

*Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand.* By Katherine A. Bowie. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 393 pp.

For the first sixty years or so of Thai constitutional monarchy government, change and continuity of politics were determined mainly within the small élite classes. That, fortunately, meant coups, counter-coups, murders and assassinations, and other forms of intimidation and betrayal were cultivated and used almost exclusively among and upon the élite themselves. Since politics revolved around a small circle of related people, most of the political violence took place in covert acts and in non-administrative manners.

But this salient aspect of violence in Thai politics was dramatically altered in the massacre of 6 October 1976. In the morning of that day, the municipal police and the Border Patrol Police (BPP) units together with the Red Gaur, Village Scouts, and Nawaphon attacked the peaceful demonstrations in the football field of Thammasat University. Thousands of people, including students and workers, were protesting against the return of the deposed Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn to the country. The unarmed demonstrators were violently and cruelly put down. Many ran for their lives, some three thousand were arrested and, according to official figures, 145 were wounded and 46 died. The 6 October massacre effectively checked the tide of people's politics and participation, especially from the students and underprivileged classes like workers, peasants, and small producers, in political process and system.

It is widely known that the various right-wing groups which violently attacked the demonstrators were organized by the state; the Krating Daeng, or Red Gaur, was established by the military's Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), the Village Scouts by the BPP, and the Nawaphon by the Interior Ministry.

Unlike the Red Gaur, the Village Scout Movement was more complicated and far less clear to many people inside and outside the movement. Bowie's *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* is thus a very important con-

tribution not only to the understanding of the movement itself but also of Thai politics in general, particularly the 6 October event. It is the first book to examine the origins and growth of the Village Scout Movement and how it became entangled in a complex web of class, state, and ideological embroilment.

Bowie's book is anthropological in perspective and she bases her analysis of the Village Scout Movement on the theories of state hegemony and peasant political consciousness. In dealing with the state and its agencies, the author discusses the origin and growth of the Village Scout Movement from its creation by Police Major-General Somkhuan Harikul, chief of the Border Patrol Police Region 4, which covered the upper northeastern Thailand that borders Laos and Cambodia. The movement's initial aim was to mobilize villagers to fight against the growth of communism that the Thai state claimed was infiltrating Thailand from communist Vietnam. Thus established in 1971, the Village Scout Movement was designed to perform counter-insurgency programmes along with the BPP and other security units in the northeastern villages where the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) has launched their armed struggle six years earlier.

In the beginning, the Village Scout Movement grew and performed its duties quietly and slowly. Then came the sudden change between 1975 and 1976 when the movement expanded rapidly from fewer than 100,000 members in 1974 to almost two million members in 1975. Importantly, according to Bowie, the movement came under the royal patronage in 1972. The significance of royal patronage in the meteoric rise of the movement was not surprising given the personal and overt support and involvement of the king and the royal family in its activities. Bowie contends that the effective appeal of the monarchy was due to its becoming increasingly popular towards the end of the military regime in 1973, and especially after the restoration of order and the appointment of the new civilian government amidst the looming unrest in the streets of Bangkok. And it was during the three years from 1973 to 1976, when politics was intensely polarized, that the monarchy shifted its focus to the countryside and the peasants, the traditional support base of the status quo. Thus, in this sense "the monarchy served simultane-

ously as a symbol of progressive reform and of conservative reaction”.

In order to understand the Village Scouts' political consciousness, the author shifts the research and analysis to the Village Scouts' rituals. The Thai state, Bowie contends, turned to the experimentation of rituals in state-nation formation due to its lack of social and cultural institutions capable of shaping popular political consciousness. The state attempted to use initiation rites in the Village Scout Movement to establish its legitimacy in the minds of its citizens. But how much did these rituals succeed? Bowie admitted that she was permitted to enter the Village Scout initiation rite camp because she was an American as well as a former girl scout. The five days of the initiation beguiled villagers into accepting the movement's agenda of nationalism through jokes, skits, songs, and “moments of earnest solemnity”. The initiation thus involved the process of status reversal; that is, elevating people from the lowest echelons of Thai society and making them perceive themselves as pivotal to the ongoing history and development of Thai nation. It also taught the key symbolic episodes from Thai history and unity-building exercises. The Scouts then were encouraged to view themselves as virtuous subjects of a mythological kingdom. The climax came on the last day when the initiates received their royal maroon kerchiefs and thus were transformed from villagers into full fledged Village Scouts.

The rites and rituals in themselves were meaningless or at most functioned as fun games and group identification. But when the rites and rituals, including songs, skits, and activities, were presented within the sacred frame of the official ideology of Nation, Religion, and King, they became reified. The most important symbol of the Village Scouts was the maroon kerchief because it was given by the king. According to Bowie, the maroon kerchief turns out to be more than just a simple political symbol of the movement. It became a sacred object with magical power, able to punish those who showed disrespectful behaviour towards the kerchief, and reward those who revered it.

Bowie is also careful in analysing the ruling classes and state hegemony. From the beginning of the Village Scout Movement, there were many government agencies and personnel involved, which, naturally led to intra-bureaucratic rivalries and conflicts. Here the royal pa-

trouge helped to solve part, if not all, of its organizational problems by helping to facilitate intra-bureaucratic co-operation. In the long run, the success and failure of the movement depended on not only support from state structures but also from the individuals concerned. In the aftermath of the 6 October 1976 coup, the government quickly put a moratorium on the Village Scout Movement as a result of conflicts among the different factions which took over the government.

In all, the book gives a very well-documented history of the Village Scout Movement both from library research and from the author's fieldwork in the village. Bowie also points out a very interesting development of the movement, that is, when the Village Scout Movement moved from the country to town, from counterinsurgency and protecting national security to electoral politics, its objectives and actions also shifted. Of utmost significance, when it moved to the town the Village Scouts supported the right-wing factions in the government and parties and participated in the putsch against the Democrat-led coalition government on the eve of 6 October 1976. This final and extreme episode of the Bangkok Village Scouts deserves another study because their political outlook and performances were not quite the same as the rural-based Village Scout Movement.

THANET Aphornsuvan

---

Thanet Aphornsuvan is Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Thailand.