d'états and 20 national constitutions since 1932. The monarchy has since the 1932 Revolution been subdued within the constitution and has until recently been promulgated as apolitical in public Thai discourse, nevertheless it has played a vital role not only in defining the characteristics of 'Thainess' but also in the ecological and spatial development of Thailand - affecting courses of environmental sustainability and awareness, accompanied with Thailand's

path towards democracy. The essence of 'Thainess' as this chapter will detail, is arguably an important constituent of level of ambivalence in environmental engagements, but also part of the problematic issue that Thai environmentalists encounter if wanting to address the double bind. In this chapter, I will provide a summarized historical account detailing the origin of the nationalistic ideology 'Thainess' and environmentalism in Thailand.

The Origin of 'Thainess' and 'Thai Democracy'

In the 12th to 17th century C.E., Southeast Asian kingdoms, (e.g., *Thai Sukhothai and Ayutthaya*), public legitimacy for rule was based on 2nd century C.E. mythic and legendary Indian ruler King Ashoka Maurya. King Ashoka converted to Buddhism and claimed to be enlightened and thus ruled in accordance with Buddhist principles. This narrative inspired Southeast-Asian kings securing a polity of the ruling king as a *bodhisattva* (a buddha-to-be) and by claiming to be a *cakkavattin*, a mythic Buddhist world ruler whom "(…) embodies the dhamma [the Buddhist Moral Law] and rules by it, and who personifies the ten royal virtues or *dasarajadhamma*: generosity, moral virtue, self-sacrifice, kindness, self-control, non-anger, nonviolence, patience, and adherence to the norm of righteousness" (Swearer 2010: 73). The king was "seen as the pivot of the polity and as the mediating link between the upper regions of the cosmos, composed of the gods and their heavens, and the lower plane of humans and lesser beings" (Tambiah, 2013: 505). This conception was common in all Thai and other kingdoms in the region – but at the onset of the 19th century, Western powers seeking to colonize the region forced the Thai ruling elite to confront new cosmologies and ideologies. Fearing colonization and eventual loss of ruling power, the Thai monarchy and aristocracy set out to find new ways in dealing with foreign threats, but also to administer the people in the wake of a growing Westernized influence. What is today considered as 'Thainess' ideology derives much of its content dating back to this time period – and was remedied by the elite as an ideology to control the narrative of *being a Thai* upon entering a new era of increased global influences.

The initial use of the "Thainess" ideology was an attempt to secure the traditional Thai polity in which social status was mainly determined by birth-right and supernatural influences based of Brahminic and Buddhist cosmology. As Western colonialism drew closer to Thailand, known as

Siam at the time, the Thai monarchy worked to assimilate Western derived political ideologies and scientific progress by an effort to reassign new definition to constituents of what was to be "the Thai way" – making new Western ideas such as *nationhood, state, personhood* and *sovereignty* fit with the existing traditional and hierarchic power structure without challenging it (Baker, 2010). The monarchy achieved in balancing a peaceful stance with the colonizers by adopting Western institutions and 'civilized' engagement, whilst maintaining the traditional power hierarchy domestically. Although Thailand was never formally colonized, it was what Michael Herzfeld terms as a "crypto-colonial" country that «claim to have avoided colonial domination but in reality are heavily dependent on, and indirectly but materially subject to, intrusive control by Western colonial powers (Herzfeld 2002: 900–1).

King Chulalongkorn (Rama 5 – r. 1886-1910) faced with the challenges detailed above, concentrated on defining "Thainess" in supplementing new meanings to royal rituals and processions, especially by reinforcing the monarchy's symbolic power to place the king in the center of what was to become of "Thainess" ideology. He selected artistic and cultural expressions that represented his definition of what should be considered *being Thai* – creating an image as the King of Progress. The symbolic representations made sure to sustain the monarchy at top of the hierarchical structure and that the king was to be regarded as the embodiment of the nation. It was professed that Siam needed unity around the middle path of the king, and a parliament would only lead to divisions and conflicts, thus "all the king's actions were devoted to improving the people's problems" (Baker 2010: 77). King Chulalongkorn enacted reforms that established a Western-inspired bureaucracy that would serve the purpose of ensuring national security and organize natural resources, although it was also made sure that it posed no threat to the monarchy's position (Sattayanurak, 2005).

The Thai Buddhist monastic order, known as the Sangha (from Pali, meaning "community") was in the late 19th century incorporated into the absolute kingship of king Chulalongkorn's rule. Benedict Anderson (1978) suggests the modernization schemes sought and implemented by the kings in the 19th and 20th century was inspired by colonial powers and mimicked domestically to gain absolute rule – thus incorporating the Sangha within the political order follows closely the mechanics of internal colonization and remains an important element of legacy of the last absolute

ruling monarchs before the 1932 revolution. According to Swearer (2010: 72), the royal institutions and monkhood were supportive of each other; the royal endorsement of the Buddhist monkhood, both in appraisal and economic support, ensured the monarch with backing from the monkhood.

Today, King Chulalongkorn is idolized among Thais for his diplomatic skills in dealing with the Western powers and his modernization schemes, such as educational reforms and new political institutions. His reign has gathered a cult-like following in modern day Thailand, and according to anthropologist Irene Stengs (2009), he has become a patron saint of the Thai middle class – and within Thai 'social imaginary', King Chulalongkorn is remembered as the 'Great King' who made Thailand a modern nation – as Stengs goes on to argue (ibid 2009: 6):

> Modernity is perceived as the outcome of King Chulalongkorn's plans for the kingdom, and as being in line with the king's desires, which makes modernity a genuine attribute of Thainess and takes the sting out of it (…) King Chulalongkorn cult heals the rupture by rendering 'being modern' as a Thai tradition.

In 1932, a coup d'état was organized by adjoining civilian and military forces that put an end to absolute kingship in which was followed by decades of turbulent transitions between civilian and military rule that still persist. The 'Thainess' ideology continued to function as a framework that would rationalize the ways of governance for any given ruler to come, as Thai historian Saichol Sattayanurak (2005: 30) elaborates:

> (…) the concept of "Thainess" as defined by the Thai intellectuals was designed in response to political problems that faced the ruling class in each era, as well as to use "Thainess" in the construction of the social and political structure desired by the political elite. This ideology has been so consistently cultivated in the society that it became a "system of truth" that is highly influential on the way Thais think, and constructed many important "truths" in Thai polity and since the 1950's it has entered the "mainstream way of thought" [which has] functioned as an obstacle to prevent Thai people from adapting themselves to the rapid changes in their society.

Since its conception in the mid-19th century, 'Thainess's core message has endured mostly unchanged, which Thai anthropologist Pinkaew Laungaramsri summarize as being a "collective identity (…) constituted by a shared commonality of language, religion and monarchy" and "to be loyal to [those] three principles/pillars" (2003: 157). In brief, the power of 'Thainess' ideology lies in the interplay of its components: the king embodies the nation and protects the faith, and the continued independence of the nation depends on the monarchy and Buddhist religion (Dressel, 2018: 271).[4] As such, "given its increasing prominence in the last four decades, it may now be considered official state ideology" (Nelson, 2012: 23). As of today, the Thai constitution today defines Thailand as a 'Thai democracy with the King as Head of State' (Section 2, Thai Constitution 2017). When the military party National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO) seized power by coup d'état in 2014, they published a list containing twelve values associated with being a patriotic Thai – known as the '12 Core Values'. The leader of NCPO, General Prayut, presented the values in his weekly televised program 'Return Happiness to the People', in which he addresses the public on a variety of topics – claiming that to build a strong nation, the Thai people had to have clearly defined core values to achieve this goal. The values serve as a fitting summation to what 'Thainess' is considered to be by the ruling elite in Thailand today – but likewise is shared by a large proportion of Thais. The values have been integrated into school curriculums and are recited by students each day in order to "instill the values (…) and to learn the 12 Thai values by heart and implement them in daily life" (NCPO, 2014). NCPO's '12 Core Values' connects the past with the symbology of both the monarchy and Buddhism, with the aim of "reflecting a view of an idealized past when Thais were said to be passive and orderly" (Kanchoochat and Hewison, 2016: 376).[5]

[4] All screenings at the cinema starts with the Royal Anthem, and everybody must stand up until it finishes. The lyrics: *We, servants of His great Majesty, prostrate our heart and head, to pay respect to the ruler, whose merits are boundless, outstanding in the great Chakri dynasty, the greatest of Siam, with great and lasting honor, (We are) secure and peaceful because of your royal rule, results of king cure (is) people in happiness and in peace, May it be that whatever you will, be done according to the hopes of your great heart as we wish (you) victory, hurrah!* (Nationalanthems, 2019)

[5] Every day, at 8 AM and 6 PM, the Thai national anthem plays on television, radio, schools and public places – all Thais stop what they are doing and stand still until it is finished. The lyrics: *Thailand embraces in its bosom all people of Thai blood. Every inch of Thailand belongs to the Thais. It has long maintained its sovereignty. Because the Thais have always been united. The Thai people are peace-loving, But they are no cowards at war. They shall allow no one to rob them of their independence, Nor shall they suffer tyranny. All Thais are ready to give up every drop of blood For the nation's safety, freedom and progress. Hurrah!* (Nationalanthems, 2019)

The 12 Core Values are:

1. Upholding the three main pillars: The Nation, the Religion, and the Monarchy.
2. Being honest, sacrificial and patient, with a positive attitude for the common good of the people.
3. Being grateful to the parents, guardians, and teachers.
4. Seeking knowledge and education directly and indirectly.
5. Treasuring cherished Thai traditions.
6. Maintaining morality, integrity, well-wishes upon others as well as being generous and sharing.
7. Understanding, learning the true essence of democratic ideals, with His Majesty the King as Head of State.
8. Maintaining discipline, respectful of laws and the elderly and seniority.
9. Being conscious and mindful of action in line with His Majesty's the King's royal statements.
10. Applying His Majesty the King's Sufficiency Economy, saving money for the time of need, being moderate with a surplus for sharing or expansion of business while having good immunity.
11. Maintaining both physical and mental health and unyielding to the dark forces of desires, having a sense of shame over guilt and sins in accordance with the religious principles.
12. Putting the public and national interest before personal interest.

Thus far, I have presented the notion of 'Thainess' as an ideology that serves to rationalize and underpin loyalty to any given leader and the nation in terms of values and norms – in turn constituting the hegemonic essence of rightful belongingness in Thailand. 'Thainess' constitutes an important facet of the proper dynamics at play in organizing and extension of the Thai state – and its impact on the agency of the population at large. Many Thais I encountered in the field spoke enthusiastically about King Bhumibol and his reign, whom is regarded as the pivot of 'Thainess'. King Bhumibol is known for taking part in the development of Thailand following the Second World War – whereas he repositioned the role of the monarchy into becoming yet again

an all-encompassing power base – reminiscent that of King Chulalongkorn's reign. To my informants, their admiration had its roots in King Bhumibol's engagement with ecological and rural development of Thailand and his emphasis on sustainable living, which was particularly visible in his economic ideology – The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy - that he presented in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 1997. The King's personal philosophy was frequently brought up by interlocuters as an example of sustainable living and mindset that was deemed aspirational, and some proposed it as a possible solution to the climate crisis itself. Nicholas Farrelly argues that 'Thainess' during the reign of King Bhumibol (Rama 9, r. 1950-2016) was further strengthened by his connections to the Thai ideal, in which is lived out "in food, language, etiquette, loyalty and cultural practice (…) Being Thai is to belong, in this interpretation, to a great and honorable civilization (…) although some fall out of favors; their Thainess can be questioned" (Farrelly, 2016: 332).

The Thai State and the Environment

As Eli Elinoff and Vanessa Lamb (2020) note there is not much environmental politics to speak of in Thailand until the 1970s – nevertheless, the environment served as an underpinning of what Vandergeest and Peluso define as "state territorialization"; in which the Siamese/Thai government exerted state control over space in three ways: first, through the expansion of civil administration in Siam/Thailand; second, through land titling; and, third, through the demarcation of large swaths of land, known as "political forests" (Vandergeest and Peluso 1999). Notably, the efforts against communist insurgency in Northern Thailand entailed land dispossessions and commoditization that still affect an uneven development, all taking place before the 1970s, but that would go on to serve as a fundamental to struggles taken up by environmental movements later on (Elinoff and Lamb 2020).

The era of rapid industrial and economic growth in Thailand, beginning in the 1950s, has been emblematic by military dictatorships and the insertion into a private capitalist marked that entailed a highly unregulated natural resource depletion, in particular, deforestation, and hydro-electrical projects aimed at producing power to an increasing 'brown' industry (Forsythe 2001). In 1956, General Sarit took control of Thailand and ousted the regime of general Pibulsonggram who had

up until then inflicted a major influence on the conduct of Thai people. General Sarit's mantra of "Work is money. Money is work. This brings happiness" (Bamrungsuak, 1988: 114), created the Upland Frontier, where regulations on mining and logging in Northern Thailand were removed and it is estimated that 30 family groups dominated in this era through their privileged access to capital and political favors (Baker 2010). The USA made Thailand their ally in the fight against the spread of communism and promoted 'development' that would be achieved through economic growth by ushering in private capitalism. With US funding, the military regime deployed new nation-state mechanisms that pushed even deeper into the social fabric of Thai society and "strengthened by the ideology of development and unconstrained democracy, businesses were able to exploit both people and natural resources on a new scale (…) subjecting the smallholder decisively to the market" (Baker 2010: 139). The Thai idea of 'nature' (*dharmmachart*) outside the confines of the *muang* (the city) was traditionally deemed as wild and untamed, filled with malevolent spirits and animals. As the frontier of development was to include this realm of uncertainty – the government introduced the idea of 'environment' *(sing waed lorm*). The 'environment', unlike 'nature', was something be managed and enjoyed, not feared (Elinoff and Lamb 2020).

The notion of 'progress' in the hands of the kings as was promoted in the 19th century, was replaced with ideas of 'development' in the hands of the military dictatorship. General Sarit proclaimed himself as a true *pho khun*, a paternalistic leader that echoed the early Sukhothai kings, distancing himself and the military from the political sphere by claiming that the main interest of politicians was only to win elections, and not providing for the Thai nation, only themselves (Sattayanurak, 2005). The sudden increase in revenue gained from their US ally created a strong elite of military leaders and private conglomerates and following the passing of general Sarit in 1963 the exploitation of ecological resources continued at a steady pace. Most notably was water management by constructing dams, and deforestation. The absence of regulations resulted in a 50 percent reduction in forest, and what is today considered the plains of Central Thailand were covered in trees up until this period of development. The American Era influenced the Thai urban middle-class as they mimicked the American consumer culture and the U.S. funded roads built to combat communist insurgency at the northern Thai borders, and this, along with the introduction of motorbikes, created an influx in rural migrant workers seeking work in Bangkok. With U.S.

funds, government offices moved into the upland hills, extending the reach of the state (Baker 2014).

Within Thai environmental policymaking and ecological development, Elinoff and Lamb (2020) argue that environmental struggles must be understood as unfolding within Thailand's socio-economic, political and spatial landscape. Struggles aimed at rights to forests, to fish, to land, or to clean water and city space also reflect struggles connected to more than *just* resources, as (…) they have also implied broader questions about the reach and limitations of political voices – those often poor, ethnically non-Thai, and more remote subjects making those political claims (ibid: 379).

In 1989, logging in the Upland Frontier was banned due to a massive mudslide resulting from deforestation that killed 251 people. Nevertheless, as Elinoff and Lamb (2020: 383) note, this did not constitute a 'green' turn in policymaking or a consensus of reaching a natural limit but served as an underpinning of the wilderness as a place where nobody lived – thus, forceful relocations of Thais commenced in order to 'protect' the environment, but resource depletion continued, this time around with less prying eyes and local objections (ibid). Elinoff and Lamb argue that the Nao Chaon dam proposed in 1966, located at the time within the heart of the Communist Party of Thailand controlled area, was a turning point for the Thai middle-class in their understanding of 'nature'. The demand made for an environmental impact assessment (EIA) by Nao Chaon protesters, that came to include not only locals and NGOs, but middle-class Thais from Bangkok as well, eventually led to the government abandoning the project altogether by the end of the 1980s. It constituted an epistemological shift in Thai environmentalism among many of the middle-class Bangkokians whereas urban life and nature where no longer conceptualized as two separate realms, but as interdependent. EIA's created a strategy that would serve later environmental movements as the basis for protest shifted to "a focus on knowledge which also appealed to and aligned with a broader public than earlier pro-poor struggles over land had accomplished" (Elinoff & Lamb 2020: 384). Although, as they assess: "it also cannot be understated how essential it was to broad-based mobilizing that this project did not bear a royal moniker" (ibid: 385). The strategy of EIA's was later on utilized during the construction of Pak Mun dam, where villagers in cooperation with NGOs and academics performed "Villager Research" to assess the level of

impact the dam would have on livelihoods, recasting future movements as " not only concerned over fish and rivers for their conservation value but as one about livelihoods lost by residents" (Elinoff & Lamb 2020: 385).

The Rain Making King

When King Bhumibol ascended the throne in 1950, Thailand had had a 16-year long hiatus from a reigning king living in the country. General Sarit understood the importance of linking his governance with the symbolic value of the monarchy – an attempt at making his dictatorship in line with being separate from the 'corrupted' and 'self-serving' realm of politicians. An important outcome of this was the abolishment of the post-1932 law stating that the king was *not* free to travel the country as the early kings of the Chakri lineage had done. The new law made it possible for King Bhumibol to travel outside Bangkok to meet with the Thai people. In the time to follow, King Bhumibol would consolidate and uplift the royal power to overcome the military, both during and after the Cold War period (Wong, 2018).

The old traditional order of loyalty based on birthright and associations that linked the king with Buddhistic formulations of 'divine kingship' was restored. This revival was in large parts accomplished with rebranding the king as the 'developer king', in which his extent of authority, legitimacy, and power derived from the development and control of water management (Blake, 2015) Likewise, the King's actions were to be judged as 'dislodged from the political sphere, instead considered as 'quasi-divine figure that embodies virtues purportedly not found in the corrupt world of Thailand's participatory politics' (Fong, 2009: 673).

The definition of a 'monarch' was changed to 'father of the nation' – in turn giving rise to the motto "doing good for father" – a statement I often heard when questioning interlocutors about their motivation in joining clean-up events. This had an impact especially on the middle class, which deemed the monarchy as the protector of the people, thus "the middle class had to protect the 'democratic system with the king as head of state' to rely on royal influence in various matters, most especially in protecting the Thai nation from national leaders who lacked the virtue of Thai-style leadership" (Sattayanurak 2019: 246). King Bhumibol's path towards becoming the

'Developer King' began during the Cold War Era when he traveled from Bangkok and up north to the borders where the fight against communist insurgency was taking place. General Sarit's military regime feared that communism would influence the poor rural communities and inspire a revolt, and their tactics in securing their preferred ideology were made with brute force that terrorized and inflicted long-lasting damage on communities (Schaffar 2018: 390). King Bhumibol approached this matter differently by deploying a soft power tactic; his measures included developing irrigation systems and rural infrastructure, new land reforms and rural banking systems to help poverty-stricken farming communities in developing a rural economy. By addressing the problems of peasant poverty and lack of development, he "won the hearts and minds of the rural populations (…) [he] reconfigured a positive image of the Thai monarchy and re-installed the economic, political and cultural influences into the countryside" (Wong, 2018: 113). His willingness to go along with the military and U.S. aided communist counterinsurgency created an image of a hardworking king "who identified with the sufferings and problems of the poor" (ibid).

The outcome of his experience from visiting the rural districts entailed the 'Royally-Initiated Projects' (*khrong-gan an-nuang maa jaak praracha-damree*). Among the most famous projects was the construction of six dams with corresponding hydropower plants. But perhaps his most visible construction is the Chaipattana low-speed aerator, first patented in 1993 making it the first patent ever given to a king. The rotary wheel is designed to increase the level of oxygen in water, in turn stimulating fish growth. On my travels in Thailand, and at my field site in Rama 9 village in Bangkok, this contraption was not an uncommon sight. Besides initiating agricultural and hydro projects, one solidified the quasi-divine interpretation of the king; artificial rain to alleviate the impacts of drought. In 1975 this technique was administered through the establishment of the 'Royal Rain-making office'. The rainmaking project building on popular Thai mythology is argued to have been "an indispensable device used by state propagandists in enabling a royally-legitimated, state-led dominance over almost the entire hydrological cycle" that along with other hydro related inventions and construction of a flood wall to protect the city of Bangkok "are routinely outlined in press articles and media reports as evidence of [the King's] superior skills in water management" (Blake, 2015: 656-657).

One recent example is the use of artificial rainmaking to mitigate the air pollution caused by the PM2.5 fine dust in Bangkok (Bangkok Post, 2019). Blake further argues that the king's involvement in hydrological development projects demonstrates that the king was far from 'above politics', making himself into a chief strategist and that water "provides a valuable linkage theme between ancient and modern forms of kingship, and has been extensively exploited through various material and symbolic means to increase the aura of symbolic royal authority over socio-nature (…)" (Blake, 2015: 664).

The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy

In the aftermath of the financial crisis in 1997 that originated in Thailand and eventually swept across Asia – effectively ending two decades of exponential economic growth – put an end to the optimistic notion of Thailand as the Fifth Asian Tiger Economy. Accordingly, King Bhumibol reintroduced his Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP). It is divided into three essentials: First; household's land should be divided into 30-30-30-10 – 30 percent for rice, 30 percent for vegetable and cash crops, 30 percent for a fishpond, and 10 percent for housing. Secondly, local cooperatives should be formed to pool resources. Thirdly; its aim should be to elevate these cooperatives to a national, and eventually, global scale (Schaffar, 2018: 393). According to King Bhumibol, three key elements were integral to its level of success; moderation, reasonableness, and self-immunity. These were, as the King Bhumibol exclaimed, interconnected and interdependent.

Moderation referred to the middle path, a Buddhist conception of not living in the extremes, but rather in the middle. To achieve success in moderation, it was crucial to attain a level of reasonableness through accumulated knowledge and experience, paired with analytical capability, self-awareness, foresight, compassion, and empathy. The combination of these 'insights' would create an awareness of the consequences of your actions, not only on yourself but others as well. The last principle, self-immunity, capsulated the notion of self-reliance as coping with events that are unpredictable or uncontrollable. In addition, knowledge and morality was a central theme. Knowledge was considered as being capable to accumulate knowledge and extracting its meaning and acting on it. Lastly, morality was considered to embody integrity, trustworthiness, ethical behavior, honesty, perseverance, and a readiness to work hard (Mongsawad, 2010: 128). Thus,

'practicing these three principles with the two underlying conditions, people would be able to live securely in harmony in a sustainable society and environment' (ibid).

Since its inception, SEP has been promoted and sustained in an array of different governmental and public projects, although it is argued that the eagerness of associating projects with SEP has been counterproductive. In short, as institutions and private companies adopt and promote their willingness to adopt SEP into their business strategy, any critique of their approach could result in being interpreted as a critique *against* the essence of SEP, hence the late King himself. It is a road not taken by many Thais. The SEP, according to Schaffer (2018), is a local Thai alternative development paradigm and has played a central role in Thai political discussion following the 1997 financial crisis – but as Schaffer (ibid: 387) continue "the conflict between different visions of development was drawn into an intra-elite struggle, in the course of which formerly emancipatory development alternatives were co-opted into a highly authoritarian project" and serves today as one of the ideological foundations of the military regime.

'Good men' and the 'smooth calm'

Anthropologist Niels Mulder (1996) identifies Buddhism as a defining factor of what constitutes the essence of 'good men' virtues. Thai children learn from an early age to follow Buddhist standards (i.e. the Eightfold Path) taught in school, at home, and in the monastery. The goal is to achieve enlightenment and escape rebirth, i.e. worldly suffering. As the King (especially King Bhumibol) is regarded as a bodhisattva, thus close to full enlightenment, he is thus regarded as the pivot of 'Thainess' – therefore military leaders and politicians strive to be regarded as 'good men' by associating themselves with the virtues vested in the monarchy, whereas their demeanor is excused as long as their 'flawless' character is upheld – avoiding disturbance of the 'smooth calm'. In Peter Jackson's *The Thai Regime of Images* (2004) he argues that discourse and practice in Thailand differ greatly between the public and private sphere – at times even contradicting each other in plain sight.

Peter Jackson argue that the modus operandi for Thai regimes has its roots in Northern-Thai traditional rituals and myths, that on the one hand rituals draws a clear cut difference between categories, whilst the myths provide an arena for fusion and overcoming the dichotomies by creating an image of a dialectic relationship between all categories. Thus, the current "regime of images is marked by an official concern with policing the context, whether public or private, in which action takes place or a statement is made rather than enforcing universal norms of acceptable behavior and speech" (Jackson 2004: 183). A statement or representation that is considered as excessive and is disrupting the 'smooth calm' (*khwam sa ngop ria pro*) of social life is, according to Jackson, "silenced or made invisible by the deployment of the full, and at times extra-judicial, power of the state" – but although it may be perceived as a belief system riddled with contradictions – it is more fruitful to view Thailand as a "systematically ordered form of power-knowledge in which distinctive local forms of power have equally distinctive epistemological effects (…) emerging from historically contingent power relations, this regime is neither static nor 'traditional', but rather is a contested and dynamic system of power/knowledge" (Jackson 2004: 184).

The public imagery of 'smooth calm' is vested in the etymological components of *phap-phoot* and *phap-lak* – the first means appearance-utterance and is 'an expression that leads one to see a mental image' (Anon. 1988: 62 cited in Jackson 2004: 186). Its usage is meant to incorporate both visual representations as well as forms of spoken and written discourse to describe 'the performative effect of public utterances and actions as well as representations of speech and action in media such as cinema, television, radio, and the press' (Jackson 2004: 186). *Phap-lak* is a more recent phrase, meaning appearance-characteristic and is best compared with the Western equivalent of 'public image', together they represent the boundaries between what is accepted as 'surface' material, and what is best kept hidden beneath (Jackson 2004: 186):

> The socio-cultural nuances of both *phap-phot* and *phap-lak* are made clear in their common association with verbs denoting to "build", "to construct", "to enhance", "to lose", and "to destroy". In modern Thai usage, "images" are "built" (*sang phap-phot*) and "constructed" (*sang-phap-lak*). They can be "enhanced" and "promoted" (*serm phap-phot*), and they are at risk of being "damaged" (*sia phap-phot*) or even "destroyed" (*thamlai phap-lak*). These

> expressions draw on and develop older notions of "face" (*na*) and "reputation" (*cheu-siang*), and reflect a pervasive cultural concern with "constructing positive images" (*sang phap-phot thi di*) and avoiding damage to reputation. In the context of the regime of state power that polices public actions and utterances, the "images" of *phap-phot* and *phap-lak* denote those performances, representations, and discursive forms that it is safe to proclaim or present in public.

In terms of contemporary Thai governance, much of its power derives from knowledge based upon an adaption of logics that once supported a galactic polity centered on the rule of absolute kingship - and by reimagining its structure to support new forms of governance and spatiality (Anderson 1991, Tambiah 2013, Van Roy 1988, Winichakul 1994). Thailand as a nation and its inherent nationalism is imagined and propagated by the state likened that of Benedict Anderson's notion of cultural memories – 'memories' of certain types that have changed through time and become historical – evoking an emotional response among the population and having a deep-seated legitimacy (Anderson 1991). Perhaps the most prominent cultural memory in Thailand is found within the imagined community construed as held together by "Thainess", in which aim to serve as a guiding mantra of accepted Thai behavior.

Political scientist Duncan McCargo defines Thai hegemonic rule as a monarchical network governance, or, as network monarchy (Mccargo, 2006). The network monarchy "is a form of semi-monarchical rule, making it inherently illiberal because it advocates reliance on 'good men', and the marginalization of formal political institutions or procedures (…) the network having close ties with conservatism and rightist groups" (McCargo, 2005: 501). McCargo argues that since the 1970s and until the populist challenge from Shinawatra starting in the '90s, the political structure in Thailand was a network consisting of the elite classes working with the King himself. Within this monarchy network, power and influence were wielded in the direction of a conservative and traditionalistic governance. Due to a blossoming of a liberal political development in the '90s, the monarchy network was forced to work with a renewed parliament, which eventually exposed the King as a political player when the network monarchy removed from power the populist prime minister Thaksin, who had won the votes and trust of the north-east region of Thailand by

promising increased payments for rice crops and a structural change to the royally owned rice mill industry (Wong, 2018).

Kanchoochat and Hewison (2016) scrutinize the monarchy network theory in that it provides insufficient information due to its narrow focus on the elite, and that "with its emphasis on a particular elite structure, is insufficient for delineating the manifold sites of political contestation that are critical for understanding the nature of the country's politics and its trajectory" (Knachoochat and Hewsion, 2016: 378). Indeed, the times are changing in Thailand. Although the royal family and the military has been in a beneficial partnership for decades, General Prayut is facing resentment among Thais that demands more democratic governance. Furthermore; the new King, Maha Vajiralongkorn (Rama 10, r. 2016 -), is facing his own difficulties in establishing the same level of loyalty and admiration among Thais. It seems as if a return to a more traditional polity is considered a remedy among the military, the royal family and its royalist, as showcased in 2019 when the annual reshuffling of military leadership in all branches of the armed forces entailed inclusion of generals with arch-royalism that will help to further entrench royal absolutism over Thailand's armed forces[6] (Chambers, 2019).

Ending remarks

In this chapter, I have shed light on just a fraction of Thailand's sociopolitical history, ecological development and environmentalism. The ideology of 'Thainess' has been central in defining Thai democracy and Thai conduct that still persists. What is considered efficient Thai governance and public consent rely on conditions founded in 'Thainess', as Sattayanurak points to, that "today, any 'Thai-style ruler' who wields absolute power but demonstrates that he is generous to the public, is loyal to the royal institution, and has close ties to popular monks (to prove his adherence to Buddhism) is still an ideal ruler in the minds of most Thais" (Sattayanurak 2007: 30). Therefore, adhering to keeping up the 'smooth calm' of surface performance, gives room for increased public

[6] King Maha Vajiralongkorn has of 2019 placed all armed forces outside the city limit of Bangkok, only keeping his utmost loyal soldiers close to the palace. It serves as a reminder that nothing is a given in Thailand's shifting sociopolitical landscape.

forgiveness with regards to private dealings that is deemed paradoxical (e.g., living a luxurious life whilst promoting sustainable and modest living).

The Thai state as a social field is a combination of several social fields; the military, civilian bureaucrats and politicians, the monarchy and the Sangha. Each a dominating social field in their own right, but nevertheless (for the time being) dependent on each other to present the Thai nation as an aggregate whole, by all claiming to be essential in reproducing the nation of Thailand and being 'guardians' of Thai traditions – even in practice by appealing to be 'good men'. Reidar Grønhaug suggests four properties that constitutes the state as social field (Grønhaug, 1974; Toje and Ødegaard, 2010):

1. The state can be understood as a regulated field in terms of laws and officials.
2. The state can be viewed as a field in which symbols are produced and as a certification body, with symbols that claim legitimacy.
3. The State can be considered as a field whereas within the production and circulation of social persons takes place and as a canalization of social and geographical mobility.
4. The State can be viewed as a field with spatial and temporal dimensions, and a product of cultural history.

In terms of laws and officials, Thailand is an authoritarian regime with weak democratic institutions plagued with corruption. Freedom of speech and assembly is subdued by strong censorship and social critics may risk facing several years in prison if they are deemed as 'unThai'. Arguably, the symbols that claim legitimacy are founded in the virtues associated with the monarchy and Theravada Buddhism – but also as manifested in Thais by supposedly staying true to 'Thainess', making Thailand the 'land of smiles'. 'Thainess' has been essential in defining 'insiders' and 'outsiders', both internationally and domestically, and has thus played a part in rationalizing social stratification and claims to space – the centerpiece of the rationale being an adherence to an idealized traditional past. Although 'Thainess' and Thai leadership are very much ingrained in the social corpus of most Thais, it is frequently brought to the surface as a critique when the level of 'un-Thainess' becomes unbearable. As Jackson exclaims, "there are areas of social life where the logic of truth dominates the logic of images and where a significant gap between the field of representation and the domain of practice is not tolerated" (Jackson 2004:

193). One such area is the defrocking of monks who have violated the monastic code of ethical conduct and they are often exposed in public. Media's increased scrutinization of monastic ethical violations and some of the community role of monks now handled by governmental and non-governmental organizations is in part the reason that the role of the Sangha has been condensed to deal with ceremonies and traditions (Wattana 2017). As to another example, the lifestyle of the new King Maha Vajiralongkorn is scrutinized by many Thais as being the opposite of how his father composed himself – that being the opposite of 'Thainess'. When I asked people how they could scrutinize the monarchy, I was told that one popular trend was to use the comment section beneath online news articles about the new king. Instead of writing a critique, they would instead write about unrelated topics, such as what they planned to have for dinner that day, movie recommendations, the weather, and so on – making it known that they didn't care much about the new king.

The military regime acting as the political party National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO) has since 2014 constrained sustainable development and environmentalism. In 2015, the NCPO enacted the Martial Law Act of 1914, and along with it, implemented section 44 of the 2014 constitution, which entailed strict censorship and restrictions on the freedom of expression. To further entrench the voice and mobility of NGOs and CSOs, they also introduced Strategy Legality Against Public Participation (SLAPP) – combined, Proposition 44 and SLAPP gave the NCPO absolute power in suppressing and removing any critical adversaries they deemed troublesome. Furthermore, the 1992 National Environmental Quality Promotion and Protection Act, ratified during one of the brief periods of "democracy" in Thailand, in which private and government projects had to undergo an EIA before construction commenced, was in 2016 reduced by NCPO to *not* include any project that was taking place within the New Special Economic Zones. This includes mining projects, coal, and nuclear power plants, water treatment plants, garbage disposal, and collection plants, recycling plants and gas processing plants (Manorom 2019: 374). In effect, private companies can begin construction before an EIA is approved, and although the bill was met with fierce rejections by NGOs and CSOs, the government still argues that economic growth is impossible if one must wait at each turn for an EIA (ibid). I visited a landfill in Thailand with some of my informants coming along. We were treated with a power-point presentation by the owners that operated the landfill on a government contract. We asked if the local community had

raised any objections, as we had been told that many locals feared the water quality was becoming worse and did not trust the landfill own environmental assessment impact. The owner replied with a stern facial: “We are lucky because we have proposition 44 to solve the problem. So, people can’t protest anything.” Furthermore, it is argued that the current regime has combined the ideas of Sufficiency Economy, the Thai-Buddhist inspired alternative development concept, and the commitment to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for their legitimization (Schaffar, 2018: 408) – thus “Thailand today constitutes an example where a regime reminiscent of the fascist regimes in Europe in the 1930s is founded internally on a post-development inspired alternative model, and externally on the commitments to SDGs” (ibid).

In Thailand, the practice and effects of ‘Thainess’ as promoted by the elite, in particular the military and the monarchy, seems to function as a proper dynamic that is “conditioning the lives of individuals, whatever the subjective hopes and strategies of these individuals may be” (Grønhaug 1974: 81). Therefore, the nationalistic ideology of ‘Thainess’ and its elitist connections should be kept in mind when observing an environmentalism that deals with structural negligence, as ‘Thainess’ contains elements of possible unrealized potential, such as promoting environmentalism in terms of ‘Thainess’ virtues, but also repercussion if one is considered to disturb the ‘smooth calm’ – not only from the government, but Thais as well. It makes ‘Thainess’ a crucial part of the double bind, being that successful environmental campaigns must include a systemic critique as well in order to achieve success.

Chapter 3

Land of Waste

In the past, the waterways were our social life. When I was young, the river was where everything took place; transport, shopping, livelihoods, not to mention bathing and playing around. But look at it today, Kuhn Daniel; Thais have forgotten this. The houses no longer face the rivers, but the roads. It has turned into a sewer. And if it remains a sewer, they will treat it as such.

- An informant sharing his distress.

Introduction

Water is an essential part of Thailand. Natural waterways cut throughout the country and have been a decisive factor in Thai livelihood and development. River confluences have been strategic powerbases for many kingdoms in Thai history up until recent day, the main river and its tributaries connecting people through trade and transportation, and perhaps most importantly, by irrigating the rice fields that brand Thailand as the second-largest exporter of rice in the world. Water plays a fundamental role in mythmaking, belief systems and in superstition – and is the central component in two of the most celebrated festivals in Thailand; Songkran and Loi Krathong. Tourists are tempted by the seemingly countless islands, beaches, and rich ocean life – making tourism one of the most significant contributions to their economy, with 35 million tourists visiting in 2018, a new record in tourist arrivals (Bangkok Post, 2019).

The state of water quality in Thailand today is perilous – the beaches, rivers, and canals overflow with garbage, making Thailand the 6th highest contributor to marine waste pollution in the world. The festivals meant to honor water has become a threat to the environment itself. Decades of rapid economic development have led to increased consumerism that is unmatched by a lacking

infrastructure, not only in terms of waste management but also in the minds of the consumers themselves. Between 1960 and 1990, the population of Thailand almost doubled; from 26.3 million to 54 million inhabitants. Today, the population is close to 70 million people, with Bangkok accounting for 8.2 million, although the number fluctuates.

Alongside the population growth, the emergence of a middle-class, and the introduction of new commodities have made a serious contribution to the increasing amount of trash produced not only in Bangkok but Thailand in general. The Pollution Control Department (PCD), a Thai government agency vested with the task of monitoring the degree of pollution in Thailand and its impact on society and the environment, estimated that each Thai individual on an average per day produced about 1.1 kg of waste in 2018. In Bangkok, this accounts for 10.500 tons of municipal solid waste (MSW) being produced each day, a total number of 4.85 million tons of generated solid waste in 2018. Only 0.92 million tons were recycled.

The remaining 3.93 million tons MSW were disposed in open landfills in (1) Kamphaeng Saen district, Nakhon Pathom province, (2) Phanom Sarakham district, Chachoengsao province and incinerators at the solid waste collecting center in (3) Nhong Khaem, Bangkok (PCD Report 2019: 37). Nationwide, the total amount of MSW produced in 2018 is estimated at 27.8 million tons, an increase of 1.64% compared to 2017, which the department emphasizes is due to expanding urban communities and lifestyle changes from the shift from an agricultural to urban society (PCD Rapport 2019: 36).

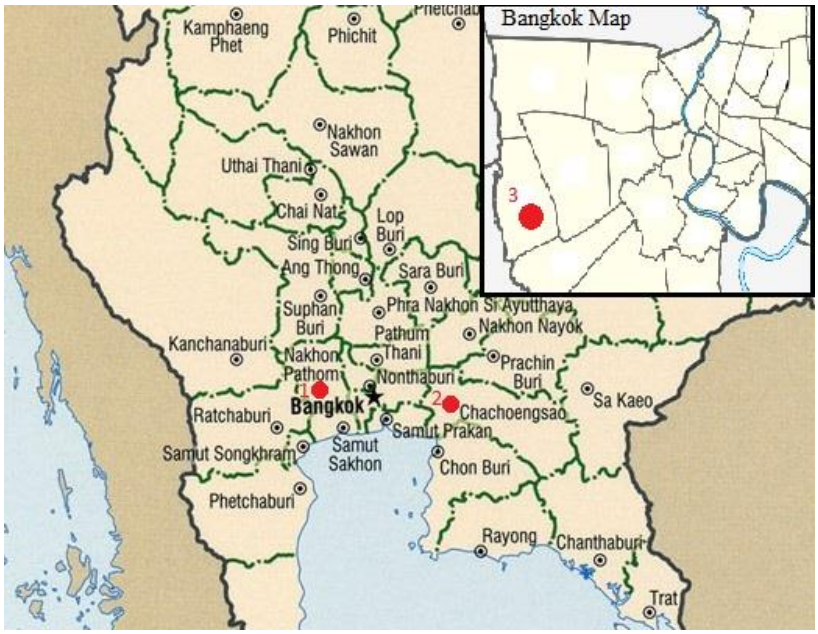

Figure 4 - MSW Disposal Sites for Bangkok

National waste management is organized by the Royal Thai Government and local administrative organizations are tasked with collecting and processing the waste. The waste is divided among the

4894 solid waste disposal centers countrywide. However, 2881 local administrative organizations do not have a solid waste management system and need to dispose of their waste in their areas by constructing their own landfill. Currently, there are no laws requiring an environmental impact assessment (EIA) before construction. In 2018, only 10.88 million tons of MSW were disposed of appropriately, whereas the remainder of MSW was disposed of in unauthorized open landfills, simply dumped into the waters or left behind at any given location that suited the disposer. Seasonal flooding further increases the amount of MSW ending up in the rivers, thus entering the ocean. The illegal dumping of MSW has had a significant impact on the environment, and especially the pollution of waterways and the world oceans. During my year in Bangkok, a short-finn pilot whale was found stranded on the beach in Klong Na Tub, in the Songkla province. The whale, according to Thai scientists upon inspecting the content of its stomach, had succumbed due to eating mostly plastic bags. It was believed it mistook the plastic bags for jellyfish. This triggered a nationwide debate about the state of marine pollution in Thailand (Pakkawan, 2018).

In 2015, the non-profit environmental advocacy group Ocean Conservancy (OC) published their report on the state of global marine plastic pollution. They concluded that five countries were responsible for most of the plastic-waste leakage into the world oceans; these were in descending order: China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam – and together they were responsible for approximately 60 percent of total plastic-waste leakage into the oceans. OC attributes these high levels of plastic-waste to the respective countries' historically recent increase in GDP, reduced poverty, and improved quality of life – further emphasizing that increased economic power has created an explosion in demand for consumer products whilst this increase in consumption has not been met with a commensurate waste-management infrastructure. They estimate that if this scenario continues in a business-as-usual fashion, the quantity of plastic in the ocean will nearly double to 250 million metric tons by 2025 (Conservancy Group Report 2015).

It seems safe to say that one of the most significant battles against plastic-waste leakage into the oceans is to be fought in Asia – and if won, will make an important contribution in reducing the amount of marine pollution. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the scope of waste leakage and environmental policies in Thailand during my fieldwork in 2018.

What is waste?

Certainly, what constitutes as waste for one person, may very well be regarded as a treasure by others. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2011) reasons there is no such thing as 'waste', but rather resources that are astray, and drawing on Mary Douglas's 'matter out of place', he argues it is rather a question of *context* (Eriksen 2011: 20). In her *Challenges for Sustainable Solid Waste Management: Lessons from Thailand* (2018), Dr. Chanathip Pharino defines 'waste' as "any substance or object which the holder discards, or intends or is required, to discard" (ibid: 3). Pharino argues that MSW can be broken into the following categories (Pharino, 2018: 3):

- Waste produced from residential and industrial (non-process waste), commercial and institutional sources apart from hazardous and universal waste, construction and demolition waste, and liquid waste (water, wastewater, industrial processes).

- Waste produced by households, businesses, and institutions, frequently linked to consumption, and under the responsibility of municipalities including waste originating from economic activity and public agencies (i.e., residents, shops, restaurants, schools, etc.).

- Waste generated by industrial activity, frequently linked directly to the production or occurring at the end of life of certain products. There are special categories, such as waste from the construction and demolition sector, mining activity, agricultural activity, and so on.

When I ventured onto the streets and canals with Trash Hero, with other environmentalists, or on my own to pick trash, all the above-mentioned sources were well represented in our findings –

once even a large bag of blood originating from a hospital was found[7], in addition to larger objects such as mattresses and car tires. The most common trash found was plastic bags/wrapping, styrofoam containers and plastic bottles and bottle caps, as PCD also points out in their annual report on the state of marine pollution in Thailand (PCD, 2019: 38):

> In 2018, Thailand produced 27.8 million tons of solid waste – of which 2 million tons is municipal plastic waste. Only 500 000 tons is qualified for recycling, most of which are plastic bottles, and of the remaining 1.5 million tons of plastic waste, 1.2 million tons are plastic bags. The remaining tons consist of other plastic garbage, such as cups, boxes, trays, bottles, and bottles with lids.

PCD notes that in 2018, 7.5 million tons of solid waste was disposed of inappropriately, such as by open dump or open burning in waste disposal sites, illegal dumping in public areas and into water sources.

The 3R's

Four ongoing national plans have been implemented in Thailand to address MSW pollution, known under its umbrella term as The National 3R Strategic Plan. Prime minister Prayut has vested the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to organize campaign and solutions to marine waste leakage. The strategic plan includes:

(1) Government Green Procurement Program (2) The National Environmental Basic Plan (2017-2021) (3) National Solid Waste Management Master Plan (2016-2021) and (4) Plastic Debris Management Plan (2017-2021).

[7] As an environmentalist was trying to handle the bag, he accidently dropped it and it exploded as it hit the ground, resulting in a large puddle of blood. When I came over to have a look, he was busy trying to clean up the blood, a messy ordeal in which most of the other environmentalists stayed clear of, including myself. PCD estimated that in 2018 infectious waste originating from hospitals amounted to 55.497 tons, in which 89.9% was disposed of properly. The bag of blood was a stark reminder of the remaining percent (PCD 2019: 41).

The plans include several approaches; promotion and introduction of eco-packaging and eco-friendly plastic substitution, development of material flow analysis for plastic containers and packaging inventory, implementation of the 3R's (reduce-reuse-recycle) strategy for plastic debris management, and promotion of education for relevant stakeholders in the fields of plastic and its alternative materials. Furthermore; to create more effective plastic management by implementing legislation or revise the laws to improve efficiency, thus reducing the amount of plastic waste (Wichaiutcha and Chavalparit, 2018). During the Ninth Regional 3R Forum in Asia and the Pacific organized in Hanoi, Vietnam in March 2019 – Thailand partook with its strategy named "3R's as a way for moving towards sufficiency economy – Implications for SDGs". A reason stated as the foremost contributing factor in low numbers related to recycling is low participation in households, i.e. waste sorting at home (Country 3R Progress Report 2019). One of the issues related to MSW not being incinerated is due to households not separating food waste, which makes the other solid wastes moist and harder to incinerate, and therefore it is disposed of in landfills.

On July 17, 2018, the government initiated the project 'Do the Good Activities With Your Heart, Reduce Danger to Environment' (*Tum Kwam Dee Duay Hua Jai, Lhod Phai Sing Waed Lom).* The aim was to lead by example. The project included national parks and zoo areas, and by encouraging the private and public sector to act as role models. This entailed reducing and separating waste at its source, reducing plastic bags for both the producer and consumers and replacing the food containers made from foam with metal meal boxes. Among the initiatives made by the private sector was campaigning where shops introduced 'no plastic bag'-day in the major shopping departments, e.g., Tesco Lotus, 7-11 and even in the more traditional food markets (PCD, 2019: 42).

Although scrutinized by Thai NGOs as an attempt at greenwashing, as it was only one day each month, the campaigns had an effect and 7-11 and others reported a decrease in the use of plastic bags. 7-11 reported after three months that they had accumulated more than 237 million unused plastic bags (Thaiger, 2019). However, they would not disclose how many *were* handed out during the campaign. One informant made a short video of himself going to a 7-11 store and he intended to promote the 'no plastic bag'-day by posting it to his social media profiles. However, he was surprised upon entering his local 7-11 in Bangkok to see that business was as usual, and bags were handed out without question. He confronted the cashiers in a polite manner to ask why they were not doing the promoted campaign, to which they replied that the customer wanted bags. Then he uploaded the video to 7-11 Thailand's Facebook profile asking them as well. In the comments section beneath the video, my informant was praised by other Thais for his efforts to confront 7-11. Then, midway, the comments section turned against him, questioning why he would harass the hardworking cashiers, and whether he was 'Thai enough', seemingly making accusations that he was badmouthing Thailand. My informant referred to these posters as the '7-11 Facebook Squad' paid by 7-11 to turn the narrative of the comments section in favor of 7-11.

Figure 5 - Individual wrapped bananas in 7-11.

In conversation with Greenpeace Thailand, I was told that 7-11 removed their logo from plastic straws, and in Greenpeace's opinion, that was to obscure the origin of plastic straws scattered in the environment – but also to make Greenpeace yearly 'brand audit' more difficult. The 'brand audit' is collection of data of which brands that was found during clean-ups and is published online in an attempt to pressure the corporates to change their policies and to replace their plastic packing.

Informal waste pickers

Even though the amount of MSW produced in 2018 increased compared to 2017, PCD notes that solid waste management has shown improvements in 2018 – more waste is sorted at its source and is re-utilized, totaling at 9.6 million tons, 13% increase from 2017. They attribute the increase directly to the 3 R's-policy. The most common re-utilization is recycling and making natural fertilizer. Concerning plastic, the re-utilization is much lower – this is in part due to its low recycling rate price, whereas the distance to the closest recycling location acts as a variable in cost and payment. As an example: after a clean-up with Trash Hero, the plastic bottles found were brought to a privately-owned scrap dealer who acts as a middle-man, collecting recyclable goods, mostly consisting of plastic bottles and paper, but also glass. The price offered per kilo unsorted plastic was 7 Thai Baht (THB) (0.7 USD) and per kilo glass; 0.5 TBH (0.016 USD). The price fluctuates according to the distance to the closest recycling plant. Speaking with the owner, I asked if he had noticed an increase in the willingness to recycle among Thais. He said no – but he did notice that it increased in conjunction with the economy; during prosperous times there was much less business compared to when the economy was in a free-fall.

For many Thais, collecting recyclable goods is an important source of income – perhaps most so for the urban poor surviving as informal waste-pickers. According to *From Waste to Resource: World Waste Survey 2009* (Chalmin et al., 2009), in which the impact of informal waste pickers in developing countries was analyzed – waste management is mostly the responsibility of municipalities. Moreover, a trending feature of increasing budget trimming makes the informal waste-pickers essential in handling waste – given their contribution to sorting and selling their findings to scrap dealers – and in some instances, municipalities depend on the informal sector's efforts. The downside, as the survey emphasizes, is the related health-concerns working with waste, as no benefits or regulations protect the informal waste pickers. In addition, I spoke with garbage truck drivers, as I observed they always picked valuable recyclable items to keep to themselves. The drivers claimed they could sometimes earn up to an additional twenty thousand Thai baht (about 640 USD) each month. Which made it a highly sought-after job for people with low education.

Interestingly, informal waste pickers have become a part of Thai environmental discourse and effort, whereby they may be viewed by some as contributing to the environmental movement. This observation was touched upon many times by my informants; sometimes as a reflection on their efforts being that it was considered as perhaps the most demeaning action possible, but at the same time, the efforts of informal waste-pickers were deemed as an important contribution to the agenda of environmentalism. This is in stark contrast to how many Thais view the poor as victims of their actions, i.e., their current situation is due to negative karma accumulated in their past life.

Chapter 4

We Clean - We Educate - We change

I am very passionate about the ocean, so whatever I am doing, I am doing it for my love of the ocean. In my lifetime, before I die, one thing I want to see happen, is to see the river near my house having clear water. Then I can die peacefully and happy.

- Ananda, from my fieldnotes.

Introduction

This chapter will present two different locations where the volunteer organization Trash Hero Bangkok arranged clean-ups. The first is at Taco Lake in the suburban district Bang Phli Yai outside Bangkok where most weekly clean-ups took place. The other location is in Rama 9 Village (*Bueng Rama 9*), an urban community in the center of Bangkok, where my informant Ananda was an influential organizer.

Trash Hero Bangkok

Trash Hero Bangkok is a local chapter that is part of Trash Hero World that originated in Thailand in 2007 and was founded by Roman Peter and Jan Bareš – both expats staying in Thailand at the time. Their goal is to reduce waste by educating local communities about environmental awareness through participating in volunteer clean-ups, organizing workshops, and other volunteer-activities seeking to spread environmental awareness. There are currently 29 local chapters in Thailand, and as of 2020 Trash Hero World have more than 120 local chapters spread among 13 countries; Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Laos, Singapore, USA, Australia, Romania, Czech Republic, Serbia, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. The organization is a non-profit association

registered in Switzerland and acts as the governing body for the global network by supporting individual chapters with their movement financially and structurally. They do not accept monetary donations, but encourage donators to buy them the necessary equipment, e.g., gloves, bags, T-shirts etc. Trash Hero's mission as formulated by one its co-founders, Roman Peter, is to "create sustainable, community-based projects that remove existing waste and reduce future waste by inspiring long-term behavior change" (Peter, 2018).

The Trash Hero Bangkok chapter was initiated in May 2016 by employees at Starboard Co. – a surfboard manufacturer located at Taco Lake in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area. Here they organize volunteer clean-ups once each week, usually on Khlong Suan, a water-canal located next to their office. They provide the volunteers with stand-up paddleboards, a surfboard upon which you stand up and use a paddle for propulsion. For about an hour, volunteers collect trash that they find floating in the water, before disposing of it at official trash pickup spots. Meantime, much of the conversation on land is about topics related to environmentalism. In addition, they visit schools and organize workshops for children, using educational material provided by Trash Hero World.

As of 2020, Trash Hero Bangkok have organized 103 cleanups with 2,189 volunteers, more than 380 children joining, and a total of 18,744 kg of trash collected, which may seem like nothing when in Bangkok, roughly 10,500 kg of waste is discarded each day. This was evident among the organizers; they considered the clean-ups more as an 'educational tool' that made volunteers and communities confront local waste, and hopefully incite a behavioral change. Volunteers joining the Trash Hero movement are encouraged to commit to their rules of conduct, such as:

> **Be selfless** - I will act for the public benefit, not for private gain. I will never try to promote myself or my business, nor try to get financial or other benefits for myself.
>
> **Act with integrity** - I will refuse sponsorship or other favors from outside individuals or organizations that might compromise our values or mission. I will ensure Trash Hero remains neutral and independent of any political, religious or commercial organization.

Be the change - I will be a good role model, who reflects the Trash Hero values and mission, and treat everyone with dignity and respect. I will be positive in my thoughts, words and actions.

Besides the Trash Hero World office, I was made to understand by the organizers of Trash Hero Bangkok that there was no leadership hierarchy among themselves – thus, there was no one willing to claim to lead the Bangkok chapter per se – rather, it was to be regarded as one collective group joined in a shared interest of environmentalism.

Trash Hero Bangkok at Taco Lake

I contacted Trash Hero Bangkok through their Facebook group, where I stated my research goals and asked if I could take part in a cleanup. Their Facebook page echoed the values and goals of Trash Hero World, as stated in their 'About'-section – written only in English:

-Action and Awareness.
We pick up trash. Whether a cigarette butt on the road, or 20,000 kilos from island beaches if we see it, we clean it! And as they say, actions speak louder than words. By spending just a few hours together picking up trash, people can see the real-world consequences of being careless about waste.

-Education.
We back up hands-on experience with educational information about the impact that trash has on the global environment.

-Sustainable Projects.
We create long-term projects that bring communities together to remove and better manage their waste, and strategies that reduce the amount of waste being produced in the future.

-Inspiration.

> We motivate people to become Trash Heroes in their everyday lives. Trash Hero Thailand alum have gone home to make their own heroic clean-ups around the world.

Each week, Trash Hero Bangkok shared an event on Facebook in which you could register as attending, written in Thai and followed by an English translation. It took about 45 minutes' drive to reach Taco Lake from On Nut in Bangkok, where I stayed – and my taxi driver was just as surprised as I was to eventually find this place after driving down a long and desolate dirt road. Taco Lake is a large artificial lake and is more than twenty meters deep. Upon the lake, there are cables connected to machinery which pull people standing on wakeboards – best resembling a ski elevator on water. After pacing around the different buildings at Taco Lake, I noticed some wearing the yellow Trash Hero t-shirt. I was greeted by Juan, a Spaniard and Starboard employee and Trash Hero organizer, and Mona, a 19-year old girl who was interning at Starboard and responsible for administrating the company's affiliation with Trash Hero. Besides the Starboard volunteers, the others who had come to join were Thais – but not many, as only six others showed up. After introducing ourselves, it was time to get ready to pick trash. All volunteers got yellow Trash Hero T-shirts, gloves and bags to keep collected trash in. The back of the T-shirt read: "We clean Bangkok every week" – written in Thai and English. In front, it read "Trash Hero". There was excitement in the air as other volunteers were first-timers as well. We were instructed to help carry stand-up paddleboards (SUPs) down to the water canal (*khloeng*). After an introduction made by Juan in the art of performing with a SUP-board and how-to pick-up trash with the paddle, everyone ventured out on their respective boards.

The canal was not wide, not more than perhaps five meters, and we were frequently passed by longtail boats ferrying people up and down the canal. Although they slowed down whilst passing us – the small waves made it a challenge to maintain a balance – and muddy brown water sprinkled with trash seemed like an unpleasant place to go for a swim. The passengers in the longtails had a blast seeing this collage of *fallangs* (meaning foreigners) and Thais collecting trash – giving us thumbs up and taking pictures with their phones. I put on a brave smile and waved back. We paddled a short distance up and down the canal for about an hour, before returning to land. After

collecting all the trash bins, the trash was disposed of at an official garbage collection point, although it did not offer options to sort the trash into recyclables.

Khlong Suan

The location and time were mostly the same each week, but the level of volunteer turnout decided whether they would do a cleanup on the canal or land. When fewer people volunteered, usually less than five, we would do a land-based cleanup taking place next to a large football field not so far from the Starboard offices. These cleanups usually drew local children to participate to a larger extent than the water canal. The Trash Hero organizers thought perhaps it had to do with the fact that many Thais does not know how to swim and felt safer joining on land. On the other hand, it also had occurred to them that the children perhaps joined because it seemed like a fun thing to do there and then – making the organizers a bit uneasy about whether they understood the core message of their efforts.

The latter reflection had some merit to it, as it presented itself during one cleanup at the football site. At this cleanup, we were only four people, each one associated with Starboard as no other volunteers joined and we decided we would clean at the fence opposite of a football field. It didn't take long before we were surrounded by local children wanting to take part. Each got themselves a pair of gloves and eagerly started picking trash. They went out of their way in retrieving bits and pieces of plastic bags, foam containers, glass- and plastic bottles and spent a hefty amount of time removing a carpet that had fused with its surroundings. As we finished our cleanup and the organizers were busy hauling bags filled with trash onto their pickup truck, I noticed one of our young volunteers trying to open a bag of potato chips. After biting his way into the bag, he eventually got hold of a piece that allowed him to open it – only to throw the piece on the ground afterward. I was surprised, to say the least. He was one of the most eager children to collect trash, and as I was told, had joined many times before. I approached him and gently tapped him on his shoulder. As he looked at me, I smiled and indicated a questioning look at the trash he just threw away. He looked at it as well, then back at me with big questioning eyes – not quite sure what to make of my hints. I repeated myself, nudging at the piece of trash – he looked at it, then at me, still with a perplexed look – until it suddenly changed, and I could see his revelation of what this

fallang was trying to convey. He laughed and bent down to pick it up and put it in his pocket. Some Trash Hero organizers even expressed worry that the locals seeing them pick trash at this location from time to time, in fact, made them throw their garbage there as it seemed to be a fitting place for it.

The water canal (*khlong*) on which Trash Hero BK did most of their weekly cleanups is named Khlong Suan and runs through the subdistrict (*tamboon*) of Bang Phli Yai in the Samut Prakan province, which is a part of the Bangkok Metropolitan Area. Bang Phli Yai is home to 23 subdistricts, known as Villages (*mooban*), totaling at 80,790 inhabitants divided among 47,354 households. The area is home to many manufacturing industries, among them is Starboard – and large housing complexes with adjoining shopping malls and markets. Khlong Suan is connected to Khlong Samrong which is the main water canal running through the Samut Prakan province. Khlong Samrong is 56 km long and originates from and returns to the Chao Prya river – carrying polluted water from the main river, making Samut Prakan the second most polluted province in terms of waterways in Thailand, only surpassed by neighboring Bangkok (PCD, 2019). While paddling down Khlong Suan, housing along the canal ranged from patchwork shacks to cemented villas scattered in between large housing projects. Within a hundred meters from the canal was the cityscape with all its modern amenities.

The Volunteers

Each cleanup had volunteers from Starboard that organized the event – the most consistent participants were Mona and Juan. This is not to say that others from Starboard did not show interest, but their participation was decided upon factors related to work – many of whom worked away from the office. Most of the volunteers coming out to Taco Lake during my fieldwork were young Thais in their 20s or 30s. Some were looking for inspiration for their own environmental pursuit, be that organizing a cleanup in their community, or starting an environmentally friendly business. Although most of the weekly volunteers had some degree of knowledge about environmental challenges – a common feature among most participants was an ambition to learn more from Trash Hero BKK. I never experienced any local community member joining, but some would engage with encouragements when seeing us, or handing us some rubbish they saw around

them, before moving on. Other than that, some young children would occasionally join in, but mostly just observe us out of curiosity.

Figure 6 - Trash Hero volunteers disposing trash found on Khlong Suan.

Many volunteers told me that they were intrigued by what looked like a fun activity, especially the SUP-boarding. Juan usually included in his instructions that this would be a great opportunity to update their social media profile picture, as pictures shared on social media by volunteers wearing the Trash Hero T-shirt picking trash was deemed as a positive in getting their message and presence out to the public. Most of the volunteers that I spoke with had come across Trash Hero BKK on Facebook – while others through word of mouth. When asking them as to why they found Trash Hero BKK interesting the answers ranged from a fun activity to do and while others had come to a sense of despair; as one female volunteer put it: "I feel guilty to be a part of the problem. Earth is like a mother; she gives but doesn't ask anything back. I want to give something back. Coming here makes me feel less hopeless – at least we are doing *something*".

When I asked her if she was optimistic about the future of Thailand's efforts in mitigating the effects of the Anthropocene – she replied:

> Before, I was more optimistic – thinking change was possible. But I was just young – now as I've gotten older, I see the same patterns of bad governance and selfishness among Thais repeating itself. That's why I try to join these things – it gives me a little peace of mind by doing something.

Other volunteers were more optimistic about the future. Many shared a strong belief that people could change for the better – usually, because they had been just as 'ignorant' as well, before becoming environmentally aware. One male volunteer in his mid-twenties said:

> After I realized how bad the environmental situation is in Thailand something inside me changed. First, I was scared, you know. Because what can I do? But when my cousin told me about the Trash Hero volunteers on his friend's home island, I thought to myself; If I can change my mindset, so can others. That's why I want to share and pass on this positive energy with others. But it is important to never judge or blame anyone for their mistakes. I must be careful in thinking that I am better than others that do not know yet – I must remember I was just as ignorant once upon a time.

They were aware that some people just didn't care about their actions – these were hard, or impossible, to change. Nevertheless, instead of lecturing others, many found the Trash Hero approach especially appealing: Show, don't tell. Let people realize for themselves why waste was a problem by trying to clean it up. Thus, they might reconsider their behavior, and hopefully impact people around them, e.g., family and friends. This is in line with Trash Hero's philosophy but was also an essential constituent among other environmentalists that I would come to encounter during my fieldwork.

Ananda

On my third visit at Taco Lake, I noticed a new volunteer; a Bangkokian in his mid-thirties wearing a large traditional Thai farmer's straw-hat, almost as wide as his shoulders – and who seemed to go out of his way in trying to interact with the other volunteers. He spoke fluent English, a skill usually associated with the more educated middle-class and up.

His name was Ananda, and he was a man with a mission. When we met, he had recently left a high salary job to pursue environmentalism as a full-time engagement. He held a higher degree in economics attained abroad, and in his career, he had worked in high level positions in the Thai government and private sector. Life events that had taken place in recent times had brought him into a deep contemplation about how he wanted to take part in the Thai environmental movement and how he could contribute in trying to achieve a circular economy in Thailand. The question of exactly *what* he should do remained unanswered. Nevertheless, he quit his job leaving behind a six-figure annual salary and joined a Buddhist temple to meditate and seek guidance from the monks. After spending two months at the monastery, he left with his mindset on seeking a new path in life. Being a life-long enthusiast of watersports, especially free-diving, he spent much of his time in the ocean. It was here he started to take new notice of all the trash on the beaches and in the ocean – and the tourist *fallangs* that went about picking trash off the beaches. This made him think; here were *fallangs* that had traveled far to visit his country and they removed trash emanating mostly from Thais – to him this selfless act was an eyeopener. The *fallangs* picking trash made him contemplate how dire the marine waste situation was.

This would be his new path in life. He decided he wanted to commit himself to educate the people of Thailand, and himself, about environmental awareness. After some initial research, he came across Trash Hero Bangkok and he liked their concept of changing mindsets and behavior through action. According to him, their message was simple and proactive; "We Clean. We Educate. We change". He also very much liked the name of the organization; it was catchy and especially their color; yellow - the color representing the late king Bhumibol Adulyadej[8] – a figure that I would

[8] In Thailand, each day of a week is associated with a color, a practice that originates from Hinduism, and each color represents a deity – Monday is yellow and is King Bhumibol's day of birth. Roman Peter confirmed the reason as to

later come to understand was a great source of inspiration for Ananda. At the time when we first met in September 2018, he had followed this new path for a short time – and just like me, he had yet much to learn about Thai environmentalism. He was especially intrigued by anthropological participant observation when I explained the importance of speaking with the locals and try to understand their point of view. It seemed like a fitting match to join efforts.

Meeting with the locals at Khlong Suan

I received a text message from Ananda telling me that he had arranged for a journalist from Thai PBS, a television station, to join a cleanup. The journalist said she wanted to speak with the locals who lived along the canal, and keeping in mind what I had told him about the importance of understanding the locals' point of view, he thought this would be a great opportunity to interact with them as well. Ananda picked me up in his car, a fashionable European sportscar. I commented on his nice-looking vehicle and he told me that he was strongly considering selling it – and instead purchase a pick-up truck to more easily collect trash – as he would often jokingly say; "I'm a trashman now, Daniel!".

At this point, I had come to know Ananda as a man of his words. Since I first met him at Trash Hero, he had been busy trying to make use of his network of government and business associates to benefit the movement. The television crew that would join us that day was just one of many examples to come of his vast network. During our ride out to Taco Lake we listened to music made by king Bhumibol – who was an avid fan of jazz and played the saxophone. Ananda told me he found inspiration in listening to these recordings and suggested I should come to visit him at his home. To finance his new endeavor, he had rented out his apartment and moved into a house that he inherited from his grandfather – telling me that the house was like a royal museum. I would come to understand exactly what he meant by that.

why they chose the color yellow for their organization was in fact due to it representing the Thai monarchy – which seemed fitting when they started Trash Hero while staying in Thailand back in 2007, and its inherent symbolic meaning in Thailand.

At Khlong Suan the television crew from Thai PBS was ready to shoot their segment. The volunteers prepared, as usual, collecting the SUP-boards and carried them down to the khlong. Ananda was the centerpiece in the segment and had a SUP-board that had room the cameraman. The sun was closing in on the horizon as we set out – and the pathwalk along the khlong was filled with more people than usual. This time around, I chose not to venture out on the canal but instead joined forces with the journalist in approaching the community. It came to a somewhat negative start. Ananda paddled his board into one of the side-khlongs to interact with a group of local spectators, among them an elderly woman. She was not pleased with our visit as Ananda replied to her with the usual greeting of 'auntie' reserved for the elderly[9]. She responded harshly by telling us that we were not needed – they could take care of themselves. I was told she believed we intended to blame the poor community as was quite typical in Thai media.[10] The 'auntie' was not interested to speak if this was to be the case here as well. Ananda reassured her that this was not their intention, but that they rather wanted to learn and cooperate with the community. The conversation then took a more positive turn.

[9] As Jeremy H. Kemp (1983) notes, the use of Thai fictional kinship is an attempt to utilize the terms value-ladened benefits to reach a common ground or desired goal. In conjunction with the *moeang* , the community is regarded as kin. Although they are not actually related, "they offer a means of transforming otherwise calculating, competitive relations by the ideal of love and trust, in other words, by the axiom of amity" (Kemp 1983: 90).

[10] This notion was also supported by the second-hand store I visited in the slum of Kloeng Toey; that most media segments about urban poor (and rural poor) was centered on portraying the poor communities as the root of all problems in Thailand.

Figure 7 - Ananda talking with Thai PBS – while a local boy watch.

The 'auntie' had lived next to the canal for forty years and when asked if there had been made any improvements to their community, she pointed to the pathwalk that we were standing on as an example. As to trash, she said they had no problem with that – they diligently sorted everything (e.g. valuable trash to be resold), then left the rest for the authorities to come pick it up. Ananda cautiously asked about the trash around us, wondering where it came from – the answer given was a reply that I would hear often among residents along waterways; it comes from the villages further up the river – not us. She might have very well been truthful – but it was somewhat paradoxical that this was a common reply made by most of the communities I visited during my fieldwork; not us, but others – not from here, but further up the river. In her community, everyone helped clean – as to the others further up the canal she was not so sure of.

Figure 8 - Ananda speaking with the local community.

It should be pointed out, later that evening a local fisherman heaving his net hoping to catch supper just a few meters from where we had our conversation with 'auntie' – caught more trash than fish. Whenever he retrieved the bits and pieces of plastic and styrofoam he threw it back into the canal – and the volunteers seemed a bit perplexed about whether he was throwing it in their general direction so they could pick it up – on the other hand, his stern facial expression indicated perhaps a different motive. When I tried to speak to him, the elderly man seemed to not understand what exactly I was getting at – and didn't seem to have an interest in any further conversation. The little I was able to gather was that whatever he caught was for him and his family, not intended for the marked – the trash was of no value.

A common concern among the Trash Hero BKK organizers was the lack of being able to communicate with the locals in Thai. Although there were Thais among the organizers, the *fallangs* felt like they had a hard time connecting with the locals other than waving their hands, smiling and the occasional *sawadee kap/ka* (hello) or *kap kuhn kap/ka* (thank you) whenever the locals, mostly the children, would hand them pieces of trash they had collected on their own. The adults would sometimes bring a beverage or pieces of fruit to show their appreciation – but any conversation beyond that never transpired between the *fallangs* and the locals when I was present. Getting the core message out to the locals seemed to be lacking – as when one local was asked about Trash Hero BKK. He assured me that he had seen them for many years now – but didn't know their

organization's name. Others thought they meant good – trying to help their community and they appreciated it – but they questioned their method, as one local put it: "Doing this stuff partially helps. But it doesn't solve the root problem. It's already at the end of the problem, it is already too late."

I ventured further up the canal alongside the journalist. The most consistent answer we got from the locals we interacted with was that they had never joined Trash Hero BKK in a cleanup. As to why, most answered that they did not have the time, instead having to focus on work or other obligations. While the others were either too old, or sick. They didn't know anybody else joining either, except perhaps for the children. As the sun settled on the horizon, the journalist and I sat down with two local men, one in his seventies, the other in his forties.

The older man had lived at Khlong Suan for 40 years and insisted that the climate and water-quality had changed since his youth. As he told us, before there was an intermediate period between summer and the rainy season with a cooler season – but now it was not as cool as it used to be – instead he felt like the winter was gone altogether. He also remembered that there was much less trash in the canal before and that he had used the canal water to boil his rice, but not anymore. Between 1987 and 2000 the inner-city population density of Bangkok decreased from 3.25 to 2.35 thousand/ km2, whereas the outer ring population density increased from 0.67 to 1.12 (UNEP, 2001). In turn, housing projects and industrial development put further stress on the environment. The small rice-fields and fisheries that once scattered the area had long since been replaced by factories and afterward merged with Bangkok to its north.

The old man continued:

> In the last twenty years, there are more factories, and more apartments come along with new workers. And there is no system to treat the water, trash just gets released and ends up in the canals. In the past, there were no gates for the water, so when it rained it went to the canals and into the river. But now, it has a gate, the water cannot flow to the sea, so it accumulates in the canals. There are gates everywhere, and sometimes even fish or vessels cannot commute. There is so much more water in the river as well, and Bangkok releases its polluted

> water in the river. Because the river in Bangkok is very polluted - when it rains the water flows to the canals, and polluted water flows to our communities, and then goes to the sea.

Both were somewhat aware of the impact trash had on the environment – stating that they knew it would eventually end up in the oceans and that it was not good for the fish. The man in his forties told me about friends of his that lived in Bangkok and fished in Chao Prya river – though in the recent years they had become more worried that the fish was sick, or just gone. Most of them no longer relied on fishing their supper but instead looked for any source of income to earn money they could spend at the market.

The man in his forties had opinions about how Thai society was changing:

> For some reason, people just don't care and throw it in the river. Some people are trying to raise awareness of the people. They provided trash bins, then there will be a truck that comes to collect it, but we must pay for that. Many houses around here have the bins in front of their house, so they can throw trash properly. Everything around here is changing, like houses near the river, in the past there were so many of them, but not anymore. Instead of building houses along the canals, they instead build tall buildings for the factory workers, and the factories release polluted water. I even once reported a factory to the authorities, but they didn't do anything about it.

Figure 9 - Ananda speaking with one of the Thai PBS reporters.

People we spoke with seemed comfortable speaking in front of a camera and me – and didn't seem to hesitate in sharing their opinions and personal analysis. Most blame was directed toward the factories and other villages – but less formulated as against the government. When speaking off-camera upon my next return, people seemed more at ease. One person had much to say on the topic of how he felt poorer communities were treated by media and the BMA (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration). He shifted between living with his family at Khlong Suan and Khlong Lat Prao – a poor inner-city community with many informal settlements that were undergoing restructuring to accommodate a floodwall.

I asked if there were adequate disposal sites on land and as his opinion to the reason behind all pollution in the canals:

> Where there are problems, we are supposedly the ones that cause them, because we are poor. This is how others think. I don't agree. There are places we can throw our trashes. See over there, we have the bins. We throw trash there, and the BMA will come and get it. So, trash is caused by people who are irresponsible or careless. It is not necessarily the people living

near the canal. It can also be the people who live quite far from the river. Their houses don't have areas to dispose of their trash, so they secretly bring their trash down her and dump it. We cannot say for sure how many there are, but there are irresponsible people, but maybe only 10 out of a 100. It is normal. We are a part of it, but we are not the only ones causing it.

Throughout the rapid economic development in Thailand in the 90s; only 20 percent of people living in Bangkok's many informal settlements had access to garbage bins and 85 percent did not have garbage pickups at their resident – this lead to increased amounts of uncollected garbage in informal settlements compared to formal, therefore increased illegal dumping. As of 2007, only about 2 percent of Bangkok households were connected to the sewerage system – the remainder rely on septic tanks, pit latrines or public spaces, such as waterways (Marcotullio, 2007: 35).

Figure 10 - an informal settlement in Kloeng Toey - the opposite side of the houses faced the streets with an entrance. During flooding, this canal acted as a floodway. Picture by author.

Currently, the BMA is pursuing a goal of 100 percent collection coverage. To strengthen their collection rate, they cooperate with the private sector ensuring trucks for land-based collections, boats for cleaning the canals and two private companies employed to transport the waste to landfills outside the city. Until recently, the collection fee per household was 20 Baht – which was insufficient in covering the cost of efficient waste management - and achieving a circular economy.

It has now been quadrupled to 80 Baht – a perhaps modest increase considering the vast structural improvement necessary – but an increased cost on low-income households. The question remains whether this will lead to improved collection or increased illegal dumping.

Rama 9 Village

The location of Khlong Suan for their weekly cleanups was shared by many volunteers, and organizers, as somewhat impractical. It was mostly due to its location in terms of getting there as all public transport options were too far away and necessitated either coming by taxi or car. Trash Hero BKK did from time to time organize cleanups in the inner-city – but it required a fair amount of coordinating with the communities, transport gear, and SUP-boards if needed. Furthermore, as employees at Starboard were the main organizers, it made it easier for them to combine a day's workload with organizing cleanups as it took place right outside their offices. Therefore, Ananda proposed that he could organize a cleanup in an urban community called Rama 9 Village (*Bueng Rama 9*) in the Bang Kapi district located in the inner-city of Bangkok.

Ananda had come across this urban community in a somewhat of a fluke. In November 2017, Thai rockstar Artiware "Toon" Kongmalai ran a charity-run from the southern border of Thailand to the north in 56 days – a distance of 2200 km. His run was made to get attention for his fundraiser which in its entirety would be donated for hospitals to buy equipment that would benefit local communities. He managed to inspire Thais in donating over a billion Thai Baht. His run generated a large following through media coverage and social media shares. Ananda had wished to join in parts of his run, but unable to do so – therefore, as he woke up early one day and saw "Toon" on TV already running – he got a strong feeling that he should at least do something similar in solidarity:

> So, I start running out of my house, like 'I got to get out! I got to run!' [Laughs] And it was the first time for me running, ever… Because we Thai people hate hot air… We all want convenience, that's why we have 7-11's everywhere, because; 'Yeah, we don't want to do anything…' We want to get in the car, we want to drive not walk.

> That was the first time for me to walk the furthest distance from my house, and I jogged, and we don't have the pavement for it. I could have easily taken a car, but never, that was the first time on foot, and I came across Rama 9 Village and saw how much trash that had accumulated in the area. I'd heard about this community; I know the story about the King doing good for the community – so it was sad to see his accomplishments being overrun with trash – especially from the Lat Prao Canal – there is so much. And they are trying to treat the water in the ponds – but at the same time having to deal with all the trash coming in. So, I saw all their problems with trash - just because 'Toon' was running, and it planted a seed in my head, like, I need to do something about this.

Rama 9 Pond Wastewater Treatment Plant

In the late 1980s, King Bhumibol initiated several projects related to improve Bangkok's polluted water – one being the construction of Rama 9 Pond Wastewater Treatment Plant (Rama 9 pond from here on) – where three aerated lagoons would be filled with water from Khlong Lat Prao. The Rama 9 Pond is constructed to deal with polluted wastewater from the Lat Prao Canal – and is located next to Rama 9 Village. It treats water through three aerated lagoons that hastens the decomposing of organic pollutants in the wastewater — until it is released back into the Lat Prao Canal (The Office of the Royal Development Projects Board, 2019). The Rama IX Pond was completed in 1989 and treats 28,000 m^3 of wastewater each day (ibid). There are more than 6000 households along Khlong Lat Prao, many being informal settlements that has expanded towards the canal, and the canal is among the most polluted canals in Bangkok.

Rama 9 Village is located at the very end of Khlong Lat Prao – where it connects to the Wat Sri Bunruang Watergate. At the intersection there is a treatment facility built to collect trash – but when water is needed to flow – the gates are opened, and trash neglected. As Ananda discovered when he came across the facility and managed to capture on film the fast-paced stream of trash not being sorted out of Khlong Lat Prao, instead flowing directly into the Wat Sri Bunruang Watergate, which eventually leads to Chao Prya. Ananda shared the video on Facebook and it went viral – gaining more than 250,000 views and 5000 shares.

Figure 11 - Screenshot from the video Ananda shared on Facebook - filmed through a metal screen in the ground revealing the trash flowing at high-speed directly into the next canal.

Rama 9 Village is an urban low-income community with roughly 500 inhabitants which King Bhumibol decided should be improved as well in terms of his "Three Pillars Philosophy" that derives from the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy – which warrants a community with three fundamental core principles to achieve a harmonious community; (1) Home - *ban*, (2) Temple - *wat*, and (3) School – *rongreiyn*. The ideal is to reflect society as self-reliant, whereas the community members are encouraged to take care of each other and their community (Phaithayawat, 2019). In Rama 9 Village this is exemplified by the abundance of civil services offered by the government – compared to other less fortunate communities. Its affiliation with King Bhumibol's urban development projects has made Rama 9 Village into a showroom for health facilities, schools and with a temple commissioned by the King. The community had several gardens with fruit trees, medical plants, and herbs which was shared among the inhabitants – others kept animals such as cows and goats. Many collaborated in producing food for the animals, then divided the resources produced.

The First Cleanup at Rama 9 Village

The cleanup was organized in collaboration with Precious Plastic Bangkok (PPB), an NGO that has designed a machine in which you can feed plastic bottles and caps into its inbuilt shredder – turning the plastic waste into 'new' plastic pellets that can be melted into products to sell. The event was shared on social media – the poster seen below.

Figure 12

The event gained 451 registered as 'interested' – and 99 as 'going'. The date was chosen to be on a Sunday – hoping that it would draw a larger crowd than the usual weekly cleanups at Khlong Suan – always organized on a Thursday.

Underneath the overpass of Chalong Rat Expressway they had set up tents and tables, hung posters and information about Rama 9 Village-community, the pond and the event. The machine from PPB was in place and Trash Hero merchandise, such as their T-shirts and bottles were for sale – all revenue put to produce more T-shirts for future volunteers. Juan and Ananda welcomed the gathered volunteers. About 60 persons joined, whereas approximately 20 people were *fallangs*, the rest Thais. Though, only about 10 were from the Rama 9 Village itself. Juan started their introduction by thanking everybody for showing up and wanting to join their effort. He continued

by emphasizing the importance of doing cleanups and spreading awareness – but underscored that these efforts on their own were not enough until Thailand achieved a circular economy. Therefore, he continued, they had invited PPB that had created an alternative for recycling plastic that might not be of value, i.e., worthy of selling to a scrap dealer.

Ananda took over the microphone and explained to the volunteers how the area had been divided into four zones in which they would do the cleanup. Asking for ten 'brave volunteers', Ananda pointed to Zone Zero, or as he called it; "Ground Zero" that was located on Klong Lat Prao itself, and was a half-circle of tied-together bamboos that were extracted onto the canal water. Its function was to gather trash floating down Khlong Lat Prao. There were many of these bamboo 'catchers' throughout Bangkok's canals, and on Lat Prao itself – but this one was deemed particularly important by the organizers because it was located just before the water-intake leading into the Rama 9 Ponds. It was filled to its rims with trash – and once a day the BMA would come to collect it – though it quickly refilled and extended several meters deep. It was also a source of income as many community members scavenged it for valuable items to sell.

Figure 13 - 'Ground Zero' or Zone Zero and the trash 'catcher' on khlong Lat Prao - pictured in blue is Ping - the person responsible for waste-management in Rama 9 Village.

I was put in charge of leading a team of about 10 volunteers into Zone 3. I told them to do some freelancing, pick up whatever trash they came across – and if by any chance they would run out of trash to pick they should come to see me. No chance that would happen. We went about collecting trash for about an hour before returning to the initial meeting point.

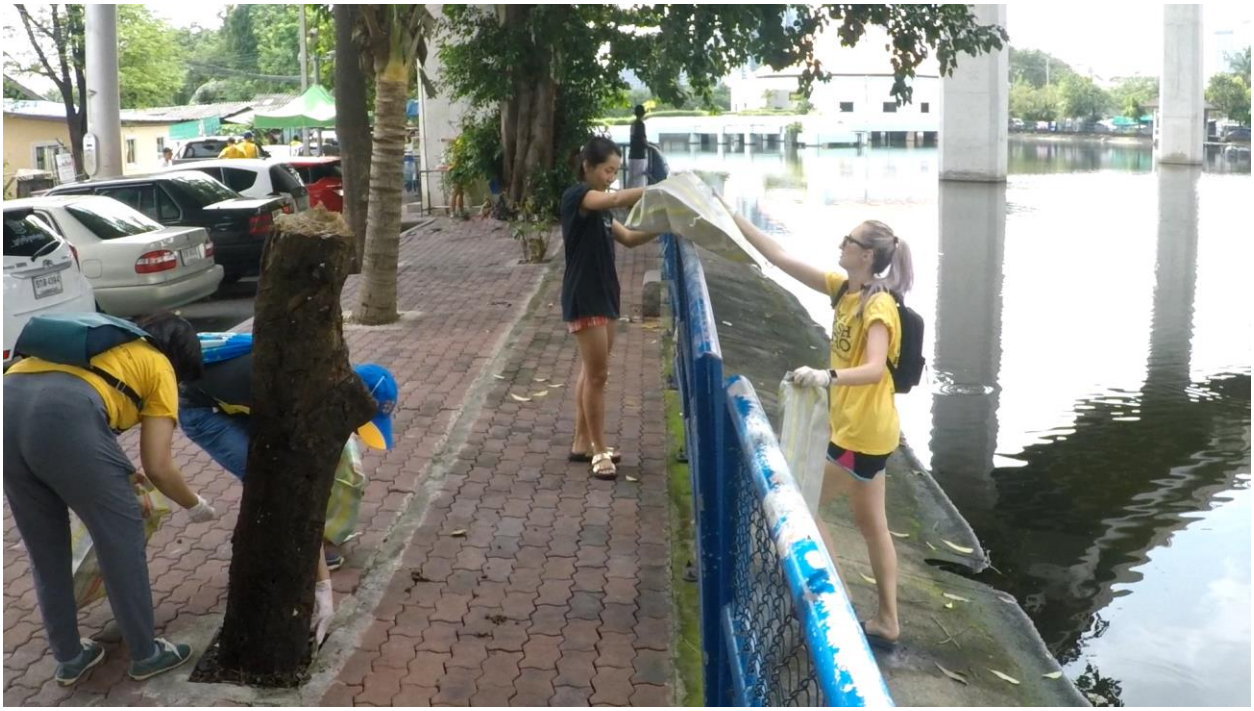

Figure 14 - My team cleaning in Zone 3.

After we were done collecting trash, it was put in the center of the courtyard, now to be sorted. Among the volunteers was a professor from a Bangkok university. He was researching typologies of trash that was found – and instructed the volunteers on how they should sort the trash. Ananda translated into Thai the professor's instructions – but it became increasingly difficult to follow his method of sorting – as he presented a complex taxology of what was supposed to go where. Of importance was sorting out plastic straws, bottles into its brand-name, different degrees of broken styrofoam-containers and plastic bags. For example, an unbroken plastic bag would gather sediments and sink to the bottom.

Figure 15 - Volunteers sorting trash.

After we finished sorting the trash – any valuable pieces that could be sold to a recycler were given to the community – the rest was picked up by representatives from the BMA to be disposed of in a landfill. On a large whiteboard, volunteers could write suggestions for items that could be made with PPB's machine. Although the cleanup had lasted for only an hour – the volunteers gathered 600 kg – however, many collected what wasn't considered waste, such as organic materials, a dead turtle and fish. After the volunteers had left, I stayed behind with Ananda – asking him of his opinion of the event. He was exhausted, but pleased, saying; "I will make this my home." His ambition was to return each month and perform the same cleanup.

I was also introduced by Ananda to Ping working for the BMA on a community level. She was paid 150 Baht each time she assisted the BMA in collecting trash from the community, e.g. collecting bins to a designated pick up point. Ping was assisted by four additional BMA workers during the cleanup event. Ping didn't speak any English, but she had brought her friend Mae Som from Rama 9 Village. She was not part of the BMA-crew but volunteered to help her friend Ping. Mae Som spoke broken English – and she was eager to answer my questions. When I asked if she would mind helping me get to know the community – she did not hesitate, suggesting I could come back next Sunday and have lunch with her.

Mae Som

Mae Som is a woman in her late fifties and has stayed in Rama 9 Village, living with her sister, for two decades. We met again at the courtyard and followed the narrow footpaths leading us closer to the canal. Although we were amid a megacity -, the narrow *sois* slithering in between low-rise communities among the skyrises could sometimes offer serene breaks from the more congested streets of Bangkok. Her house was situated along Khlong Lat Prao and was sparsely decorated and well kept. The kitchen area was divided between the interior of the house and the small porch overlooking the canal – where we would sit in a small shade for most of our conversations to come.

Mae Som was originally from Isan – the poorest region in northeastern Thailand, and only finished junior high school before having to work on the family farm. In Bangkok, she worked as a cleaner – earning her about 8000 Baht a month – a minimum wage salary in Thailand. She was a dedicated worshipper of Theravada Buddhism – but also tended to her small spirit shrine outside her house, an animistic practice outdating the arrival of Buddhism in Thailand. Today it is as much part of their belief system as Buddhism. The shrine was meant as a house for the local spirits to reside. A careful balance was kept, one of asking for favors and showing respect to the spirit. She pleased the spirit with offerings, such as fruits, incense, flowers, and Red Fanta – the latter a modern substitute in animistic blood sacrifice.

Mae Som was proud to be a member of Rama 9 Village. It was low on crime, and the people here were kind to each other and she felt they could be trusted. She said it was in large part due to good village leadership and people wanting to have a good community. When speaking about their late king, she would emphasize his compassion for Thai people, especially the poor as countless deeds were testaments to his goodwill – such as the development of Rama 9 Village. Her participation in Trash Hero's cleanup had come from the belief in making good merit – not only for yourself in terms of karma, but also for the betterment of the community. When we touched on subjects related to the practice of Buddhism, she as many others I interacted with, seemed to regard the issue at hand with great gravity – carefully contemplating before speaking. Mae Som had pondered during the cleanup was why *fallangs* would spend their vacation cleaning trash. Why were they not on the beach enjoying themselves? I explained that most tourists would be on the beach – but for

some, the combination of vacation and doing volunteer work was very popular these days. She explained to me, that for most low-income Thais, a vacation was something very special – for many it was a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence – therefore the vacation had to be maximized in terms of enjoyment and certainly not work. I couldn't help noticing that when we picked trash, Mae Som looked specifically for items that could be resold as recyclables – maximizing her efforts.

Mae Som and Ping explained that they had several bins for recycling but had been told by the trash collectors to ignore separating it – rather to place everything in one bin. As to why, the garbage collectors said it took too much time if they were to collect several bins at each collection point. It was far easier to handle one large bin. The collection points along the canal were less accessible when coming by road and was therefore collected by BMA-boats. The garbage collectors complained that people were putting out their informal bins, ignoring the official collections spots – which in turn made their collection even harder as they would have to include more stops than planned. It might be a reason why they encouraged the residents in sorting everything into the same bin to save time.

Mae Som introduced me to the village leader as well. The village leader lived just across from the courtyard where the cleanup was organized. It was a large house with two floors, and the exterior walls were covered in pictures of the royal family – it also functioned as a community house. He was in his early fifties and had been the leader for 20 years. He explained his job was to take care of everyone and the area. Try to mitigate the problems people have. He also functioned as the mediator between the provincial government and the village. He shared a story about when King Bhumibol visited the village following the 1983 flooding of Bangkok – in which inflicted much damage to the city's infrastructure.

> I am so proud that I can inherit the purpose of King Bhumibol. The King just came here on his own. My friend was out fishing with his fishnet and was so preoccupied with his fishing when the King approached from behind, that he just ignored the King's attempt at getting his attention. The King asked him again "How much fish have you caught?", and my friend turned around and wondered: "Who is this guy, and why does he look so much like the

> King?" and asked the King, why he looked like the guy on the money bills? [Laughing] Afterwards they went kayaking together.
>
> The king had noticed this area being flooded and he told the man that the area was going to become a treatment plant for water. The King asked my friend it they needed anything, and my friend said he wanted schools, temples, and medical facilities. Just two or three weeks later, the tractors came and started constructing the ponds. Before the King sent people to make it into a treatment area, it was known as countryside inside Bangkok, because the area didn't have electricity or access to tap water or anything that modern society has. They didn't even have the road connected to the village, they had only transport by boats.

In the old days, he said, people grew rice and morning glory. After the water treatment plant was finished, the people who lived nearby became workers for the irrigation department. All the previous farmers and workers started working there. The king used his own money to build houses for the workers to live in, such as the community house – where the Village Leader resided, but things were different nowadays, as he elaborated:

> In the past, there were only 70 houses, but now there are 500. The older generations used to work for the King in operating the water treatment facility and stayed inside the village. But now the old generation is retired. The original members of the community are no longer a majority of the village but replaced with people that have arrived from other provinces and Bangkok districts. I do not blame the people from outside for living here, but they are not original inhabitants of the village, so it is not easy for us to convince them. The original people who live here already have this good intention to help everyone, such as Trash Hero with their work. But the hard part might be convincing the majority of the people from outside to get along with Trash Hero. I don't think it is possible to convince older people. But younger people should be easier to convince, like students. It will be easier. Try to build that awareness from when they're young.

As to Trash Hero's event, he appreciated their efforts, saying he liked it because they brought knowledge and good intention to the village. He estimated that about 30 percent of the village had knowledge about Trash Hero's event, but that perhaps more would know next time.

Figure 16 - Sweepers from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration assisting in the event.

The Second Clean-Up

After the first cleanup in Rama 9 Village, I had been invited home to Ananda. In his yard, he had initiated several small ecological projects inspired by king Bhumibol – among them was a filtering process of water that ran through a miniaturized canal system around his property. Its function was to transport wastewater to the canal. Before he told me, the wastewater was discharged without any filtration – but he made changes to reduce the amount of pollution. In short, it was a replica of the aerated pond system in the Rama 9 Pond. King Bhumibol was known to experiment with many small development research projects on his properties, before scaling it up and implementing it into Thai infrastructure. Ananda even contemplated growing rice, as it was good for the soil – also inspired by the late King.

His house had belonged to his grandfather, and upon entering I understood why he had said it was like a museum honoring the monarchy. The house was filled with large and small pictures of the kings. In the dining-room, large bronze busts of the former kings stood silently watching the dining table centered in the room. On the wall hung several pictures of his grandfather in conversation with King Bhumibol.

Ananda had three maids that lived and worked on his property – and they were busy learning about recycling and had even been put in charge of making biofertilizers made with organic waste originating from the household. He jokingly said that they were ‘going green’ because of him – even perhaps being a bit tired of his relentless pursuit of making his property into a “Zero Waste Zone”. However, he had some difficulties getting the other inhabitants on his property into recycling – making him question whether it was possible or not to convert people. Though it did not discourage his efforts. He often emphasized the inspiration he got from King Bhumibol – but Buddhism as well. A key aspect was selfishness and how Buddhism through its emphasis on compassion for the world and its beings was vital to overcoming this.

I arrived early in Rama 9 Village to help Ananda prepare the event. One month had passed and Ananda stayed true to his word. He was wearing his large straw hat, by now almost infamous among Trash Hero volunteers and was busy instructing his maids that had been brought along to

sweep the courtyard. I and Ananda borrowed speakers and a microphone from the community. Soon afterward Precious Plastic arrived with their machine. The event was once again shared as a collaboration of Trash Hero BKK and Precious Plastic, and as volunteers started showing up, I counted about 83 people joining – nearly double the volunteers compared to the first cleanup.

Several changes had been implemented since last time. For starters, the complicated sorting process that transpired last time was simplified – this time we only separated straws, plastic bottles and caps and glass bottles. Last time, Ping and her teammates had received all valuable trash, and along with her findings, they had earned 3000 Baht reselling it to a scrap dealer. Secondly, the food provided was homemade sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves – compared to previously where the food was provided by a caterer that Ananda paid for. As Ananda professed on the microphone as most important: "No single-use plastic whatsoever." Additionally, we were joined by young politicians from the New Democratic Party – wanting to learn more about community waste-management and the BMA had provided the event with five employees to assist. The volunteers showed up in greater numbers than anticipated – and the number of trash-bags was not enough for everyone. Therefore, everyone was paired and shared a bag among themselves. As we gathered in the courtyard, the village leader announced on the community speakers that we were getting ready to start and anyone willing was invited to join along. Mae Som joined again with Ping and assistants provided by BMA.

I paired with a Bangkokian volunteer named Jing, an undergraduate student from a local university and we conversed as we picked trash. A friend of his had shared the event on his Facebook page and Jing had decided to join – as he liked this sort of activity as it was good for Thailand. Politicians seemed to prefer making reports and write papers – but not much more than that, in his opinion. And they didn't talk too much about the issues on TV either. In his opinion, the pollution was caused by a simple mindset, saying "Some people think that when they throw trash in the canal – and it floats away – then their duty is done." "Unlike in the park", he continued; "the trash stays wherever you throw it. So, you'll see it the next day. That's why people don't throw as much in parks – but more in canals. The evidence is gone – so their duty is done. They don't care where it goes next. It's not *their* responsibility." Another volunteer claimed that Thais needed an incentive to cooperate, as he said:

> To solve this problem around the world we need to consider culture. In Thailand this means you should get something in return. If I buy a Singha beer, there is a chance I can win a motorcycle, so there is this behavior – that the product engages you. So, if I bring a reusable bag to 7-11, they should give me something in return. I think that would help when it comes to changing Thai mentality. There is a give and take exchange mentality in Thailand, like when you do something there should be an equal reaction back. If I give you something, you will have to give me something too. In each country you need to answer the culture to create change – so Thai people; they want something in return.

A volunteer from the New Democrat Party shared Jing's sentiment, as he claimed people living along the Bangkok canals regarded the pollution to be something the BMA should take care of, not them. They claimed that BMA had ownership of the waterway – making them responsible for keeping it clean. The environmental laws and financial funding were insufficient and gave the BMA less ability in pursuing and punish illegal dumping.

We collected trash for about an hour before returning to the courtyard. Volunteers eagerly went to work, separating all bits of trashes into piles. The final count was 676 plastic bottles, 1200 bottlecaps, 1450 straws, 200 Styrofoam-containers, and 410 glass bottles. Not included in the number was all other bits and pieces, and plastic bags – in which amounted to several hundred kilos. The BMA provided a garbage truck and took away the remaining invaluable trash. Afterward, volunteers mingled, sharing ideas and opinions and getting to know each other.

Figure 17 - Empty bottles of popular energy drinks.

Ananda thanked the volunteers for contributing to their movement – and addressing the *fallangs* joining, "You come here and make us Thais feel bad, haha – so we need to do something. Everybody is cleaning up and we're doing nothing? This must change!". Then everyone posed for a group picture and volunteers signed a large poster with good wishes to the village leader. A week later, I returned with Ananda, to discover that someone had illegally dumped trash in 'Ground Zero'.

Figure 18 - Illegal dumping at Ground Zero.

Ending remarks

Trash Hero's environmental engagement, along with Ananda and other volunteers, differed in typology, oscillating between loyal, specific, expanding, critical and religious, and along with level of ambivalence if addressing the double bind. Trash Hero Bangkok organizers professed that their ambition was not to engage in a systemic critique directed at the government, as one organizer put it:

> We need someone to act, and I guess it should be their government, but it is not Trash Hero's intention to confront the government. It is not like we're the ones implementing regulations, but at the same time, don't put it to the people to resolve it, but include the businesses as well, so you can get a price on the plastic bag.

Trash Hero's environmental engagement seemed to be an amalgamation of loyal, specific and expanding, but to a less extent, critical – and dependent on whom environmental issues was addressed. They shifted their engagement to fit with volunteer's conceptual scale, being able to address and teach about environmental issues in different manners depending on who they were engaging with, such as elderly and children, working class and middle-class. A considerable challenge was the language barrier and volunteers conceptual scale, as one Trash Hero informant put it:

> It's a big barrier. Most of the people who will come to TH are educated people, with good English, and I believe that your status and your education will have an influence here. Poor people that are less educated will have other problems to tend to, like survival, and does not care that much about trash. Educated people have more time, less problems, it makes everything easier for us, they got all the information already. They will be more aware and are trying to fix the problem. But the Thai language is a big problem, because when you are out there cleaning, and all these people are on the streets, you cannot explain why you clean, why it shouldn't be there, why it is bad, like, what the long term consequences will be.

Loyal engagement was part in Trash Hero's symbolic ensemble to get the attention of Thais and teach them about environmental awareness. The yellow color of the T-shirt, and also the Trash Hero brand-color, was initially chosen by the founders due to its connotation to the monarchy, in especially King Bhumibol – hoping to align with Thai's adherence to 'doing good for Father' by undertaking an act considered good for Thailand and professing true 'Thainess'. However, I cannot say for certain that it was the intention of the founders to conjure up ideals associated with 'Thainess', they nevertheless confirmed that the choice of color was due to its symbolic value in Thailand – which any case is closely related to the virtues inherent in 'Thainess' and arguably has effect on some Thais. Local Thais I spoke with in Rama 9 Village that only observed the event, related the volunteer's efforts to 'trying to do good acts for the community' and admired their contribution to the King's village. They spoke less of waste as part of a global concern, such as polluting the world oceans, instead focused on their immediate surroundings. Ananda also shared this sentiment, saying that many Thai organizations volunteered in Rama 9 Village because it was associated with being a royal project. He feared the message conveyed from Trash Hero got a bit

lost in the social chatter within the community as being just an effort of 'doing good' in honor of King Bhumibol's philosophy – being that Trash Hero's clean-up bears resemblances with the yearly nationwide Thai tradition of doing a collective cleaning of all communities, and arranging festivities, to commemorate the late King's birthday, on December 5th, known as 'Father's day'.

Specific engagement was perhaps mostly so for the inhabitants of the communities that was cleaned by Trash Hero volunteers. At Khlong Suan and in Rama 9 Village some of the residents spoke of Trash Hero's engagement as a contribution aimed at ridding their immediate surroundings of trash. The trash was by some locals regarded as not emanating from their community, but rather from outside and 'others'. Their specific engagement seemed animated by wanting to distance themselves from the 'others', and not necessarily a specific and localized ecological concern. Their level of ambivalence when addressing the double-bind took two forms, especially prevalent when Thai PBS joined us for a cleaning. In front of the camera, those interviewed would not hesitate in critiquing other Thais that they deemed as careless and 'bad Thais' and as cause to much of the pollution, but also industries that polluted the waters – although nothing was directed as a critique of the government's involvement. None of those comments made the final cut aired on TV.

When I met with the community members later on without the camera crew present, the level of ambivalence dropped significantly, and the double bind was contemplated – drawing on links between the problem of waste and corruption among some politicians and businesses, or by displaying apathy when asked what they expected from the government. The segment that was broadcasted on national television, lasted roughly three minutes.

The segment starts with a string of text messages between two friends, where one friend is trying to convince the other of joining a Trash Hero clean-up on the khlong, at which the friend replies "That's dirty!", before agreeing to join. Ananda is introduced and shows the viewers a discarded bubble teacup, saying "This bubble tea, we all like to drink, but look; it's three pieces of plastic [bottom, upper cap and plastic bag] and the straw might be lost. Four pieces of plastic for a drink that we consume in about 20 minutes!" Then he continues by telling the story of how he was inspired by seeing foreigners pick trash – and his love for marine life stemming from being a lifelong watersport enthusiast. Next, a local man holding a baby is asked if he remember the name

of the organization, he does not – although he adds that Trash Hero had a *servant* come talk to him once, explaining what they were doing.[11]

A mid-twenties female volunteer tells the reporter that she found out about the event on Facebook and explains "It's a new thing in Thailand. Because *fallangs* are the first to think about this, and do something for Thai people to see, to feel ashamed about, and to make Thais feel that they should do something. We are supposed to do something, instead of them offering it to us. At least we try and see what we can do about it." The segment includes factoids about environmental challenges and ends with the CEO of Starboard, a Norwegian, suggesting Thailand should try his approach of encouraging the prime minister, the royal family, and important Thai companies to talk together and agree on working together to solve plastic waste problems. Concluding that it is far easier and faster for only a few people with power to incite change, than getting 65 million Thais to cooperate. The segment ends with the Starboard CEO exclaiming optimistically: "Let's do it!"[12].

When speaking about the government in front of the camera, I took notice that most would say that they *did as they were told* by the government, trying to sort their trash and leave it at designated pick-up points. This was often repeated when the organizers spoke with community members. I took this to resemble a 'silent critique', being that even though they (in their words) did exactly as instructed by the government, the problem was left unresolved.

Ananda's environmental engagement varied as well depending on the situation, and took forms starting with expanding in combination with loyal, and somewhat critical. He got involved with environmentalism after observing *fallangs* cleaning a beach – from this experience he expanded his conceptual horizon to not only contemplate Thailand's impact on marine life and the climate crisis, but his duties as a citizen of Thailand as well. He would go to expand his social and conceptual scale by contacting and drawing on inspiration from other Thai and foreign environmentalists – but in combination with a loyal- and religious engagement by seeking

[11] My translator told me the man used a Thai word for 'servant' that indicates he was getting a *service* from the Trash Hero volunteers – and my translator guessed the man mistook their intention.

[12] The CEO's optimistic notion of a 'coming togetherness' of the most important people in Thailand did not spark an enthusiasm among other Thai volunteers that were present when PBS was filming the interview. Some told me that his suggestion was too simplistic and didn't take into consideration the corrupt 'nature' of Thai politics. But, keeping in mind the strict censorship rules in Thailand, his encouragement was not irrelevant as it clearly states what actually would constitute an efficient way to achieve a green transition.

inspiration and motivation from king Bhumibol's legacy, but also within Theravada Buddhism, as he was undergoing a spiritual reassessment of his life. His critical engagement came into fruition through his social scale that entailed a vast network of Thai business owners and politicians. Ananda was well aware of systemic problems in Thailand – but having previous experience from working in the political realm, he was convinced that for now, educating Thais by arranging clean-ups, networking and joining panel debates to share his message of concern for the environment, was likely to be the most efficient way of making a difference – as time was certainly of the essence. His network was influential. Ananda was contacted by a former colleague that currently works at the prime minister Prayut's office, asking if Ananda could send him some talking points about Trash Hero. This led to Prime minister Prayut speaking about Trash Hero and their engagement in his weekly televised address to the nation on August 8th, 2018:

> The Government is focusing on raising public awareness on the impact of waste and plastic, so that we all can change the course. It may not be as convenient as before. Another important task is the separation of organic waste from the rest. I ask that every household to kindly separate waste properly for better waste management. Everyone needs to contribute to the effort. We cannot put the blame on anyone else. If we separate waste, concerned agencies will be able to manage it better. They might be able to make it useful.
>
> I believe that our campaign to protect the environment by reducing waste is in line with the global trend and is exactly what the country needs. There is a group of people called "Trash Hero" trying to raise youth's awareness of waste problems. A large number of young volunteers have spent time and effort with the waste disposal campaign. The campaign is known around the world, including Thailand. I want our country's image to be better when it comes to waste management.
>
> There are 100,000 people that has joined the campaign. The group was able to dispose of almost 600,000 kilograms of waste. If 60 million people joined, how much waste would we be able to dispose? If more people join, we can do more about this problem. I don't want to see it come down to law enforcement or punishment. Let's work this out together for our communities. I believe that this kind of activity is one of many activities that will instill goodness in people in other areas for the sake of our nation and the global

> community. On the Government's part in relation to addressing environmental issues, especially plastic waste, I would like you all to carefully think about the following question: Can enforcing the law alone resolve this problem sustainably? I believe that a sustainable solution requires cooperation from the public, the private sectors, and the entrepreneurs.

His notion of recycling at home does not seem to fit with the experience of Thais, such as in Rama 9 Village, whereas some had been told to not recycle due to time constraint. More so, his reluctance in imposing new laws and regulations echoes what Cindy Isenhour details as "the interdependent nature of the global economic system that makes most governments hesitant to act unilaterally for the fear of losing competitive advantage" which she goes on to argue has been vital in the emergence of "the idea that concerned individuals take responsibility for climate change" leaving the government in a position merely as a provider of information, not action (Isenhour, 2016: 230).

Trash Hero and Ananda made use of socio-cultural symbols and Thai public discourse that is engraved in Thai society, such as Buddhism and royalism. Trash Hero's guiding principles resembled Buddhist notions of selfless acts motivated by a compassion towards others and your surroundings – thus inherently relating the efforts of environmentalism to the essence of 'Thainess' conduct. Furthermore, it was mentioned by many volunteers and reflected on in conversations during the events, the likeness of environmentalism and Buddhist thinking. Mae Som's engagement was inspired by a combination of loyal and religious environmental engagement, as she told me that her actions in this life would reflect on her rebirth – making merit to increase karmic action, for herself and but also the community. Furthermore, by joining Trash Hero, the organizers invested the volunteers with the status of becoming *a hero* performing heroic actions – even more so, your action would not only benefit Thailand, but you became a part of a larger movement to save the planet; in particular the oceans.

Ananda chose the locality precisely because it was closely linked with the monarchy, in especially King Bhumibol. His aspiration was that if Rama 9 Village could change, this would gain media attention and have a greater impact on the minds of Thais elsewhere, being it was known as an ideal community in terms of king Bhumibol's sustainability philosophy. The use of yellow Trash Hero T-shirts drew up connotations to king Bhumibol and the monarchy, and the act of doing

volunteer work *in benefit for* the Rama 9 Village community, as was promoted several times during the events by the organizers – alongside the message of global and local environmental awareness. The act of cleaning and gaining knowledge resembled the essence of the Developer King in practice – and I was told that the community would write a letter to the new King explaining what had been done in his village.

During the events, the double bind was not addressed, rather Trash Hero and Ananda presented to volunteers and observers the magnitude of environmental problems and its connection to human consumerism – and its resolution by changing local behaviors. Confronting the double bind would always simmer beneath the surface, and I would hear participants addressing it among each other as essential in resolving the problem of waste – though it must be noted that these conversation usually transpired between foreigners and Thais that shared similar educational cosmology and sense of 'globalism'. In brief, Trash Hero and Ananda's focus was not to scrutinize the government, neither the local communities. What they aspired was a behavioral change manifested through action by making volunteers and observers see and clean trash in their own community. In this thesis ending discussion, I will tend to the events as sites for possible 'new imaginings' of the cultural practice of Thai environmentalism.

Figure 19 - The Kayak Team and followers crossing through the Chao Prya Dam.

Chapter 5

Kayaking for Chao Prya

The midday heat was starting to take its toll on the panel debate participants, despite some relief provided from the shadow underneath the Banyan tree where we were seated. The local environmental NGO representative had lost all hope of Thais changing their behavior and said: *I will still do my job – I will go on, but even though Ajarn Prinya has hope, I don't anymore*. The audience went quiet, then Ajahn Prinya grabbed the microphone and quipped back: *So, why are you here if you have lost hope? If you've lost hope, I will just go on without you and do it myself!*
- Fieldnotes from the kayak event

The Kayak Event

Chao Prya river flows through central Thailand, starting from the Nakhon Sawan province and slithers southwards for 400 km, through 10 provinces, including Bangkok, to the Thai Gulf. Chao Prya translated to English is 'King's River,' but it is also known as 'Mae Nam' (*Mother River*) among Thais. Chao Prya has been a central route for the transportation of goods and people for hundreds of years. In early December 2018, I joined a clean-up event on Chao Prya, orchestrated by Ajahn Prinya Thaewanarumitkul, the vice-rector for the Administration and Sustainability department at Thammasat University in Bangkok. Prinya is a Thai legal scholar specializing in public law and is a well-known public figure in Thailand. Many Thais recognize him due to his countless television appearances, where he comments on Thai constitutional laws and politics. He was also in 2006-2008 co-leader of the People's Alliance for Democracy, better known as the "Yellow Shirts."[13]

[13] The 'Yellow Shirts', also known as The People's Alliance for Democracy, was a political movement of Bangkokian elite royalists and working- and middle-class Thais that protested former populist Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin supporters, known as 'Red Shirts' consisted of mainly northeastern rural Thais, that clashed with members of 'Yellow Shirts' in Bangkok throughout the 2000s – leading to civilian casualties. Ajahn Prinya eventually left the 'Yellow Shirts' in 2008, claiming that the 'Yellow Shirts' and the 'Red Shirts' were not contributing to alleviating the suffering of rural poor farmers – only making things worse.

The event was promoted as 'Kayaking for Chao Prya' and lasted for 14 days. The inspiration for the event had come three years prior when Ajahn Prinya visited his home village to attend his father's funeral in 2015. Upon arrival, he was shocked to see his childhood playground, the river[14], contaminated by trash. He went to speak with the community leader, hoping to resolve the trash issue, but the leader claimed that the problem was out of their hands, instead of arguing that the central government in Bangkok would have to solve it. Prinya did not agree and decided to show them that they could solve the problem on their own accord. Fearing that telling them in plain words that they should clean it themselves would cause them to be offended, or lose face, he decided on a different approach. Ajahn Prinya had noticed their keen interest in his kayak that he had brought along for the trip and suggested he could arrange a small kayak festival for the community by bringing more kayaks for them all to try out. Although, as he told the community, if they were going to arrange a kayak festival, they should first clean all trash – a natural precursor for any Thai festival. The community agreed and started cleaning. After the mini-festival, Ajahn Prinya visited the community leader again and proudly exclaimed that they had solved the trash problem themselves, and there was no need to wait for the central government. Although it did not solve the problem indefinitely, Ajahn Prinya claimed the effort managed to improve the local water quality somewhat, and the community still perform clean-ups inspired by his actions.

After this experience, Ajahn Prinya decided to upscale the initiative to include the full length of Chao Prya. His extensive network and influence made it possible to promote and create a large venue for the event, bringing in sponsors and collaborating with local governors and Buddhist temples, and getting the attention of Thai media. The leading team of kayakers consisted of ten people and included volunteers from Thailand and foreigners from the US, South Korea, and the Maldives. All had diverse professional backgrounds and had in common that they were well educated and from the middle-class and upwards. The campaign promoted them as the core team of the campaign. According to Ajahn Prinya, the inclusion of foreigners was vital for the project, as he said, "An international team because it is an international problem." Thais would probably not care about their campaign if it looked like *just another project for the King done by Thais* – therefore, as he reasoned, the inclusion of foreigners was to force Thais to see themselves from the

[14] Ajahn Prinya refers to a river branch of the Bang Pakong river that flows through the Chachoengsao province, which is located on the east side of neighboring Bangkok province.

'outside' and that their behavior did not only affect them but the world as well. When promoting the reason for the Kayak event, Ajahn Prinya stated two objectives: First, they were cleaning the river for the upcoming coronation of the new King, Maha Vajiralongkorn, or Rama 10 – in which the Chao Prya River was central in the royal ceremony[15]. Secondly, they were trying to educate communities about environmental awareness and promoting sustainable consumerism. For fourteen days, we paddled through all ten provinces situated next to the Chao Prya river. Each night we slept in a local temple, and come the next morning, we paddled on to the province capital. At each province capital, an event was organized by a Thammasat University land-team in advance in cooperation with the local government. During the event, they invited locals to join the core kayak team for a 4 km clean-up down-river by borrowing one of the 50 kayaks transported by the land-team. After completing the clean-up on river and land, the locals themselves would sort through the trash, separating everything into piles, such as glass and plastic bottles, Styrofoam food-containers, hazardous materials ranging from gasoline containers, spray-cans to even car tires and mattresses.

Figure 20 - Sorting trash items.

The events were attended by locals, local government representatives, youth organizations, NGO's, students and media, and included a panel debate with Ahjan Prinya and local representatives to discuss the challenges of waste disposal and how this, among other environmental challenges, affected their communities. Then we would paddle on 20-30 km each day to reach a temple where we spent the night. This formula was repeated until the end of the trip when we arrived in Samut Prakan province that connects with the Thai Gulf.

[15] Parts of the coronation take place by sailing down Chao Prya river in Bangkok on a large and impressive royal barge.

As previously mentioned, 'Thainess' and Thai elitist conceptions of nationalism have been influential in constructing social truths about proper Thai conduct and the objective world. Common among most Thais is a high level of respect for teachers and academics, including monks, as many Thais regard teaching as a selfless act and right karmic action. In my field, an influential factor among interlocutors' conceptual scale concerning environmental awareness and the double bind seemed to rely on level and type of education.

In this chapter, I will present Ajahn Prinya's environmental engagements and Wat Chak Daeng, a Buddhist temple in Bangkok. There, the monks were eagerly trying to increase environmental awareness in their community. Prinya and the monks represent two separate educational institutions in Thailand that play a decisive part in articulating 'knowledge' about 'reality' in Thai society, in this case being environmentalism, and by teaching their knowledge to others.

The Thai educational system

In anthropologist Niels Mulders' (1999) extensive research of the Thai educational system and the state-produced and standardized national curriculum, he goes on to argue that the curriculum inflicts a passive attitude in Thais that "suppresses initiative, self-responsibility, and individual maturation" (Mulder, 1999: 336). I spoke with several students and headmasters from inside and outside Bangkok, public and private schools. One persistent factor was the (almost) utter lack of environmental knowledge among students from public schools, and unfortunately teachers as well, compared to that of private. When stating their intention for joining the clean-up, most students from the public sector claimed it was to 'do good for Thailand', and to reduce climate change as well, but usually in very vague terms – while students from private schools immediately connected their intention and efforts to mitigate the effects of the Anthropocene. They spoke of a global perspective – usually scrutinizing Thai environmental policies.

According to Mulder (1999: 336), the Thai elementary school curriculum consists of 75 percent social subjects that teach moralism, manners, and nationalism. Students learn how to be good citizens, or as Mulder posits from the curriculum, "a child the nation desires" (ibid: 336). In Thai elementary school textbooks and the teacher manual, the individual is a 'basic moral agent' on which his/her actions determine society's condition. However, in order to act morally, the

individual needs guidance and moral knowledge that makes him/her conscious of self, social place, and obligations – and by adhering to moral conduct becomes a responsible part of a group. The curriculum depicts social equilibrium as that of a dependent child in need of moral guidance from its parents, i.e., the individuals' need for moral guidance from the state (Mulder, 1999: 62). It connects moral guidance within a Thai specific historic landscape, drawing on traditional social virtues and connecting it with a hierarchical order resembling a family structure. Mulder goes on to argue it has essentialized a model in which to think about nation, country, state, society, population, and public interest, all more or less fusing in the institution of King, thus adding that "(…) the resulting image of society, therefore, became utopian, in contrast to a realistically depicted one (…) (Mulder, 1999: 63).

In junior and senior high school curriculums, the emphasis is on contemporary Thai society. Mulder notes that what connects the higher grades with previous school experience is moralism, national propaganda, and social problems. In higher grades there is increased attention to social problems, its source and solution – although it is formulated as a nationalistic analysis that obfuscates the real cause and interlinkage of social problems, as the curriculum seems "more concerned with truisms and twaddle than with the objectification of the world the students live in" (Mulder, 1999: 20). It leads to confusion among students and teachers trying to overcome the conceptual discrepancies presented in class, compared with that of the real world outside (ibid). In contrast, at the university level, the curriculum is decided by the university – and may offer comprehensive and insightful social science that is internationally renowned (Mulder 1999).
Mulder's analysis of curriculum from 1999 was during a period of educational reform, focused on assisting the Thai people in meeting the new challenges of globalization. Many of my informants and other interlocutors were educated within this reform. The current educational reform is still very much founded on the same principles of the '90s, with emphasis on values or virtues, morality, and right behavior (Faikhamta and Ladachart, 2016: 198). The most recent educational reform aims to provide education for all children, and that encourage learning-potential and creativity – as part of the government's 'Thailand 4.0'-strategy of becoming a 'value-based economy' (Buasuwan, 2018). The strategy entails an educational reform of subjects in the field of science in preschool, primary, secondary, and higher state-provided education. According to Faikhamta and Ladachart (2016), its form is influenced by Westernization and globalization, as the country

transitions from dependence on agriculture to become a semi-industrial and information-based society.

A national science standard guides the science reform, and it is the schools' responsibility to create a curriculum accordingly. Though, this seems to be an intricate process, as "schools are responsible for coordinating and cooperating with individuals, families, communities, community organizations, local administration organizations, private persons, private organizations, professional bodies, religious institutions, enterprises, and other social institution" (Faikhamta and Ladachart, 2016: 200). This vast array of interests ties to the idea of creating a flexible curriculum that is more related to local communities – although most teachers have little or no experience with compiling a curriculum (ibid). However, despite reform, Thai students show little, or no, skill improvement since 2008, a fact attributed by Faikhamta (et al., 2013) to the misinterpretation by teachers of 'the nature of scientific inquiry.' Thai science teachers rely on experiment-based teaching, in that "the teachers believe that the students can instinctively learn scientific process skills, scientific thinking, scientific methods, and the attributes of scientists when carrying out experiments" (Faikhamta et al., 2013). Besides, the Thai sociality of showing elders and teachers respect, as Faikhamta and Ladachart elaborate, constrains the student's conceptual scale (2016: 209): "Students are expected to respect and obey the teacher (…) As a "good" student is expected to listen to the teacher, asking a critical question can be perceived by the teacher as threatening."

In brief, the Thai educational system instill on its students a nationalistic behavior, creating an educated Thai workforce that is out of date, as Warr argues Thailand is caught in a 'middle-income trap' failing to provide adequate education to stagger the under-supply of human capital that a marked-based economic system inherently produces (Warr, 2018).

Nature and the environment

Anthropologists Opart Panya and Solot Sirisai (2003) studied Thai rural and urban conceptions of 'nature' and the 'environment', and their main finding suggests that there exist two sets of knowledge that the different groups use to interpret not only the 'the world out there' that they live in, but also how they define their social existence. In the study, the authors note that the word

'environment' *(sing waed lorm*) is a term that has been introduced recently in Thailand, as opposed to the word 'nature' (*dharmmachart*) that has existed within Theravada Buddhism and the public discourse for a long time. According to their study, lay people had difficulties defining 'environment,' and perceived it as the modernized and developed world, while ‘nature’ was associated with the periphery, rurality, and wilderness. The authors posit that "imposing one set of 'paradigms', such as the dominance of applied sciences over that of local knowledge have created inactive environmentalism: people know about and are aware of environmental problems, but lack individual efficacy and collective action (Panya & Sirisai, 2003: 74). The authors attribute this to how the urban-based and educated Thai population have dominated the rural communities with modernized and applied-science knowledge, making "the general Thai public lack a sense of personal efficacy and responsibility, feeling that environmental 'action' is outside the individual's responsibility, and that it belongs to the urban-based elite and environmental experts" (ibid: 59). An older woman in a rural town questioned why my translator left 7-11, carrying all his items in his arms. She did not feel any responsibility in adjusting to reducing plastic dependency. As she said, "If you want to but many things, then you will need plastic bags. How are you supposed to hold your groceries without a plastic bag?" When asked about using a cloth bag, instead, she replied: "They don't provide us with this. It is supposed to be 7-11's responsibility to provide that. Not us. I would use it if they gave it to us".

Bangkok comes to town

The localized clean-ups during the Kayak event was always followed by a well-organized event that best resembled a community fair, featuring musical acts, games, speeches from local representatives and organizers from Bangkok, along with serving free food and drinks – and each province provided a welcoming atmosphere, eager to assist us. All the trash collected by the volunteers was separated and weighed. The Pollution Control Department (PCD) put up posters on where to put each trash item and provided samples of the local river water. Initially, the events started like communal gatherings. However, as we progressed down the river and closed in on Bangkok, the events became more “officialized,” featuring long ‘standardized’ governmental philosophies of ‘right’ attitudes, rather than rural governors that would often emphasize how local livelihoods was challenged by the Anthropocene, drawing on local experience and how it affected

the world, and vice versa.[16] Ajahn Prinya acted as the main organizer and front-runner of the campaign – and was a leading figure during the panel debates. I asked Prinya how he approached rural Thais, knowing that many outsiders considered Bangkok as 'elitist' and their insistence to assist rural Thais to 'reach modernity':

> I use a positive approach; I never blame them but try to inspire them. That's my approach. Many people know me before I come to see them, and people have trust in Thammasat University. Sometimes, I get angry at some people, but it is no use to blame. Instead, I try to convince them by inspiration. I believe like this, we can change the behavior in people. If you only blame and blame, they don't want to talk to you anymore.

Prinya's understanding of environmental challenges and possible solutions, coupled with his social position as a well-known academic figure, lent him great respect among all communities we visited. Prinya made sure that whenever he could, he would grab an instrument, that being a drum or guitar, and put on a show for the participants, even dancing. His playfulness seemed to entertain, but also baffle the audience in that a man of his stature was not 'all serious'. He shifted his type of engagement during the events according to whom he was addressing; sometimes talking about specific localized challenges when speaking with rural laypeople, while in conversation with academics and NGOs, would draw on the need for real democracy to combat climate change. During the events he evoked "Thainess" conceptions about social behavior and its inherent potential in Thais to do "the right thing", while from time to time included a systemic critique of Thai governance, clearly stating that it was insufficient. His respect as a teacher granted him a social position that entailed a broad conceptual scale concerning environmental challenges and an understanding of 'Thainess' on how to utilize its intrinsic values and norms to inspire increased environmental awareness and sustainability among general Thais. Furthermore, the kayak event was only one part of a grander plan, as he told me:

> *Kuhn* Daniel, we need to finish at our destination, on the way, what we collect is data, connection with the people, and the story! After we finish, we will have something to say.

[16] Mostly, deputy governors would attend the events and speak, apologizing that the Governor was preoccupied. Closer to Ayutthaya and Bangkok, the provincial Governor, and not only deputies, started attending and speaking.

> We will have information to work with for tomorrow. Solve the problem. I will come back to visit all of them and to keep inspiring them. For example, my idea is that we let the local people count how many Leo beer bottles, how many Chang beer bottles, how many sponsor bottles, Coke, Pepsi bottles [both sponsored the kayak event], and I will send the companies the numbers. Talk to people and try to get people to talk to each other to solve the problem.

Along the trip, I interacted with many local Thai students and headmasters. I was surprised to find out how little financial support they received from the central government in Bangkok to achieve the idea of 'Thailand 4.0'. The most common answer was 'little' or 'nothing.' One headmaster even pleaded to me to help her understand how she should teach her students about sustainability. A public high school student insisted that the sun was getting warmer and caused climate change. Many lower-grade students proudly exhibited how they had reused waste to create clothing and other trinkets – but were vague when asked about the cause of waste leakage and how it affected the environment – giving credence to the notion as mentioned earlier of 'creative students' and experiment-based science knowledge.

When asked why she joined Trash Hero, a Japanese private-school student said: "To save the world, tackle the problem. At the international school, they talk about this all the time. However, they talked more about this in Japan." When I asked students from public schools, the reason was often to help or 'do good,' as one student said: "Our teacher gave us the assignment and volunteered us to come." I asked what the assignment was, and he replied: "She told us to go and do good – so I do this for the public." As to the cause of pollution, he said it was due to bad habits – but they seldom spoke or taught anything about it. I asked if he had noticed someone talking about this on television or discussed it with a friend: "No, not really. There is not much on TV about this, and I don't talk about this with friends, it's not that cool to talk about." 'Bad-habits' was mentioned by most interlocutors – and often they would say that in the past, almost all take-away food was wrapped in organic materials, and it was quite common just to throw that where-ever. Therefore, many thought Thais had picked up this habit from their parents and grandparents, although now it was no longer organic wrapping, but plastic and styrofoam.

Many Thais would say they had no experience with disasters. I once asked about the 2004 tsunami but was told that that was a 'natural disaster' – they had no experience with a 'man-made' disaster. As one informant said, "What we need in Thailand? An atom-bomb. Now that would make a change. No more Thais, no more waste". He said he was joking but emphasized that Thais have no experience in dealing with a human-made disaster – and perhaps such an event would "wake them up."[17]

[17] Black humor was often used by some interlocuters, and mostly the environmentalists and other Thais joining would make jokes and entertain each other as we went along. A kayak team member, an avid kayaker that had helped ajahn Prinya plan the trip, approached me one night and sat down next to me. He leaned in and whispered, "You know, kuhn Daniel…" Immediately grabbing my attention as he knew I was keen on every bit of information and insight into Thai thinking. He continued. "Water is life. And life is water. Without no water; no life." He let me simmer the notion for a bit, before he concluded, "And no water; no kayaking!" He laughed at my surprised response to his conclusion, patted my back and we resumed eating our lunch.

Figure 21 - Monks at Wat Chak Daeng picking trash - happily doing so.

Wat Chak Daeng

After arriving in Bangkok to great jubilee at Thammasat University, we continued the next day to Wat *(temple*) Chak Daeng in Samut Prakan province. Wat Chak Daeng was the last place we spent the night, and it differed a great deal from previous temples. At the other temples, we seldomly saw any monks as they wanted to give us space, as one team member said. At Wat Chak Daeng, the monks were far from missing, but active environmentalists keen on discussing and sharing ideas with us about teaching Thais environmental awareness. The temple is located on the half-

island Bang Kra Jao, facing the skyline of Bangkok, next to Chao Prya, and is home to a botanical garden, a forestry initiative, and a low-rise community. Bang Kra Jao is a large patch of land and is underdeveloped compared with central Bangkok, making it a sought-after Sunday destination for many Bangkokians – offering a serene 'natural' environment for biking and strolling.

For 20 years, the Abbot at Wat Chak Daeng has been trying to change Thai environmental behavior, and today, the temple best resembles a fully functioning waste management facility – producing biofertilizer and biofuel, soaps and other consumer products, all produced with waste that originates from the local community, and Chao Prya. The location of the temple is next to a part of the river that is highly polluted, with some parts of the water entirely deprived of oxygen.

On the river, the monks have constructed a bamboo-catcher, like the one discussed in Rama 9 Village. Each day, the monks collect about two metric tons of waste flowing down the river, which is then recycled by the monks into the abovementioned products. The products are free for the local community if they bring along some plastic or trash as payment. The Abbot wore a saffron colored robe made with recycled materials and took a considerable time experimenting with getting the fabric perfect. 15 plastic bottles were necessary to make a 2-meter-long cloth, enough for one monk robe, and consists of 34% recycled plastic, 43% silk, and 23% polyester. After our initial visit as part of the kayak event, I later returned to speak with the monks about how they teach environmental awareness in their community.

Theravada Buddhism in Thailand

An estimated 95 percent of Thais are Buddhists, yet the constitution does not declare Buddhism as a state religion but instead emphasizes that the King professes the Buddhist faith – shadowing a long-lasting affiliation between the Sangha and the monarchy. The Theravada strain of Buddhism differs from other strains of Buddhism, with the prime position it accords to the monks and monastic order (Baker 2010: 18). They must preserve the teachings of the Buddha, the *Dhamma,* and by following the monastic order, monks aspire to teach the Dhamma to the people and live an imitation of the Buddha's own life, seeking insights by adhering to ascetic rigor and meditation. The Sangha is the largest institution in Thailand – consisting of more than 500,000

monks and novices combined. Even though Thailand has undergone liberal reforms in civic life, the Sangha very much remains orthodox and hierarchical. The emphasis on rituals and ceremonies has made reform very hard for younger generations of monks wishing to extend further beyond the formal institutionalized Sangha, thus "(…) it lacks leadership, vision, purpose, and inspiration beyond the guardianship of ceremonies and tradition" (Mulder 1996: 117). Instead of creating room for advocating the universalism inherent in the teachings of Buddhism, Thai monks, and Buddhist teachers emphasize a belief system where Thailand is centered, resulting in a 'captured Buddhism', "preoccupied with the preservation of orthodoxy and the maintenance of the established order" (Wattana, 2018: 54).

Monkhood still functions for many low-income Thais as a source of formal education, and it is common for men from all walks of life to ordain as novice monks for a short time and living in the temple ranging from weeks to months. Having children ordained as novice monks brings good merit to the family, even if it was just for a short stay. The Sangha musters much adherence among Thais – and many monks have found new opportunities of income in an increasingly modernized Thailand, e.g., providing lucky numbers for the lottery and producing amulets. The practice of Theravada Buddhism seems to differ depending on social class, as Mulder points to:

> (…) [the urban intellectuals] are the people who want to bring modern relevance to old practices, they identify with both Buddhism and 'Thainess' (…) the tradition-oriented people are not interested in spiritual or intellectual depth but rather in survival. To them religion offers protection and security in a world in flux, a thing to cling to, not for the sake of a religious way of life but as an identity and a means towards blessing.[18]

Many monks have been vocal in their critique of natural resource depletion in the hands of the Thai state and business conglomerates. During the height of forest depletion in the 1980s, monks ordained trees with a saffron robe, tying it around the tree to save forests from being cut down,

[18] In March 2019, I traveled to Bodhgaya, India – the location of the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha was enlightened. I brought with me a fallen leaf originating from the tree to give Mae Som when I returned to Bangkok. She was delighted when she received it, and her friend that was present immediately sprung up and started prostrating before the leaf, praying in Thai. When I asked her what she had prayed for, she said, "lottery number, of course".

protected by its heightened status (Swearer, 2010). During the kayak event, we visited the last patch of virgin forest along Chao Prya. When I asked how the forest had survived, I was told it was due to the adjoining temple that owned the land and protected it. Besides, many local Thais were afraid of the 'forest spirit' if they entered its domain. This blend of 'the spirit world' and the objective world would often transpire, as when the Abbot at Wat Chak Daeng took me to see an old wooden boat on their premise that dated back to the 16th century. The Abbot told me that he had been visited in his dreams by long-gone soldiers telling him that they had died on the Chao Prya river, and asked if he could retrieve their vessel by showing him the location.

The Green Monks

Figure 22 - Burmese migrant workers making merit at Wat Chak Daeng.

Upon my return to Wat Chak Daeng, engineers from Thammasat University, accompanied by Ajahn Prinya were busy improving the monastery's 'bamboo-catcher.' As promised, he had returned to help the monks improve their trash collection scheme. A large gathering of worshipping Thais standing in a group was holding onto a long string, symbolizing 'one-ness' and 'interdependence of all phenomena' in Buddhism[19]. They were gaining merit by releasing living fish back into the river by sliding them down a small ramp. However, one of my

[19] This ties to the Buddhist philosophy of 'emptiness' – considered a vital insight for attaining enlightenment. In short, all 'things' are interconnected and interdependent. Nothing can exist on its own, but only in relation to

informants joining wondered: "Are they aware that there is no oxygen in this part of the river?". I was whisked away by monks and onto a riverboat with Burmese immigrant workers volunteering their one-day-off a week to help the Abbot collect trash on the river, a contribution that they had done each Sunday for four years.

Afterward, I met with the Abbot and got a grand tour of the premises, a lavish monastery with golden decor and well-kept gardens, and several production halls for sorting and reutilizing waste. Including trash bins intended for the local community to donate their trash, as he had declared to them that trash-collection was merit-making – a reason the Burmese stated for their participation. Initially, the monks had put international symbols affiliated with recycling above the trash cans, indicating what was supposed to go where. Most community members did not recognize the symbols and, in their confusion, sorted their trash into wrong bins. Therefore, the monks removed the labels, and instead put a concrete example of trash to each bin to make it easier for the merit-makers. According to the Abbott, guidance in inspiring the community's environmental engagement was within the Buddhist canon; the Tripitaka.

Ghosts and trash

I spoke with a monk that was vested with overseeing waste management. He had been a monk for five years and initially stayed at a forest monastery, before moving to Wat Chak Daeng. In the past, he was CEO of an organization, as he said when he had a "very high ego." Therefore, he became a monk; to find a way to bring his ego down, at which he concluded with "what can do that, if not trash - because what can be lower than trash? There is no lower level where I can go". Working with trash was a way he could continue practicing mindfulness to understand himself better - adding "there is not going to be anyone who comes and points the finger at me, telling me; 'oh you used to be a CEO, and now you are a monk working with trash, really?' - because with trash, people don't care about that." By doing this consistently, he became more content and peaceful. When at work, he tries to make each task itself into a positive in achieving higher levels of insight and wisdom in how to combat his ego, with each move conditioning his

others, thus the Dhamma states; 'form is empty – emptiness is form,' as postulated in the Heart Sutra (Tanahashi, 2016).

mindfulness[20]. In the following excerpt from my conversation with the monk, he touches on the core of how they incorporate Buddhist doctrines into a pursuit of increasing environmental awareness – and personal insight:

> The Thai people's conception of trash is not quite right, so I try to change their perspective to help them conceive it from a different perspective. People have this mindset that trash is something spoiled and dirty, unusable. Even full of diseases and that trash is something that should be feared. But it is good to feel fear, so you can think about how to fight it. Consider ghosts. Even if we don't see a ghost, we still fear it because we don't know what it is. This fearful mindset of ghost is what we have been taught from a young age when our mothers said; 'don't go too far, a ghost will kidnap you'. However, if we can change this perspective of ghosts as something scary to instead be more like angels. Because, if we have never seen a ghost, then it could very well be an angel. It's just a different mindset. Same with trash, make it into a thing that is not negative. We fear trash because we we've been told since we were kids, that trash is something dirty and dangerous, full of diseases, so don't go near it. Therefore, if they come here, we can show them that this image is not correct, that it is not as dangerous as you've been told.
>
> Many people's perspective of picking up trash, dealing with trash, is that it is done to make the area clean, tidying up, in turn relieving the environment. But that is not our purpose, that is not the right mentality towards working with trash. We need to practice on working with our inner selves, through trash. I want us to change our mindset into observing and questioning ourselves. Our society is changing, but not necessarily in a positive direction, but this is the opportunity that we are going to use, by solving this problem, then other problems we are going to deal with in the future might not seem so hard. We should consider this as an opportunity to improve ourselves. For example, when we are using a broom to clean, why are we using it? Are we using it just for the sake of using it to clean, or for the sake of income? That is not the right mindset. We need to use the broom to

[20] Mindfulness is the effort of staying mindful of the moment and staying alert to assess your thoughts and feelings that may arise from each moment, either in meditation or daily practices, to understand your ego, hopefully leading to its dissolution, i.e., emptiness.

practice mindfulness, observe what we are doing, and improve ourselves on the inside. When sweeping trash, we should not do it only to clean the place, because it will never be clean. After we get done, there will be other days when the trash returns from others who threw it there, or it might be leaves that have fallen from the trees, so it will never be thoroughly clean. Many politicians, teachers, and business leaders only focus on the result, and when it does not turn out as they planned, they start to blame the students or workers, which is not the right mindset. They should encourage them, and make the work more fun, instead of intimidating and forcing them. If a person only focuses on results, he will never be happy, but if a person focuses on themselves, how they can develop from working with this, we may undergo real changes. Then we don't have to care if the place will be spotless or not; we just keep doing it and find *happiness* in doing it. Just like picking trash, if you are not happy and tell others that 'let's pick up some trash, it is a delightful thing to do, but you are not happy, then who is going to believe you?

Moreover, this will be true sustainability because it will stick with us until we die. If we don't see this perspective, we will focus more on other people's actions and instead ask, 'why don't this organization do it? Why me?'. Our goal is to let people experience the benefits of trash and our mindset, so after they experience it and return to their normal life, they will not cause this same problem again, they will try to avoid contributing to this problem.

Every action that we make, will cause a lot of effect, by doing this, many people don't really see this, but when they come here and work on trash, they will see it for themselves, if not I will point it out to them and tell them that this is the result. There are certain things that cannot just be communicated verbally, people have to experience it, so they can really learn. The goal is not to make the people who know about the problem to do more, but instead help people who do not know the problem; to see and understand it. That's our goal.

The communities on Bang Kra Jao are tended to by the monks and in cooperation with the Bangkok Port Authority, and the Thai state-owned energy and petroleum company Public Company Limited (known as PTT). Together they are working with achieving six objectives for the betterment of

local communities; *tradition, culture, irrigation, green area development, education, and environment*. In order to achieve this, the monks, among other things, show people a selection of trees, and asks them to compare them. One tree has been exposed to pollution, and the others are fertilized with their bio-product, to show people that trash can be a bad thing, but, if managed correctly, be beneficial. Hopefully, achieving insight gained by observation. One issue that they were contemplating on how to overcome was the Thai perception of monks; "Most of the monks don't know how to make this more tempting and interesting. People have this stereotype mindset that when they talk to a monk, it will be very boring, so that is also another problem that we will have to solve". Before he concluded, "Right now, we are like a boxer, training our moves and getting ready for what's next."

Ending remarks

Ajahn Prinya and the monks' environmental engagement parallel, as both, utilizes an expanding engagement – starting with an effort to alleviate a localized environmental problem but expands conceptually to include broader processes taking place elsewhere and connecting it. Ajahn Prinya and the monks oscillated between types of engagement, depending on whom they were addressing. For the communities on Bang Kra Jao, specific engagement coupled with religious engagement seems evident in the monastery's strategy, asking the community for specific trash items for recycling. Teaching environmental awareness and action by conceptualizing it using the Dhamma as a source of reference and resolve. Their core message was always for others to realize that their fears hindered them in seeing their 'true' potential. During a public meeting at the monastery that I attended; a local coconut farmer asked the Abbot for guidance[21]. On his farm, he reutilized almost everything; in turn, he generated less waste than other Thais living in his community. He had tried to teach his neighbors how to implement his methods to great success, and now most were not reliant on government garbage collection. Though it created problems for him, as the local Governor was not pleased with the coconut farmer's community refusing to pay garbage collection fees, and in the neighboring community, many were badmouthing him, saying he was unwilling

[21] The place for the communal gathering at the monastery was located on an old graveyard, which the Abbott told me was useful in remembering that something deemed fearful, i.e., death and graveyards, could be turned into a positive, as nothing would point you to believe it had been a graveyard. And as to black humor, the Abbot laughed and told me, “And it’s a great reminder that everything is always changing – nothing lasts forever.”

to contribute to society in terms of taxes. The man pleaded to the Abbot that this was untrue, asking him what was going on – he was just doing what he had been doing for years. As the monk mentioned above stated, the Abbot said that people were fearful because they did not understand *exactly what* the farmer was doing, so was the Governor; his fear was due to decreased tax revenue, and perhaps repercussions from the central government. To this, a woman in the audience complained that the Governor was just interested in the money as he was planning to keep it for himself – because even when they paid for garbage collection, the rate of the collection was not sufficient enough – many times the garbage truck did not even show up. The Abbot listened diligently to each of the attendee's complaints and worries, before he told them that he would speak to the Governor himself – perhaps they could come to a solution.

The monks' religious environmental engagement, I believe, is sufficiently represented in excerpts of my conversation with the monk. As to addressing the double-bind, the monk did not hesitate to scrutinize governance and contemporary Thai society but would always return to the core of the monks' ideology, the nature of suffering, and that all change starts from within – it is a personal quest, but undertaken in relation to others and the world at large.

Final remarks

Introduction

In this thesis, I have presented cases in which individual and group effort was organized to inspire increased environmental awareness and action among Thais. In each case, I have compared the type of engagement and level of ambivalence in addressing a double bind, which is advocating for, within an authoritarian and corrupt regime, a needed systemic change to achieve successful mitigation of marine waste leakage. Not being able to scrutinize systemic discrepancies due to authoritarian governance constrains Thai environmentalism to 'only' deal with raising environmental awareness by addressing the public – locking them into a double bind that needs to be resolved in order to facilitate achieving a circular economy. Of particular interest is 'Thainess,' argued to be a decisive ideological intrusion on Thai's sociopolitical agency and cosmology having direct effect on Thai environmentalisms' capability to address the double bind. In these final remarks, I will assess the events, engagements, and ambivalence in relation to social position. Furthermore, I will discuss the events as sites for a possible reimagining of how 'Thainess' relates to Thai environmentalism by analyzing them as liminoid occurrences. In the liminoid, I relate social position to a social, temporal, and conceptual scale, and in turn, how this may play a part in deciding type of engagement when entering the social field of environmentalism.

I end with a discussion of how, in my case, the environmentalists constructed 'images' and discourses that relate to notions of 'Thainess,' 'good men' and upholding the 'smooth calm' – and by drawing on Kevin O'Brien's (1996) '*rightful resistance*' concerning how 'Thainess' may have potential to function as a critique towards the Thai leadership and to shape Thai environmental policymaking and behavior.

Environmental engagements and social position

I take a social position to reflect socioeconomic standing in Thailand. It is closely related to the social scale, in which the extent of the social network is part. For example, Mae Som's social position as a low-educated working-class Thai may entail a different temporal and conceptual scale than Ananda, ajahn Prinya, and the monks. Furthermore, living in an urban – compared to a rural setting seems to impact how some people conceptualize the 'environment', as most rural Thais I spoke with were mostly concerned about specific environmental challenges that affected their personal livelihood or immediate surroundings. It was mostly in my conversations with local NGOs or province governmental representatives that the engagement shifted from a specific to an expanding engagement to include processes taking place on a larger geographical scale. Only in Bangkok did I experience that a CSO was outright critical of the regime's environmental policies and action. The CSO '*Friends of the River*', spearheaded by Bangkokian urban planners and architects, opposed a government riverfront project in Bangkok that had entailed forced relocations of poor urban dwellers. Their outright vocal and performative critique by organizing Village Research (cf. chapter 1) and demonstrations on the river was noticeable and made possible due to their extensive education and socioeconomic standing in Thailand. It seems that if a person has a high social position and broad social scale, addressing the double bind becomes less treacherous.

According to Grønhaug (1974: 81), a social field has distinctive organizational patterns, values and symbols, and tasks. Furthermore, there are challenges that must be resolved within forums and situations, in which networks and groups interact with rules of inclusion and exclusion (Grønhaug, 1974). In the case at hand, I assess the practice of 'environmentalism' taking place in different localities as being an activity that constitutes as a social field. The clean-up events attracted a varied crowd of people, not only among the volunteers and those observing the event but also within the organizers' group. In the event, the social position of participants varied immensely, with people ranging from urban poor to Thai leadership – which entailed a broad and diverse conceptual and temporal scale among the participants. The emerging multiplexity within the social field, as I observed during the events and in conversation with interlocutors, affected the perception of the *task* at hand and differed conceptually depending on the social position of each participant. I will argue that this may have affected also how the information within the social field of

'environmentalism' was differently perceived and utilized by participants – possibly due to conceptions related to the fundamental dynamic at play, i.e., 'Thainess.' Before I assess the latter part of the argument, I will first present the five typologies of Thai environmental engagement and level of ambivalence in addressing the double bind.

Loyal Engagement

The most notable example of Loyal engagement I encountered was during the kayak event when we were assisted by local volunteers representing the 'King's Volunteers.' This organization is a royally initiated project by the new king (Rama 10) and resembles a scouting organization in both attire and receiving patches for achieved tasks, such as volunteering to clean with the kayak team. When asked, they intended to relieve the immediate area of trash, to assist us, but as they said, the main agenda of their organization was; "doing good in honor of the King" – after all, the kayak event promoted itself as a campaign to clean the river for the upcoming royal coronation. Trash Hero and the Kayak event attracted crowds that saw their effort as an act of 'doing good for Father' due to their use of symbols tied directly to the royal moniker, giving the events an aura of resembling the essence of King Bhumibol's environmental engagement, i.e., a Royal project. Furthermore, the kayak event had all ten kayakers wearing yellow shirts, and the organizers did not shy away from emphasizing the relevance of being *ten* main kayakers, leaving on December 10th, *ten* provinces, all about honoring the new king, or Rama *10* when stating their inspiration.

Figure 23 - Standing welcome from locals as the kayak team lands. In the foreground, members of the 'King's Volunteers' are seated with blue hats.

All interlocutors exhibited different extent of loyal engagement but depending on conceptual scale would include other types of engagement as well. The tendency, as I observed, seemed to be that *only* loyal engagement was prevalent among the working class and their take on the double bind was, in public at least, directed towards other Thais' carelessness, and less to do with governance. As one female volunteer outside Bangkok told me: "I like the governor, he is a *good man*, he does good things for the environment, and he helps the fishers" – although the local NGO representative said that this was untrue and that the governor had made the situation worse. He said the woman's opinion was due to a "blind faith" in local politicians being honest and able to solve every problem. While among middle-class Thais and upwards, the loyal engagement was supplemented with other engagements as well and entailed a broader conceptual scale, but many shared the notion of careless Thais. However, as some would present their engagement as loyal in wanting to help Thailand, I did get the impression that many were concerned with distancing themselves from 'the others'. During the kayak event, one community we visited serves as a fitting

illustration of distancing themselves from the 'other,' by what Jackson (2004) defines as constructing a positive public image, both visually and discursively, but doing quite the opposite in private.

A small community greeted us with cheers and festivity with children dressed in traditional clothes, playing instruments while dancing, and had even printed T-shirts stating in bold print that they were '*Protectors of Chao*.' The community was eagerly pursuing to become a tourist destination, in which an old temple by the Chao Prya river was the main attraction. It seemed the whole community took part during the event, even the military and police participated, though mostly with encouragement. The venue for the panel debate was fitted with small rectangular hay bales to sit on, and during the debate, the local governor made everyone in the audience pledge in front of the small temple that they would never pollute the river. The kayak team was impressed by the community effort and spirit, some saying it was the best one yet. However, the night beforehand I arrived as part of the land team, and as we strolled the neighborhood, we met upon another team member who appeared dumbfounded. As he told us, he was out strolling as well, and wanted to discharge an empty bag of chips, but did not find any trash can. He asked some locals sitting by the road where he could find one, by which they answered he could throw it behind a bush, but make sure to conceal it "because some people from Bangkok were coming tomorrow – and they don't like trash." At the small temple, a woman cleaning a statue of the Buddha told us that they had made sure to make the community real clean because of the upcoming visit from Bangkok, telling us that the local sheriff had paid some men to clean the area.

The public performance of this particular community resembled that of the others during the kayak event, even in Bangkok – as speakers and many participants took their engagement to reflect virtues associated with 'doing good acts'. In a sense distancing themselves from that of 'the others', the more careless and 'ignorant' Thais, which served as the main conceptual claim among most Thais when asked what the cause of waste leakage was. Although 'one step ahead' of the 'others', they were still eager to help 'the others' join. By joining or organizing a clean-up, they effectively constructed the image of their community to not be as that of 'the other,' e.g., careless Thais that pollute – seemingly more 'loyal' in their engagement.

Specific Engagement

Those that seemed to orient themselves towards specific engagement were rural fishermen I encountered during the kayak event – although they did not necessarily engage in 'environmentalism'. When asked about their opinion on waste leakage, they would point to how it affected their livelihood. One fisherman told me that the river had become more unpredictable in recent years, with high and low tide becoming more irregular, especially during flooding. Once, the flooding had been positive as they dug large holes on land before a flood and, after the water resided, would return to a pool filled with fish. Now, the fish were fewer or none, and conceptions as to why varied from due to sickness or possibly running out of oxygen because of increased growth of water hyacinths. Others would deny the claim that the water was polluted, saying they had no dead fish in their area. When presented with a dead specimen by one of the kayakers, the fishermen rejected it and said it was not from around here. As with Gladstone in Eriksen's (2018a, 2018b) case, this engagement did suggest greater distrust in the government than the loyal engagement, in particular concerning inadequate funding from the central government, and their lenience when confronting industrial pollution. The fishers did not relate their local ecological concerns with broader structures elsewhere, except for the government in Bangkok, or the local, provincial government, when discussing how it affected their livelihood.

Critical Engagement

None of the events I attended displayed an outright critical environmental engagement in confronting the double bind, except for my conversation with the beforementioned 'Friends of the River.' However, their demonstrations never included local communities. Instead, they were orchestrated and performed by the principal members and their network, all having a high social position with a broad conceptual and temporal scale – contesting the government's claim for the rightful 'truth' about the ramification of constructing the riverfront promenade in challenging their knowledge with that of their own – an engagement that quickly became an intra-elite struggle to claim legitimacy in deciding urban planning (cf. Herzfeld, 2016).

Expanding Engagement

As discussed in this thesis, both Ananda and Ajahn Prinya started their environmental engagement by expanding their conceptual scale from a localized problem to a global scale but would vary their message to participants according to their social position. However, both performed 'environmentalism' on a larger scale in trying to promote a systemic change by utilizing their extensive network that reached almost to the top of the social ladder in Thailand and abroad. Thus, in addition to conceptualizing the reasons behind the clean-ups of Trash Hero and the Kayak Event, they sought to tie the volunteer effort to a global green movement to protect marine life.

Religious Engagement

As detailed in chapter 6, the monks' environmental engagement had a religious motivation that was essential to understand to reach 'true' sustainability. Some were engaged in merit-making, while others would draw on the similarities between environmentalism and Buddhist universalism, though this is not to say that theirs is a 'pure' religious engagement, as most would claim other reasons for their engagement as well. The most consistent religious environmental engagement I encountered in the field was that of the monks and community members at Bang Kra Jao, the latter – whom I was made to understand by the Abbot – were mostly merit seekers, thus motivated to a considerable extent by a religious engagement.

Ambivalence and the double bind

In the case of Trash Hero, as already discussed, the double bind was rarely addressed, neither was it their intention to do so. I ascribe Trash Hero's seemingly high level of ambivalence to their social position, in that the government conceives them as an NGO or CSO – and they could therefore easily be targeted as 'un-Thai' if they were to become too critical of the regime and Thai behavior, risking the extrajudicial deployment of the state (Jackson, 2004). Their agenda is not that of contesting the Thai leadership – but rather to inspire local communities to change their behavior. In contrast, the kayak event would address the need for systemic change, and from time to time, the panel debates would scrutinize 'Thai democracy' and discuss, in their opinion, what constitutes

a real democracy in terms of values and principles. They emphasized democratic values to be important constituents in achieving efficient environmental policymaking and regulation.

In my conversations with the monks at Wat Chak Daeng, the monks addressed the double bind, but they would always return to their notion that suffering, or *Samsara*, is a natural part of life, and that the focus should instead be on reflectiveness of oneself, as actual change starts from within, in turn leading to sustainable environmental awareness and action. Furthermore, implicit in their religious engagement is the commitment to Buddhist practice, by gaining insights and reaching a higher level of enlightenment. This ultimately leads to the end of rebirth and entering an 'out of this world' dimension, i.e., Nirvana. Thus, the monks and other Buddhist practitioners seeking merit by performing good karmic actions seem to extend the conceptual and temporal scale of religious environmental engagement to encompass a 'spiritual domain.'

Potential for change in the liminoid

Lastly, I want to return to 'Thainess' and discuss whether the events made it possible for the participants to contemplate its relation to the social practice of Thai environmentalism – and perhaps even function as a 'vehicle' to address the double bind without necessarily being conceived of as critical engagement. During the events, both in Rama 9 Village and the kayak campaign, I observed that the events had characteristics that resembled Victor Turner's conception of modern rites of transition, or what Turner defines as liminoid occurrences.

Drawing on Van Gennep ([1909] 1960), Victor Turner advanced a theoretical approach that would incorporate an understanding of events taking place in contemporary time as having qualities of a premodern rite of passage. Turner understood Van Gennep's assessments to include a period of liminality that included practices of symbolic reversal and inversion, and, during which a sense of chronological time was suspended (Turner, 1969; 1974; 1984). Furthermore, he applied the notion that Van Gennep included in his analysis a broader perspective that did not only apply to "rituals accompanying the change in the social status of an individual or a cohort of individuals", but also in more significant events such as the marking of seasonal changes that would involve the entire society (1974: 56). Van Gennep distinguishes three phases during a rite of passage in a 'premodern'

society; separation, transition, and reintegration. 'Separation' establishes a clear-cut space between what is considered sacred and what is not – although the practice of the participants within the rite itself is not enough – there must also be a sense of belonging outside time "that is, beyond or outside the time which measures secular processes and routines." (Turner 1974: 57). Thus, vital to the rite is its ability to change the quality of time (ibid).

In the second phase, transition, Turner agrees with Van Gennep that there is an ambiguous period of being 'betwixt and between' that suspends norms and practices of everyday social life – upending statuses and symbols. A critical difference between Van Gennep and Turner is that the former claimed the practice did not constitute a change to society's structure, but was intended to be a reminder of its fellowship, inherent rights, and obligations provided by society and in turn reinforces and reproduces it. For Turner, the upending of practices and symbols taking place in the liminal phase did not *necessarily* reinforce or reproduce a society, but could very well challenge it all together as the liminal phase created a space for the participant to view not only him/herself from an outside perspective – but society as well. In this sense, society runs the risk that the participants refuse to reintegrate and rejects its values and power hierarchies (Spiegel, 2011). On the other hand, the participants risk anomie and social homelessness (ibid). The third phase is 'reintegration,' where the individuals return to society, usually with new status and knowledge. In brief, Van Gennep proposes that the liminal period allows the participants to rebel, though it does not challenge society itself – in Turner's liminoid, the rebellion within the liminoid might change the participants and incite societal change.

All clean-up events that I observed had similarities with being a liminoid event, but perhaps most so in Rama 9 Village. Therefore, what possible potential is there in the liminoid of creating societal change?

The Liminoid Event

A key feature in the transition phase is symbolic behavior – with symbols of reversal or inversion of secular things, relationships, and processes – all representing detachment of the ritual subjects from their previous statuses. It "involves collectively moving from all that is socially and culturally

involved" and "a previous sociocultural state or condition, to a new state or condition (..)" (Turner, 1973: 57). Among the volunteers at Rama 9 Village were Thai politicians, BMA bureaucrats, academics, and people affiliated with the upper classes of Thailand. Their life worlds stood in stark contrast to that of the inhabitants of Rama 9 Village in that most of the community members consist of working-class and urban poor residents. For the latter group of people, picking trash was not uncommon, but necessary in supplementing their income.

In contrast, among the first group it was mainly their concern for the environment that generated an incentive for action – although they understood the value of recycling, it was nevertheless not something they did merely to survive. For some outside volunteers, picking trash was something they had to overcome in their minds – as many said it was a dirty job. When the volunteers gathered in the courtyard, most of the attendees wore the yellow Trash Hero t-shirt, while some were wearing the t-shirt associated with Precious Plastic – others wore yellow t-shirts symbolizing the monarchy (but perhaps so much more in terms of its intrinsic values and norms)[22]. The yellow 'uniforms' that dominated the landscape of the event created the effect of obscuring the social statuses of the participants – and while observing the volunteers cleaning, it was hard to distinguish a local community member from that of, say, a politician. It seemed like everyone was on the same level, apparently sharing the same interest and cooperating regardless of their social positions – an assemblage and practice one would seldom experience elsewhere.

At the Rama 9 events – but also at other similar volunteer events that I observed – the message often repeated and established was one of hope and a collective coming-together to change the world for the better. Though the magnitude of the challenge at hand was overwhelming for many participants – the consensus among volunteers and other environmentalists I engaged with was that their efforts would prevail in the end. As a global movement fueled by a spirited sense inspired by the fact that more people, in general, were engaging in reducing their impact on the environment. Within the courtyard, space was created for discussion and appeals – creating a cultural realm with a sense of loss of time, as climate change discourse relates to a temporal scale,

[22] On December 10th, 2018 – the birthday of King Bhumibol, I traveled to a beach in the Chonburi province known for being a 'Thai-beach' among the many beaches along the shoreline. I had brought along my Trash Hero T-shirt and planned to do a clean-up on my own at the beach. While walking down the beach – many Thais ran towards me to give pieces of trash they had found themselves, before returning to relax on the beach. When I eagerly told Ananda that I was surprised to get so much help, he laughed and said: "You were wearing a yellow T-shirt – they probably thought you were doing good for the King on his birthday".

e.g., reducing the impact of environmental change *to come* (Eriksen, 2018a). The appeals all focused on the possibilities right here and now by encouraging action – in effect trying to create a spirit among the participants that there was hope by *doing something now* that in a sense would affect the temporal effect on environmental change, or in Van Gennep's rendition as *changing time*. The possibilities, quality, and success of the volunteer's efforts were uncertain, mostly related to how much time it would take until they succeeded at large. Many worried about the level of damage inflicted on the environment until they reached their goal. Also, the changes to the environment would necessitate a long time to recover – making the end of the endeavor even more distant and uncertain.

At the events, Ananda and Juan, among other speakers that included academics, foreign and local volunteers, and community leadership, spoke of the problems at hand, how change was needed, and that change would come about by a collective effort in changing behavior. The temporal focus of most of the volunteers during the event was on their efforts as of *right now*, interlinked with what they could produce in the future. An immediate effect would come by them removing trash in the community – while simultaneously for some volunteers, the temporal scale extended beyond their effort's impact as of right now, by interlinking it with a possible effect on the future by seeking to change the behavior of others that observed or partook in the event. That was the urgent task at hand for many of the volunteers that strongly identified with being an environmentalist. For others, for example those who only observed the event, or partook as a community member, e.g., Mae Som and locals during the kayak event, the temporal scale seemed different in their outlook on the future. Many of those who only observed the event were local community members, and in Khlong Suan and Rama 9 Village they tended to be working-class Thais preoccupied with making ends meet – as pointed out both by the village leader and other interlocutors. Compared to volunteers from the middle-class and up, and foreigners: their participation was a privilege of having leisure time. None of these volunteers picked trash for its value but did so to remove it from the environment. But while picking trash with Mae Som and Ping, I noticed that both of them looked primarily for recyclable goods – indicating a temporal focus on getting by on a day-to-day level – even relying on 'Ground Zero' to supplement their income.

The appeals all focused on the possibilities right here and now by encouraging action – in effect trying to create a spirit among the participants that there was hope by *doing something now* that in a sense would affect the temporal outcome of environmental change, or in Van Gennep's rendition as *changing time*.

Many participants of the Rama 9 Village event said that the coming togetherness of other like-minded people to clean created a relief from always thinking "the worst has yet to come", as one volunteer expressed it; it rather created a definite sense of hope that perhaps a green transition would come sooner than expected. It was certainly not uncommon that whenever we touched upon the topic of politics and politicians, or large companies, a collective agreement was quickly established. These entities were a part of the problem, not the solution – although collaboration was essential in achieving success. Their efforts relied solely on their participation and actions and made an immediate positive impact on the environment. The *communitas* of the event had the effect of rendering the uncertainties of the realm of politicians and industry as beyond their own. Right now, they were making a change regardless of all the destructive forces outside their *communitas*.

Thus, the separation into a sacred realm, e.g., that of being and acting as environmentalists – a coming togetherness – created a space for not only affecting the degree of the negative impact on the environment by humans, but also a *relief.* Many expressed that they felt reinvigorated and more ambitious after the events were completed – inspired by the group effort and meeting other likeminded people – and it was not uncommon to hear in similar events that partaking in it made them more ready to go out and face the *real world* with its environmental challenges and adversaries. Thus, reintegration in such cases generated in some volunteers a new status of being an environmentalist, or hero, vested with new knowledge to utilize in their daily lives. In brief, change of time was reflected not only in the *uncertainty* of what to expect of their immediate efforts and its outcome in the future, but also the efforts possible positive outcome. It generated an 'optimistic uncertainty' in that their actions *could* influence the course of climate change.

As to any possible reimagining of 'Thainess' concerning environmentalism and Thai behavior, I argue that the 'Thainess' discourse and practice has the potential to change within the liminoid.

As Turner assesses takes place within the liminoid, and what makes his concept different from Van Gennep's liminality, is that the symbols within the liminoid have distinct *individual* meaning, creating room for fission and differing conceptions among the participants. (Turner, 1974: 86). Trash Hero and the Kayak Event, as already discussed, made use of symbology that morphed environmentalism within a 'Thainess' moniker, especially by drawing on royal symbols and discourse. Within the event, or in the liminoid, as statuses became obscured by similar clothing and a sense of communitas, there might be a potential for the participant to reimagine his/her relevance and interdependence with others in collectively tackling a crisis – regardless of socioeconomic background and traditional social hierarchical thinking, and serve as inspiration for new imaginings of 'Thainess' in relation to environmentalism. Although they do not confront the double bind, being seemingly caught in an ambivalence due to regime constraints and nationalistic fervor – by addressing environmental concerns within a 'Thainess' discourse, the organizers and volunteers might evoke what Kevin O'Brian (1996: 33) defines as *rightful resistance*:

> Rightful resistance entails the innovative use of laws, policies, and other officially promoted values to defy "disloyal" political and economic elites; it is a kind of partially sanctioned resistance that uses influential advocates and recognized principles to apply pressure on those in power who have failed to live up to some professed ideal or who have not implemented some beneficial measure. Rightful resisters normally frame their claims with reference to protections implied in ideologies or conferred by policymakers. Since they often demand little more than scrupulous enforcement of existing commitments, theirs is a defiance based on strict adherence to established values. In their acts of contention, which usually combine legal tactics with political pressure, rightful resisters typically behave in accord with prevailing statutes (or at least not in violation of them). They forgo, for example, unlawful force or other criminal behavior, which might weaken their standing and alienate their backers. Instead, rightful resisters assert their claims largely through approved channels and use a regime's policies and legitimating myths to justify their defiance. Rightful resisters know full well that instruments of domination which facilitate control can be turned to new purposes; they have an aspirational view of government

> measures and elite values and recognize that the very symbols embraced by those in power can be a source of entitlement, inclusion, and empowerment.[23]

In brief, within the clean-up events, practice resembling Turner's liminoid seemed to take place. In these periods of being betwixt-and-between, space manifested for possible reimaginations of *being a Thai engaged in environmentalism*. The organizers and volunteers constructed what Jackson (2004) defines as a proper public image, not threatening to upset the 'smooth calm.' However, by acting out environmentalism within the ideology of 'Thainess,' possibly evoking *rightful resistance*, they effectively make comparisons of their own engagement to that of the government and industries – a practice that very well can muster up a public consent that perhaps the Thai leadership is *not* part of this 'reimagining' of Thai environmentalism undertaken with 'Thainess' practice. However, the 'Thainess' ideology is a potent discourse and practice, and the associated symbols and discourse utilized during Trash Hero and the Kayak events might for some participants and observers be conceptually different, and the organizers risk having the agenda of environmentalism reduced to 'doing good for Father,' thus becoming lost in nationalistic chatter. In turn, this would remove the quality of societal change within the liminoid, instead reproducing Thai society as if it were a liminal event of the Van Gennep type.

In 2020, Thailand banned single-use plastic bags in major stores, and by 2021 aims to enforce a complete ban. However, it might be useful to incorporate lessons from Thai history, especially the mid-1900s, when the threat of a new Western discourse posed challenges for the Thai leadership to remain in power. In the present, global advocacy for a 'green turn' entails yet a new set of discourses, such as new forms of public participation and demands for knowledge and transparency, not only domestically, but also in the Thai state's trade with other countries, as demands for sustainable production is becoming a non-negotiable term of conducting business. Also, tourists are becoming more aware of pollution when vacationing. How the Thai leadership will deal with this new set of 'imaginings' and what will come of it, is currently in the making.

[23] In Michael Herzfeld's (2016) book *The Siege of the Spirits*, he details 20 years of a continuous battle between Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and the inhabitants of Pom Mahakan village in central Bangkok. This small community resisted BMA's efforts to evict the inhabitants in order to construct a park to commemorate the Queen Mother, contesting BMA's rendition of 'Thainess' – by way of rightful resistance. Unfortunately, the community was evicted in 2019 after 20 years of resistance.

Portraits from the field

Figure 24 - Locals sorting trash after kayak clean-up.

Figure 25 - Ajahn Prinya entertaining the locals.

Figure 26 - Precious Plastic Bangkok's 'Shredder' machine on display in Rama 9 Village.

Figure 27 - The water wheel aerator 'Chaipattana' – King Bhumibol's invention on display in Rama 9 Village.

Figure 28 - Local's show of support during the Kayak event.

Figure 12- A dog taking a nap next to a canal.

Figure 29 - Volunteer diligently sorting trash.

Figure 30 - One of the few river houses left on Chao Prya.

Figure 31 - Getting ready to weight the trash.

Figure 31 - When the river becomes a sewer.

Figure 32 - Community house reutilize used plastic bottles.

Figure 13 - Kayak Team (far right) arriving in Bangkok

Figure 34 - Worshippers at Wat Chak Daeng releasing living fish back to the Chao Prya River.

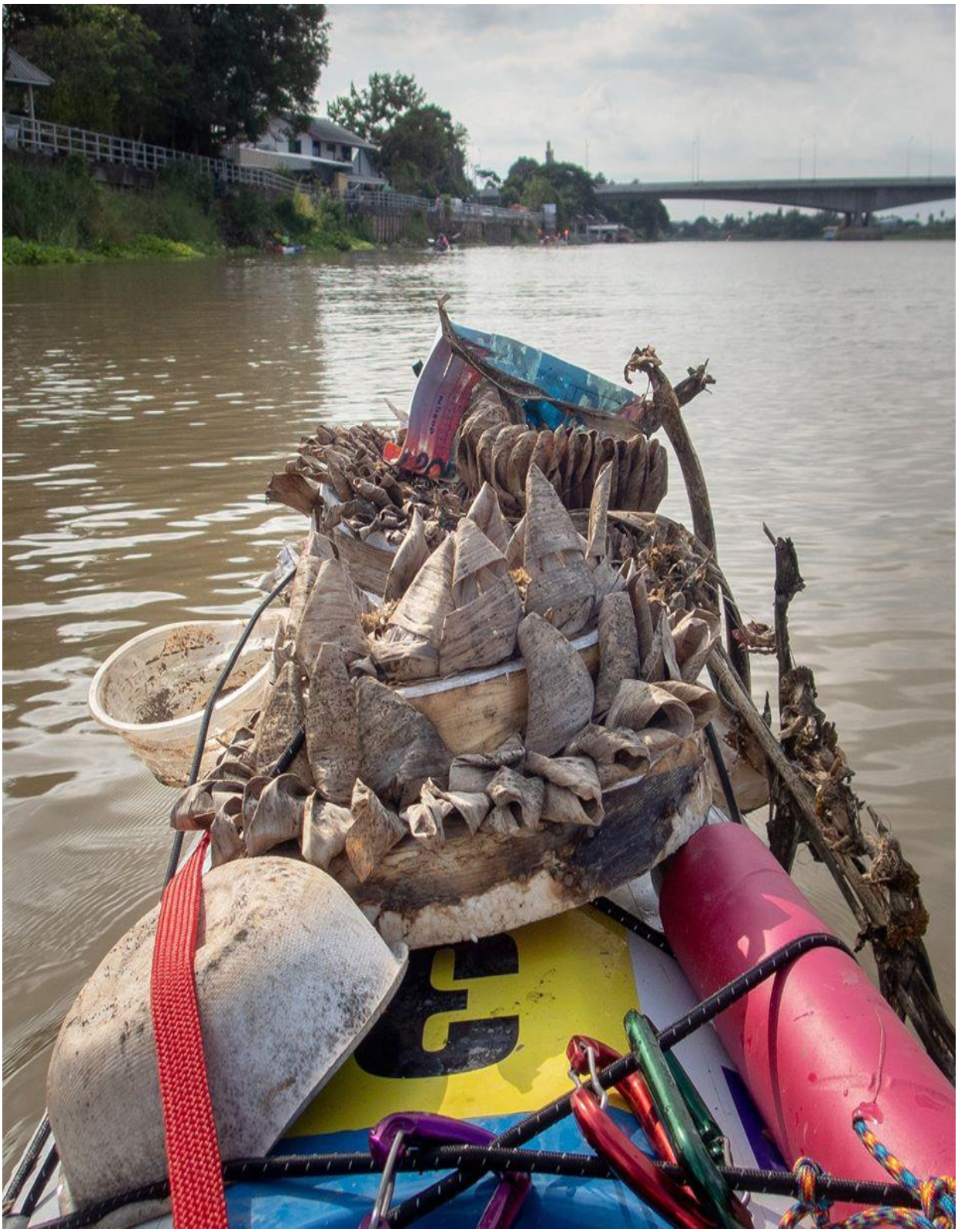

Figure 14 - A team member's kayak stuffed with leftover Loy Krathong ornaments that are put on water and rivers throughout Thailand, and other Asian countries, during Loy Krathong celebration each year.

Figure 36 - Two young volunteers waiting to sort trash.

Figure 37 - A typical set-up in a temple where we spent the night.

Figure 38 - Panel debate with a local community during the Kayak event.

Figure 15 - Some of the products made with the 'Shredder' machine.

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