Buddhist Secularism?
Genealogies of 'Buddhist Modernity' and the Production of Handbook Knowledge on Islam in Thailand

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Introduction

One of the most prominent concerns of scholarly literature on Thailand is the relationship between the state and Buddhism. However, this one-sided focus on Thailand as a Buddhist nation-state has reproduced two significant shortcomings.

First, on an empirical level, the factual existence of religious pluralism in Thailand tends to be overlooked. Besides numerous Christian communities, Thailand's Muslim community is the most important religious minority and comprises around three million people – or 5 % of the total population.

Second, on a theoretical level, the assessment of an 'amalgam' of 'state Buddhism' has often risked a conceptual collapse of the 'state' and 'Buddhism' that has decisively limited analytical understandings of a more complex configuration of state power in Thailand.

This configuration is indeed quite complicated. Thus on the one hand, religious pluralism is officially promoted as a way to foster Thailand's 'religious diversity', and constitutionally anchored in the right to religious freedom – often considered to be the cornerstone of modern secular statehood. On the other, Thailand's Buddhist monarch is assigned the legal patron of all of Thailand's religious communities, and the right to religious freedom is often justified by referring to Buddhist tolerance and respect.

Aims and Questions

My aim in deploying the provocative term 'Buddhist secularism' is to open a fresh analytical angle from which to pose the question about religion and politics in Thailand in more complicated terms. This inquiry will moreover contribute to a conceptual discussion about forms of secularism that are distinct from but entangled with paradigmatic Western formations.

Using Talal Asad's alternative analytic of secularism as a conceptual starting point, I will ask

a) historically how the 'semi-colonial' emergence of the Thai nation-state not only came with the normative enhancement of a specific version of Buddhism as the new national religion, but was also constituted in relation to a distinct construction of Islam and the Muslim community in Thailand;

b) how this historically grown discursive formation that may be called 'Buddhist secularism' manifests in a contemporary form of knowledge production, which I will explore by example of recent governmental handbooks on Islam in Thailand.

a) Genealogies of Buddhist Modernity

Until today, Thai nationalist historiography is based on the narrative that the modern Thai nation-state was built by the so-called 'modernizing monarchs' at the turn of the 20th century. These are hailed as having saved Thailand from colonization by establishing Thailand's own alternative 'Buddhist modernity'. Crucially, it was also under the rule of these 'modernizing monarchs' that a former Muslim sultanate was annexed into national territory, and Buddhist kings suddenly had to rule over a large Muslim community.

In this historical section, I want to deepen a relational perspective on the narrative of 'Buddhist modernity' during the formation of the modern Thai nation-state. Most importantly, I will explore how certain elements of 'Buddhist secularism', such as the notion of religious freedom under Buddhist patronage, are historically related to the effort of Buddhist monarchs to rule the Muslim south in what they considered to be a 'modern' way.

b) The Production of Handbook Knowledge on Islam in Thailand
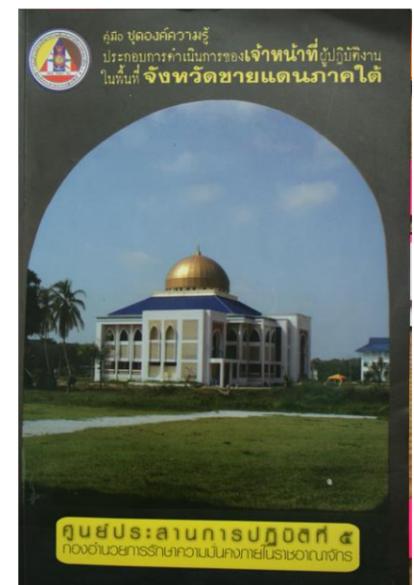
Cover of a Handbook for State Officials Working in the Three Southern Provinces, ISOC, 2010

The production of governmental handbooks on Islam in Thailand has flourished during the last decade. These handbooks have been published by different governmental departments, and are designed to teach state officials the 'correct knowledge' about Islam to foster their 'cultural understanding' with the Muslim population in Thailand's south. My exploration of these handbooks will evolve into two directions.

First, the very production of such handbooks has to be scrutinized as a material practice of regulating the Muslim community within the modern Thai nation-state project. Second, the contents of these handbooks will be examined more closely to explore discursive articulations in both textual and visual representations. I understand these representations as practices that are productive in forging specific claims to truth with regards to both, a distinct form of behavior deemed appropriate for modern state officials, and particular truth claims about the 'Muslim subjects' they are taught to relate to.