

The Construction of Local Identities in Korat, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The invention of local identities is becoming an important issue in many parts of the world. Depending on the given circumstances, localism can turn violent as separatist movements, ethnic rioting, civil war, unrest or other forms. However in Thailand we can notice a different pattern: the creation of local traditions is a crucial aspect of national integration beyond Bangkok. In this article, the city of Korat in Northeast Thailand is taken as a case study, to indicate how local identities are formed through the revitalization of local traditions and customs. Korat turned into a boom town with increased global integration during the late eighties. This in turn made the region attractive for Bangkok-based strategic groups. To be able to compete with this, the local elite had to achieve social cohesion, which was based on local identity. Surprising as it may seem, the case of Korat indicates that globalisation processes tend to strengthen localism. Combined with the democratisation of the political system in Thailand, this local identity becomes the basis for real national integration.

Key words: local identity, national integration, globalisation, Korat

ABSTRAK

Pembentukan identiti lokal atau tempatan sedang menjadi satu isu penting di banyak negara di dunia. Bergantung kepada keadaan sedia ada, lokalisme boleh berubah menjadi ganas seperti gerakan pemisah, rusuhan etnik, perang saudara atau bentuk-bentuk kekacauan yang lain. Akan tetapi di Thailand, kita dapat menyaksikan satu pola nasional di peluaran Bangkok. Dalam artikel ini, bandar Korat di Timur Laut Thailand diambil sebagai satu kajian kes untuk menunjukkan bagaimana identiti tempatan terbentuk melalui usaha menghidupkan semula tradisi dan adat resam tempatan. Korat menjadi bandar yang maju hasil peningkatan integrasi global yang berlaku pada akhir dekad lapan puluhan. Perkembangan ini menjadikan Korat satu kawasan yang menarik bagi kelompok-kelompok strategik yang berpangkalan di Bangkok. Untuk menyaingi mereka, elit tempatan terpaksa mengukuhkan perpaduan masyarakat tempatan, yang didasarkan pada identiti lokal mereka. Walaupun ini kelihatan agak menghairankan, kes Korat menunjukkan bahawa proses globalisasi mengukuhkan lokalisme. Bersama-sama dengan pendemokrasian

yang berlaku pada sistem politik Thailand, identiti tempatan menjadi asas bagi integrasi nasional yang sebenar.

Kata kunci: identiti tempatan, integrasi nasional, globalisasi, Korat

INTRODUCTION

Identities are constructed through a process of individuation as sources of meaning for the actor within social relations (Giddens 1991). Identity is therefore an individual issue, the way in which an individual tries to make sense of his or her world. As a basic feature of human existence is to live in social relations, the process of forming an individual identity is linked to a collective identity. Identity attunes individual social acting with collective standards of behaviour and cognitive patterns. Dominant social institutions therefore pursue “identity politics” as a means to perpetuate their dominance. On the state level, identity politics are pursued to achieve forms of integration. These are formulated and disseminated in educational and other institutions.¹ However, these propagated identities become individual identities only when internalised by the individual. In this process of internalisation other institutions, besides the state, play a crucial role, since people live in diverse circumstances linked to different social units. “The construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. But individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework” (Castells 1997: 7).

The social construction of identity is influenced by various experiences, especially experiences of domination, alienation, ignorance, pride and shame (Scheff 1990). Etzioni (1993) suggests that probably the most important contemporary forms of identity-building are based on experiences of domination and community-formation. Both are closely linked since community formation is a significant means of coping with domination. Here Elias and Scotson (1990) and Scott (1990) provide important insights into the joint process of identity construction and community-formation. In a study of power relations in a British town, Elias and Scotson found that the power differentials between two main groups depended on their degree of social cohesion. One closely integrated group could be defined as “established” because this group monopolised all important positions, while others were excluded and stigmatised as outsiders. Social cohesion requires a high degree of social integration, enforced social control and the application of boundary-definitions to those not belonging to the community. This can only be achieved through institutionalising a specific

collective identity. One such mechanism is what Scott (1990) describes as 'hidden transcripts'.

'Hidden transcripts' are means of resistance in the form of 'off stage' behaviour. While the interaction between dominant and sub-ordinate groups follows the frame defined by power relations, practices of indirect resistance are created based on the solidarity of the subordinated in activities such as poaching, shabby work, tax evasion, jokes etc. Hidden transcripts provide the social cohesion and solidarity necessary for these forms of resistance.

Globalisation processes imply new forms of exclusion and inclusion as well as social and cultural alienation. Under these circumstances the development of closely integrated communities or networks, some of which are spreading across the whole globe, provide forms of security and support. This requires the creation of new identities for attuning the behaviour of the individual with the collective behaviour of groups. Currently, globalisation processes, entailing differences of exclusion and inclusion, of prosperity and poverty, encourage the formation of communal identities based on local traditions. Hence globalisation itself simultaneously encourages a rapid increase of localism.

Depending on given political and social circumstances, localism can turn violent as separatist movements, ethnic rioting or other forms of civil war and unrest. This seems to be the case when a state based on rigid repressive means collapses, together with the means of control and the state monopoly of legitimate force. This is evidenced by the recent collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, as well as several states in Africa, which has given rise to ethnic violence and genocide. The break-up of national institutions increases the importance of local and communal institutions. These tend to engage in a strong competition out of fear and resentment. In contrast, where repression remains limited, the state still functions and the political system allows for the articulation of demands of diverse social and ethnic groups, localism may improve identifications beyond the limited scope of bounded communities. In Thailand, the creation of local traditions strengthening local social integration is a crucial aspect of national integration beyond the centre of power, i.e. Bangkok.

NATIONAL INTEGRATION, CENTRALISATION AND DECENTRALISATION IN THAILAND

Thailand is an example of a highly centralised political system. The political as well as social and economic elites live in Bangkok, where all decisions of national importance are made. Although most Thais live in the countryside, the provinces and especially the villages nevertheless used to play a negligible role. Since the beginning of the century, the rulers have pursued politics of national integration. However, only since the 60's and 70's have the different parts of the country been connected to a nationwide infrastructure. Real national integra-

tion as distinct from propagated nationalism has not been widespread. Moreover, dominated by military and later money politics the political system did not provide space for articulating demands from outside the established Bangkok based elites. Over the last decade several important processes have led to far reaching changes. On the one hand, a process of democratisation and liberalisation is under way. In addition to political parties, very active non-government groups are making their demands heard. In Thailand one can observe the rise of a civil society. On the other hand, the economic development during the last decade gave rise to new regional centres.

The creation of local traditions and identities in Thailand has two aspects:

1. Economic development has provided needed resources while.
2. The development of civil society has created opportunities for association and organisation.

Local traditions now seem to be the means to strengthen the local cohesion, necessary for competition with the powerful Bangkok based elites, while civil society allows for the creation of local organisations. Recently, local and provincial associations have developed their own linkages with each other beyond Bangkok's control and domination. In this way, the strengthening of local identities has fostered national integration. In the case of Thailand, therefore, localism has not led to separatism but to real nation building. In Thailand we see the interesting situation that globalisation has improved national integration, by encouraging localism.

Local traditions created in Korat, a city in northeastern Thailand, play a crucial role in integrating diverse local elites and strategic groups in their competition with Bangkok based strategic groups. In particular, the modern local traditions limit the migration of Korat elites towards Bangkok. Formally those who had success in the provinces migrated to Bangkok, to be part of the national elites (Korff 1989). Interestingly, at present the local elites of Korat follow an ideology of developing their own province. Modern local traditions also provide forms of local integration and social cohesion, which are necessary for competition with Bangkok strategic groups. Through local traditions local linkages are strengthened, while linkages based on other, even diverging, interests become less pronounced.

From this perspective the construction of local traditions and the role of local elites are closely linked and mutually reinforcing. At present, these developments are connected to globalization processes. In Thailand globalization has led to social, economic and political changes, including the rise of new middle classes demanding political influence and democratisation, which have reduced the dominance of the centralised strategic groups. In this way openness has been created in Thailand's political, economic and cultural space, into which local elites can enter. Bangkok remains the political power centre of Thailand and the focus of national politics, but power has been decentralised as local

power for local affairs. The local elites do not try to enter politically influential positions in the national state apparatus, but try to keep their local affairs under local control.

This pattern differs from a 'warlord'-pattern in which local 'warlords' use their local position to gain access to political power positions within the national state. An example was the Thai Prime Minister Banham Silapha Archa, the 'godfather' of Saraburi province. It is also different from a pattern in which groups and persons, who lost their influence in the Bangkok struggle, try to regain it by establishing linkages to certain localities and regions (Berner & Korff 1991; Pasuk & Sungsidh 1994). Here vote-buying and the differentials of democratic consciousness between Bangkok, other urban areas and the rural areas are relevant. Through vote-buying it is possible to become Member of Parliament, minister etc. and thereby gain or regain a power position in Bangkok. Chatchai Choonhavan, Member of Parliament from Korat and former Prime Minister, proves an example of this pattern.

ASPECTS OF KORAT AS A SECONDARY CENTRE

The present day city of Nakhon Ratchasima (the official name of Korat) was founded by King Narai towards the end of the 17th century as the border station of the Ayudhya Empire. Located on the southern portion of the Korat Plateau, Korat is a road, rail, and trade center for the northeast of Thailand. It is the capital of the province of Nakhon Ratchasima, by far the largest province of Thailand; with about 200.000 inhabitants within the city proper it is Thailand's second largest city.

In the seventeenth century, the city was founded as a new, planned city. A French constructor of fortresses supervised the building of the city. Although the city was newly founded, it was based on the ruins and the population of two older cities founded by the Khmer in the 10th century (Koratana or Korapura and Muang Sena).² Nakhon Ratchasima was a border town whose main function was to protect the central provinces of Siam in the lower Chao Phraya plains from attacks from the Laotian wilderness. Nakhon Ratchasima was the starting point for colonising and controlling this wilderness. Korat had the administrative status of a provincial capital of the second order (muang dho).³ As a border town Korat was a melting pot at the junction of several cultural flows, including the old Khmer influence, Laotian influence and of course strong influences from the central power. In addition Laotian prisoners of war were settled in Korat and Mon refugees from southern Burma also moved there. Today these diverse influences are reflected in the "Korat" language, which is close to central Thai but includes many Khmer and Laotian words.

In the history of Siam, Korat is mentioned only in connection with raids from Laos or revolts. When the central power showed weakness due to either

internal factional struggles or attacks from outside, mainly Burma, Korat revolted and embarked on a course of independence. These revolts were short-lived and crushed when the conditions in the centre had stabilised. The city used to be a distant place without much significance for Siam in economic, cultural or political terms.⁴ This situation changed when Siam's position was challenged with the colonialisation of Cambodia and later Laos by the French. It then became necessary to define and protect the borders of the kingdom, and to integrate the remote regions into the Thai administration to prevent their being annexed by France. Korat thus became the capital of the Monthon Isaharn late in the nineteenth century. This Monthon covered the whole of the northeast of modern Thailand and those parts of Cambodia belonging to Siam at that time. A large military base was set up in Korat for the protection of the borders and for internal control. In 1900 a railway was built from Bangkok to Korat, which triggered a first economic boom. Rice mills were established and up to 20 percent of the overall rice export of Thailand was handled through Korat before being sent to Bangkok. Many of the railway workers were Chinese who later settled in the city to use and create economic opportunities. Although Korat was the second largest town in Thailand, it still remained a rather sleepy outpost. Business was based upon and connected to agriculture, rice mills, later cassava mills, and trade with the cities nearer and further surroundings.

Another boom took place in the 1960's connected to the war in Vietnam, when Korat's large military base was used for bombing Cambodia and Vietnam. Partly to support the military infrastructure, and partly as counter-insurgency measures, development projects were sponsored and an infrastructure built. A large road, the so-called friendship highway, was constructed from Bangkok to Nong Khai at the Laotian border passing through Korat. Military spending and the stationing of American troops combined to produce an economic boom, which lasted up to the early 1970's.⁵

In the 1970's and 1980's other regional centres such as Chiang Mai in the North, Haad Yai/Songkhla in the South, Cholburi in the East and Kon Khaen in the Northeast gained in importance, while Korat was left behind. The first university in the northeast of Thailand for example, was established in Khon Khaen, a rather new city, not Korat. The description of Korat in travel guides, as a place where there is nothing to do or see, a place serving only as embarking point for visits to the Khmer ruins of Phimai, was not completely wrong.

When Chatchai Choonhavan became prime minister of Thailand in 1988, this situation changed again. The city of Korat was his constituency where he won with a clear majority. Commonly, the elected Member of Parliament, especially if he becomes minister and even more so when he is the prime minister, is expected to provide resources and support to his province. Although this does not explain the success and boom of the region, the projects initiated during his prime-ministership provided a base for rapid economic development.

Initially the existing Friendship Highway was extended to a four-way highway. Then a new road was built to link the province of Korat with the industrial zones of the eastern seaboard and the new harbour there. In this way Korat gained a direct link to the sea and international markets. In addition, connections with the cities in the north were extended and improved through building new highways. A large container depot is planned as a central facility for the North-east of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and parts of Vietnam. Finally, two large export processing industrial estates have been set up and several more are planned.

While these developments are taking place mainly at the periphery of the city proper, within the inner city three department stores have been established and more are planned and under construction. Several first class hotels were built, although Korat still has hardly any tourist attractions. At the fringe of the inner city, connected to the larger roads, housing estates for middle and higher income groups have been built. All the main banks of Thailand have several branches in Korat. As expression of the boom and the intention to develop Nakhon Ratchasima into a centre beyond the Northeast, a "World Tech" show was held close to the newly established Suranari Technical University, the first 'Technical University' outside of Bangkok. Today Korat is no longer a sleepy provincial city, but a rapidly growing boomtown.

LOCAL IDENTITY BUILDING AND SOCIAL COHESION

As in any other large town, the elite of Korat is far from homogenous, consisting of bureaucrats, intellectuals, professionals and businessmen. These have different and often diverging interests and personal connections beyond the region, making local cohesion or co-operation difficult to achieve. Why for example, should a rich businessman building department stores and hotels in Korat co-operate with a local intellectual writing critical articles in leftist publications? Why should an entrepreneur join hands with a local environmental NGO? To complicate matters even further, Korat is a city of migrants with very diverse ethnic and social backgrounds.

Indicators of social cohesion are personal linkages and membership in associations. In Korat the astonishing fact is that associations, which usually follows conflicting interests co-operate and diverse groups and persons with different interests belong to the same associations. Two core associations are indicative: The Korat Chamber of Commerce (CoC) and the Local Information Centre for Development (LICD).

The Korat Chamber of Commerce is an umbrella organisation for different local groups and other associations. The vice chairman was also chairman of a large local environmental NGO and another leading member of the Chamber of Commerce was the vice rector of the Rajabat Institute, which now has the same status as other national institutes in Thailand (like the King Mongkut Institute

of Technology or the National Institute for Development Administration). He was also a member of a Chinese language club. The Local Information Centre for Development belongs to the Rajabat Institute and is an umbrella organisation for local and regional NGOs. The leading members of the LICD are also members of the CoC and of the alumni clubs of various Bangkok universities. The LICD and the CoC regularly organise seminars in one of the larger hotels on such topics as 'Decentralisation of Power', 'Development Potentials of Nakhon Ratchasima' etc. to which academics, businessmen, NGO representatives, the provincial governor and members of the city council are invited.

Although the local groups, especially business groups, compete with Bangkok-based groups, competition alone does not imply or lead to locally-based social cohesion and co-operation. This competition and conflicts do not dissolve local conflicts. Big business in Korat could improve its position vis-à-vis the local bureaucracy and NGOs through alliances to Bangkok big business, playing an important political role. In a similar way, the Korat NGOs could co-operate with Bangkok-based NGOs, with their political influence and access to foreign funding, to strengthen their own position vis-à-vis opposing local groups. In Korat, however, the local orientation to a considerable degree overrides other interest conflicts. Interviews with different people indicate this strong local orientation in such terms as: "We are the people of Korat", "we have to develop our province" etc. Even persons who studied in Bangkok or abroad have returned to Korat for the reason that "this is my home province".⁶ Especially among younger businessmen, a strong motive is to modernise and beautify the city. Their idea is to make Korat a modern city with all "modern" amenities, but without the problems of Bangkok. From this starting point, the creation of local traditions, symbols and identity markers is important to achieve solidarity and to build up a bond to the locality.

At the centre of these local traditions and as a major symbol of local identity is the Ya Mo (Grandmother Mo) cult. Like any tradition, the cult is connected to historical incidents, which become points of reference for an invented history. In the early nineteenth century a revolt in Vientiane, Laos broke out and an army was heading towards Bangkok. In the course of its approach, the city of Korat was besieged, conquered and all its inhabitants taken as prisoner. Following Chakrabongse (1960: 161) "Every night, while the men were in close captivity, the women were ordered to serve the Laotian officers and men with food and drink. One night the wife of the murdered governor of Korat led other women in luring their Laotian captors into a kind of drunken orgy, after which they were able to free their menfolk, who fought and killed some 2,000 of the Vientiane troops, and were thus able to free themselves and rejoin the Thais". Manich Jumsai (1976) tells the story as follows: "Among the people swept away to Vientiane was the Deputy-Governor's wife, Mo, and all her women colleagues. At night Mo led her women and other compatriots to rise against the Lao guards who were killed... This led Anu (the commander) to believe that the Thais were

coming and he retreated to find a better place to hold out" (Manich 1976: 470). Due to her bravery, Mo was given the title of honour "Thao Suranari".⁷

What is historically verified is the fact of an attack from Laos, in the course of which Korat was conquered. This revolt was defeated by Bangkok troops and in the end Laos became again a vassal of the Bangkok state (Hall 1968: 468). Recently, in an M.A. thesis at Thammasat University (Saiphin 1995), the argument was developed that the whole Ya Mo story is completely fiction, which led to uproar and large-scale demonstrations in Korat, demanding that the whole province be closed to the woman who wrote the thesis.

Whether it is a true historical account or contains elements of fiction, the story of Mo or Suranari is reminiscent of a Chinese Opera play or the story of Judith in the Bible. It does not end, however, with the defeat of the Laotian troops. Suranari died in 1847 of a natural death, and her bones were kept in a special urn in a temple (Wat Salaloi). This urn broke for unknown reasons and her bones were transferred to another temple, where again the urn broke. The explanation given was that her remains had not yet been properly stored and her spirit therefore could not find peace. Finally, a monument was built in 1934 and she has become the protective spirit of the province and city of Korat. There is a departure here from the usual pattern of how protective spirits are born. Her natural death would normally not indicate that she had become a spiritual force, especially a powerful one. Protective spirits are humans who died a violent death, especially pregnant women (Quaritch-Wales 1931). The story of the broken urns may compensate this shortcoming.

Saiphin (1995) argues that the rise of the Suranari cult was based on two factors. Firstly, after the revolt in 1932 in Bangkok, by which the absolute monarchy was abolished, a revolt against the new government (Boworadet Revolt 1933) started in Korat. After its defeat, high-ranking state officials and local people wanted to indicate their alliance with the new political elite in Bangkok and sought permission to erect a statue of Suranari as a symbol of local loyalty to the Siamese state. Secondly, the new government had a strong interest in propagating a people's-nationalism which was different from the nationalism spread by the former King Rama VI, and was thus in favour of such a monument. The members of the older elite were quite surprised by the celebration of Suranari. "Prince Naris wrote to Prince Damrong telling him that he could not understand why such a fuss was being made about her. He told Damrong that the Third Reign Chronicles (when the event had happened) simply noted that she was in charge of local women in the area when the Lao forces arrived on the scene, and not directly involved in any hostilities, no more, no less... For his part, Damrong responded by writing that the idea of having a monument commemorating Thao Suranari was just one more example of how present day thinking is totally at odds with that of the past" (Barme 1997: 212).

In the Ya Mo story several cultural elements are connected. First, Mo appears to be a local woman married to the centrally installed governor (or deputy-

governor) of the province. A linkage between 'local – female' and 'central – male' is thereby expressed. The governor was the leading representative of the state in Korat, responsible for maintaining order and organising protection. This connection between what is 'central', 'powerful' and 'ordered' is weakened in course of the story, as the Thai soldiers were defeated or failed to protect the city against the Laotians. Hence the 'local – female' became the power-base against the barbarian invaders in the final struggle.⁸

Obviously, the Ya Mo story was kept alive in local traditions. In 1934 a monument was built to commemorate Suranari, financed by the state through the provincial governor and local donations mainly from the Chinese population. Sil Bhirasi, an Italian artist living and working in Thailand, designed the monument. In 1987 the foundation collapsed and it was rebuilt, this time by a local architect and the funding for the renovation came entirely from local donations.

The Suranari monument is in front of the rebuilt western gate of the city of Korat, adjacent to the main road named "Suranari Road". This road connects the "new" city, where the railway station is located, with the old quadrangular city. This new city grew after the railway was built early in the nineteenth century. It was extended during the 1960s, when shops, hotels, brothels and bars were set up for American soldiers seeking rest and recreation. While passing the monument, the people pay their respects to the spirit of Suranari and worship her regularly. Stories abound of how her spirit helped people who paid homage to her. Around the monument are several stalls selling flowers and sandalwood sticks for those who want to pay homage or beg for help.⁹

The statue, designed following European fashion, faces west, the direction where Bangkok is located, with her back to the old city of Korat and is at the border between old and new town. Across the street is a Chinese temple. On the land belonging to this temple a stage is erected where the so-called Korat song and play is performed. It is said that the spirit of Suranari enjoys these shows, so people whose wishes have been fulfilled sponsor performances.

The spirit of Suranari is regarded as a very powerful locality spirit. In Korat two additional locality spirits have importance: the city pillar indicating the location of the city spirit and a small building housing the bones of a white elephant.¹⁰ On the façade of a large house overlooking the temple for the city pillar, the story of Suranari has been engraved. The power of the city pillar is regarded as limited to the city proper, while Suranari is regarded as the protector of the whole province and its inhabitants.¹¹

To a large degree, Ya Mo structures the city spatially as well as spiritually. The monument located at the edge of the old city and the new city is in the middle of the modern city of Korat and the province of Korat. It is a point of reference. In addition, it is a central place for urban traffic and most buses pass by it. Thus the place and its surroundings are always very busy. To locate once business close to the monument is regarded as advantageous for spiritual as well as economic reasons, and the streets in the vicinity form the major business

district. The owner of a large department store argued that it was very important to locate the store close to the monument to gain additional spiritual protection. He even wanted to extend the existing department store towards the monument. The name Suranari is often used. Besides the Suranari Road, there is a Suranari Hotel, the Suranari industrial estate, the Ya Mo market and the new university is named Suranari University. In a publication of the Chamber of Commerce, reference is made to Suranari when Korat is described as the 'province and city of brave women'.

Ya Mo certainly is 'the centre' of Korat and the whole province. In a survey in the city of Korat, 90 percent of the respondents regarded the monument as the centre of Korat. About one-third regularly go to the monument to pay homage to Ya Mo or ask for favours. Although in Korat two other locations are connected to powerful locality spirits (the city pillar and the San Chang Puak or temple of the white elephant), 90 percent of the respondents regard the monument as most important and most powerful. A survey among those paying homage at the Suranari monument indicated a large number of people come from elsewhere within the province and even other provinces of Thailand. The reputation of Ya Mo extends far beyond the city and province, not limited to any special social or ethnic groups.¹² Although local traditions are not limited to the Ya Mo cult, it forms a core and point of reference, providing a focus for self-consciousness and pride. Other local traditions (language, food) are elevated as well, strengthening local integration. Several examples can be cited:

The province of Nakhon Ratchasima is by far the largest province of Thailand and it was planned to split it into three. At least two other cities within the province grew rapidly during the last decade (Chokchai and Phak Chong/Si Khiau) and it was planned to promote these districts to the status of province with the cities becoming provincial capitals. Such a promotion implies a largely improved status and various advantages namely an own budget. Astonishingly, this plan faced strong resistance from the people of the districts who wanted to remain 'the children of grandmother (Ya) Mo'.

Another indicator is the name of the province and the city. The old name, dating back to the Khmer empire, is Korat, which is also the geographical name for the whole region: the Korat Plateau. However, the official name of the city and province is Nakhon Ratchasima. Inside the province, people speak only of Korat, not of Nakhon Ratchasima. The people define themselves as people of Korat, certainly not as people of Nakhon Ratchasima. Even most migrants regard themselves soon as people of Korat.

Finally, a special Thai dialect is spoken in the province consisting of various words from the Khmer and Laotian languages and with a pronunciation different from central Thai. Locally this dialect is referred to as 'Korat language' (Phasa Korat). For long it was regarded as a sign of underdevelopment to speak local dialects and not proper central Thai, especially not a dialect that could be identified with 'Laotian'. Now Korat Thai is widely spoken in the province and it

is pointed out that, although different from Bangkok Thai, it is not at all Laotian. One woman felt quite insulted when her language was referred to as Korat Laotian in Bangkok. Her argument was that the Bangkok people have no idea about Laotian and Korat language.

How could such a strong orientation on the province emerge in the context of a strongly centralised state, where namely culture and traditions are defined by the centre? Furthermore, how could the Suranari tradition, which was initially an expression of nationalism and alliance to the centre, be transformed into a local tradition and base for a local identity?

SYNCRETISM, SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND LOCAL IDENTITY

Modernisation demands new forms of integration in which tradition, change, and modernity are combined. The re-construction of traditions and symbols of collective identification through which cultural continuity is achieved is therefore part of modernisation (Eisenstadt 1979: 364-65). The Ya Mo cult can be described as such a “constructed tradition” integrating diverse cultural elements and social groups on a local level. The cult is successful in achieving local integration of diverse groups, because it consists of many diverse elements. Most local groups can identify at least with some of these.

The monument was built to symbolise the spirit of Suranari and her courage in protecting the city of Korat. It was built by an Italian architect following European artistic tastes and values and could have been located in any European city. The building was financed by the Thai state and local donations from businessmen. The governor of the province, sent there from the Ministry of Interior, authorized construction of the monument. The first monument therefore symbolises Bangkok support of the province, a monument of the governor, of the artist, and of local strength to collect sufficient funds for such a monument. The 1987 renovation was financed entirely by local donations with the names of the donators inscribed on the base of the monument. As a result, Suranari became more a local symbol taken care of by locals.

Interesting is a widespread Chinese-based symbolism. Although at the monument no Chinese signs are written, on the opposite side of the street, where the stage used for the Korat song and play is located, Chinese signs are prominent and a Chinese temple is located. The temple is regularly used in ceremonies.

The local context is expressed especially in the Korat song and play. The song and play consist of traditional Thai dances, into which aspects of Khmer and Laotian folk dance and music are integrated. In the songs local myths and comic episodes are recorded as well as stories from the life of Buddha and Suranari. The special Korat song has existed since the 1930s, when the monument was built and the Ya Mo cult was either initiated or had a first revival.

Locals write the stories. It is said that only locals are able to interpret the story of Ya Mo in the correct way.

Obviously, the Ya Mo cult is highly syncretistic. In this respect, the cult provides something for most inhabitants of the city and the province. It points to the desire for freedom and independence, the strength to fight for it, the relation to Bangkok, the difference of Korat compared to the Laotian wilderness from where the army came, modernism in the form of a European style statue, and integration of migrants into Korat everyday life. Furthermore, it provides a local self consciousness, suggesting that the people of Korat can fight for themselves, as Ya Mo showed them in her struggle with the Laotian army.

CONCLUSION

Although economic and social development has been concentrated in Bangkok, its success has led to detrimental effects like traffic jams, expensive land and labour etc. Increasingly, economic growth now depends on decentralisation. In fact, within Bangkok itself decentralisation takes place with the rise of new centres in the surroundings of the city proper. While finance and commerce still are concentrated in the inner city, sustained industrialisation has required the development of regional growth poles. Initially, decentralisation linked to industrialisation began transforming the rural surroundings of Bangkok into industrial suburbs. With the improvement of infrastructure, regional centres have been linked more closely to Bangkok, providing a base for further decentralisation and rapid development of regional centres as locations for trade and commerce, and especially industrial production.

The current boom in Korat is a result of policies and interests of Bangkok-based strategic groups in the context of globalization of the Thai economy. In this context the local elites, be it business-persons, politicians, intellectuals, bureaucrats and others control less resources than their potential competitors from Bangkok. As long as Korat was a backward place with little economic and political relevance, the competition remained limited and because the local resources were of little interest to the Bangkok elites, the local elites could keep their control over them. After Korat was integrated into the infrastructure and developed into a growth pole within the Thai economy, investments in Korat became profitable and accordingly, competition increased. For the local elites forming alliances and solidarity is a chance to reduce domination from the centre and keep local affairs under local control. Based on the revival of local traditions the local elite is able to develop strong social cohesion and solidarity. This allows the preservation and fostering of a certain degree of independence in local and provincial affairs.

In the case of Korat, its local traditions are the bases for the formation of local identities. Their strength is shown by the way in how they bring together

diverse groups with differing interests. Interestingly, this leads not towards separatism, but something like a local/provincial self consciousness in the context of the Thai nation. These Korat traditions are thus an asset in that they imply both a distinction from Bangkok and the construction of a distinctively local identity, connected to an ideology of development, which also provides cultural continuity.

Korat today is neither a satellite of Bangkok nor a province aiming at independence or local autonomy. It is a province integrated into Thailand whose local elites seek with some success to use and develop their local opportunities. Its local traditions are exemplified by the popular Ya Mo cult, which is syncretistic enough for virtually all groups and persons at the local level to identify with. The local identities linked to Ya Mo are inclusive rather than exclusive. The ideology of “we are the children of Ya Mo” overshadows other conflicts of interest in favour of local co-operation.

Surprising as it may seem, globalisation processes tend to strengthen localism. The processes described in Korat are consistent with this observation. Castells (1997) maintains that local identities can develop two contrasting features. “On the one hand, identities that tend to be inclusive use their control of regional institutions to broaden the social and demographic basis of their identity. On the other hand, local societies retrenched in a defensive position build their autonomous institutions as mechanism of exclusion”. Which direction identity formation takes depends on the openness of the political system to account for local interests and the emergence of civil organisations to permit their articulation. In the case of Korat, the democratisation of the political system in Thailand provides the necessary space for the rise of an inclusive local identity. Under these conditions, local identity becomes the basis for real national integration in contradiction to an exclusive nationalism propagated form centres of political power.

NOTES

1. Most widespread are of course national ideologies like patriotism, upholding a national culture and cultural values etc. In Thailand for example a “Board of National Identity” has been established with the task to spread knowledge about Thai culture and devise teaching materials like English language course books with titles like “Thai Culture”, “Thai Identity”, “Love your Country” etc.
2. These two cities had already the function of border towns. The province of Korat used to be the most north-eastern extension of the old Khmer empire. The most important city during that time was Phimai and the temples – fortresses of Phanom Rung.
3. More important border towns of a first order (*muang aek*) were Nakhorn Sri Thamarat in the South and Phitsanulok in the north. These two towns were of a much higher strategic importance, as the Burmese armies usually passed through them in their approach towards the capital city. While the Burmese armies formed a real threat, the Laotian armies in contrast were not regarded as particularly dangerous.

4. Only once, after the fall of Ayudhya, Korat had larger significance, when it was used as base by a noble of the old Ayudhya aristocracy to fight against Taksin, when he had shifted the capital to Thonburi. In the end, Taksin's army conquered Korat and the city was integrated into the new Siamese kingdom.
5. Increasingly though Korat became overshadowed by the new town Khon Kaen. One reason was that the former Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat came from Khon Kaen and tried to modernise this city on the expense of Korat.
6. That young well-educated persons go back to their home province is still unusual in Thailand. In a talk a spokesman of the provincial assembly of Nakorn Sawan pointed at the problem that the children do not want to come back to "outback" boring places full of bureaucratic corruption, Mafia structures etc. after studying in Bangkok. Many businesses experienced continuous problems due to this drain.
7. It is interesting that the governor's or deputy governor's role is limited to being the husband of Mo. No mention is made of what his tasks had been. One may only assume that he was either killed or escaped.
8. An interesting side story concerns the girlfriend of Mo, who helped her in attacking the Laotian soldiers. Her remains are kept in a temple away from the city. The place is hardly known by the people of Korat. The reason given is that she either had an affair with a Laotian soldier or was raped and thus lost her innocence and could not be styled as the Joan of Arc of Korat.
9. The celebration of Suranari has nothing to do with Buddhism, but is closely related to animist and spirit cults found all over Southeast Asia predating the arrival of the "axial religions" in the region. "Ritual and shamanistic activity was usually designed, therefore, for immediate practical ends. Spiritual forces had to be manipulated to cure illness, ensure fertility, increase power, safeguard the living, particularly at dangerous life crises, and ensure that the dead were assisted" (Reid 1993: 137). Moulder (1993) provides a discussion of the relations between animist and spiritual practices and religions in Southeast Asia in the present.
10. White elephants are regarded as sacred and belong to the king. This white elephant died before he was sent to Bangkok in the late eighteenth century, when the Friendship Highway was built, several mysterious accidents happened until the small house was built as the proper place for its bones.
11. Presently, a large Suranari Memorial with several showpieces belonging to her is under construction and in some shops photograph of her can be bought, even though she lived in the first half of nineteenth century. The memorial faces some opposition from the locals. One reason probably was that a market has been demolished to make space for the memorial and that the governor is pushing the construction. One argument is that the memorial is supposed to be the governor's memorial, not the memorial of the Korat's people.
12. This has been put in context though. Although Korat is a city of migrants, most are Buddhist and have no religious problems to engage in spirit cults. There is only a very small Islamic and Christian minority in Korat that does not participate in the cult or participates only marginally. As far as I could find out only one Indian family selling textiles lives in Korat. Most migrants are Chinese, Khmer, Moh and people from Laos. Recently, due to the boom, people from the north and south and parts of the central provinces moved to Korat.

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