

PRACTICES OF FAITH, BELONGING AND COMMUNITY AMONG CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN BURIRAM

Domenic Teipelke

It is Sunday morning, around 10 am in Buriram. I find myself amongst 200 church members in Buriram's so-called new Protestant church. In front of us are around 150 other people, standing with their arms raised into the air for prayer. Sounds are vibrating through the church's nave: melodiously repeated choruses, guitar chords, vocalized prayers, screams, cries of suffering, the deep tones of a shofar. People seek the touch of Jesus, their king. The people here name Jesus as their king, not Rama X, the nominal King of Thailand. Emotions are surging and this lasts for half an hour, every week, whereupon the church service resumes. After prayer, people leave the church, or similarly on Fridays, the mosque, to proceed to a shared lunch. Families and friends gather in circles and share their food. A sense of community is performed through these food-sharing practices and through the physical co-presence of members. Over the course of another two hours, the families leave the premises of the mosque or church.

My research in the city of Buriram focused on the local lifeworlds of Muslims and Christians as well as narrations of the congregational life. The project was greatly enabled through the help of my four research partners from the local college: Komkrit Thammiphak, Sirimongkhon Pekram, Dawaree Sundae, Thanaporn Thammiphak. Anwarussalam Mosque has a Sunni commu-



Anwarussalam Mosque © Domenic Teipelke

nity consisting of around 120 people, while the Protestant (Pentecostalist) church has grown to around 800; taken together, this makes about three percent of Buriram's population. Both communities have been in Buriram for around thirty years. My research relied predominantly

on participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were usually conducted in Thai, with my research partners as mediators and translators, or in English. We wanted to come to an understanding of overarching questions such as: Can one be anything and believe in anything in Thailand "as long as one is Thai" (as it is proverbially stated)? Which locally situated knowledge and notions of Islam and Christianity are narrated?

The preliminary analysis of the collected material has provided a few insights. The communities are embedded in the context of Buriram while its members often bring in trans-local biographies. As such, members explained on the one hand their respective community's local history. Despite the relatively short timeframe of 30 years, Christian members pointed to the steady growth of Christianity in the lower Northeast of Thailand due to ongoing missionary movements. Most members of their community converted within recent years, but they and their families have been residing in Buriram province prior to that. Muslims commented on the slowly increasing visibility of architecture related to Islam in the city through the construction of a new mosque near the city's center as well as the opening of Halal restaurants. On the other hand, members influence the congregational lives by their often translocal biographies. This was especially observable in the Muslim community which had grown through migration of Muslims from the four Southern provinces of Thailand. Understandings and experiences are thus exchanged, but relationships and obligations are also upheld between former and current residence. The local context with its lack of certain institutions also made (interprovincial) cooperation necessary. For instance, members of both communities highlighted that children or young adults would need to spend time in Bangkok to receive proper religious education which could only be partially offered in Buriram. Additionally, the mosque in Buriram shares a burial site 50 kilometers away with other communities in the lower Northeast, so that the organization of practices relies on communication between these communities. Interviewees referred to their respective communities as a family. Taking part in prayer and service reinforces the importance

of the local congregational group each week. Within both religious communities, this leads to individual questions on how one can act faithfully. Consequently, orders of hierarchy have emerged in both pious communities. Fellow believers who have either been part of the community for a long time or invest considerable



Community hall in the church © Komkrit Thammiphak

time into the community are met with respect and are turned to for advice and counseling. However, 'correct' pious behavior is a highly subjective category based on one's perspective towards teachings mediated via esteemed members of the communities. While common practices are observed by the members of the communities, Islam and Christianity do not exist as absolute unquestioned categories; their meaning is created by individual understandings of piety. Individuals understand the meanings of practices differently and link them to their own biographies or, for example, see in them means for an inner reformation.

About the Author:

Domenic Teipelke is a Master's student of Modern South - and Southeast Asian Studies at IAAW. His research interests include the relation between history writing and memory as well as academic freedom and exile.



© Naree Inram