

THE MEANING OF DEK WAEN EXPLORING EVERYDAY TEENAGE LIFEWORLDS IN BURIRAM

Danny Kretschmer

It is seven o'clock. Bouncing basketballs, chirping birds, the cracking of skateboard wheels on the ground. Dusk sets different tones here. A vibrant soundscape is emerging as the pace of life quickens. One cannot ignore the roaring of engines. Engines of every kind are sweeping across the city. Truck, pick-up and motorbike noises are fading in and out. It is Friday night, and the roar of motorbikes is growing louder, as it does every week at this time. Framed by rusty grandstands full of spectators, countless teenagers are racing down a straight concrete strip. Over and over again, from one side to the other. Aggressive sounds caused by modified exhaust pipes and engines are cutting through the air. While this is generally illegal in Thailand, on Fridays in Buriram it is not. In Thailand, teenagers who race customized motorbikes are called *Dek Waen* and it seems that for teenagers in Buriram the practice of motorbike racing and modification is particularly popular. It also seems that the meaning of being a teenager is situated in local configurations. The answer to what it means to be a teenager in Buriram is still a work-in-progress and this article offers only a glimpse into some observations and preliminary interpretations which will come to their final form in my BA thesis. The project is part of Dr. Benjamin Baumann's seminar "Everyday Lifeworlds in Buriram". It aims to understand local, situated knowledge practices and to explicate their implicit dimensions.

Immersed in everyday teenage lifeworlds in Buriram, I conducted interviews, observed and participated in their practices to understand the situated meaning of being a teenager. During the exploration phase, an exchange student from Bangkok told me what he associates with teenagers in Buriram and with the category of

Dek Waen. Then, because I knew nothing about it, I wanted to explore what this means. *Dek* means child. *Waen* is an onomatopoeic description of motorbike sounds. Associations with the category *Dek Waen* are mainly negative. In Thai public discourse it is used for the criminalization or degradation of the lower classes.

On the other hand, it is also a self-referential indicator of social belonging or of one's love for motorbike



Waiting for the race. © Danny Kretschmer

modifications and races. The meaning of the category *Dek Waen* is made up by its many practical uses in language-games which are embedded in specific social structures. To make sense of the flexible use of the term, I argue that it has to be linked to the users' interests and their positions in social space. The interpretation of the motorbike as a symbol of masculinity will be another key aspect in understanding of the making of *Dek Waen* for teenagers in Buriram.

In extending the frame from words to practices, I aim to widen the research perspective to gain knowledge of the notion of the body in this context. Michael Jackson's approach to body practice can be employed to understand "how human experience is grounded in bodily movement within a social and material environment"¹. Most of the students in Buriram commute from surrounding villages to the city. For them, riding a motorbike is the basic mode of transportation, the medium for being mobile. Being mobile means the possibility to meet friends and build social

relations. It also means being able to temporarily escape parental control and thus, (re-)negotiating oneself as a self among peers. While the majority of teenagers ride motorbikes, customization serves as a marker of distinction. Understanding modification as a mode of distinction links it to modes of reproduction or negotiation of one's social position. While visual modifications are being used to produce

differences, performance enhancement can be used to challenge other drivers. In the context of Thailand's extreme wealth inequality, the race opens a temporal space for a game where one's social position does not seem to matter. The race is the bodily practice of racing. There is no past and no future, one's body is one with the machine, immersed in the sensory

(over) stimulation of the moment.

About the Author:

Danny Kretschmer is currently working on his BA thesis in Area Studies Asia/Africa with a focus on the Southeast Asian region.



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Racers and spectators. © Danny Kretschmer

¹ JACKSON, M. (2013). *LIFEWORLDS: ESSAYS IN EXISTENTIAL ANTHROPOLOGY*. CHICAGO, IL: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, P. 57.