

SACRED PROTESTS AND BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE

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An unknown assailant stabbed the Thai monk, Phra Supoj Suvacano, to death at his meditation center in June 2005. The monk was an active member of Sekhiyadhamma, an informal organization of socially engaged monks, and was involved in trying to protect the land around the meditation center where he lived in Chiang Mai province from being converted into a tangerine plantation. At first glance, the case seems to be a straightforward instance of land conflict. Put into the broader context of a growing number of monks engaged in environmental activism, the strength of the Thai environmental movement, and the numerous problems the case has encountered, however, Phra Supoj's assassination can be seen as evidence of complex tensions between Buddhist monks engaged in environmentalism and the secular state.

In an article on Thai civic religion, Frank Reynolds (1994) describes the imaginative-symbolic and the practical, programmatic discourses that together form the basis of Thai legal culture. He frames these discourses within the concepts of *chat* (nation, including the people), *satsana* (religion), and *mahakesat* (kingship), the three-part formula of Thai civic religion since the early twentieth century. He examines how various actors in social, legal conflicts use the rhetoric of these concepts to build their arguments. Reynolds points out two main strands in modern Thai Buddhism and how they intersect with Thai civic religion:

The first is basically conservative in that those involved are generally in concert with the mainstream interpretation of Thai civic religion and with the current patterns of Thai politics and law. The second strand

is more radical in that the beliefs and practices of those involved have produced tensions within the status quo and conflicts with the powers that be. (Reynolds, 1994, p. 445)

Reynolds places engaged Buddhists within the second, smaller strand because of their “anti-establishment” perspective (Reynolds, 1994, p. 449).

I would agree with Reynolds that engaged Buddhists in Thailand, especially monks involved in environmental work, tend to challenge the “status quo” and the “powers that be,” including the state. Over time, however, the relationship between “environmental monks” (*phra nak anurak thamachat*, in Thai)¹ and the state keeps shifting as the two respond and adapt to each other. What Reynolds does not discuss is the evolving context within which engaged monks and the Thai state intersect, that is, the process of modernization and the forces it exerts on all parties. Both the state and contemporary Buddhists respond to what David McMahan (2008, p. 5) refers to as “the dominant problems and questions of modernity, such as epistemic uncertainty, religious pluralism, the threat of nihilism, conflicts between science and religion, war, and environmental destruction.” The Thai state has largely accepted aspects of modernity that incorporate capitalist economic development, using material measures of progress and promoting consumption. Socially engaged Buddhists seek ways to alleviate the suffering (the essential goal of Buddhism) that they see resulting from such an approach. To do so, ironically, they themselves adopt aspects of modernity, in particular, concepts of human rights, social justice, and environmentalism. To succeed in this process, McMahan argues “that the tradition be able to engage with a culture’s lived world: the daily repertory of practices, implicit ideas, and dispositions that structure perception and action, allowing people to engage in social intercourse, know what is appropriate and inappropriate, understand what to expect of each other, and discern power relations” (2008, p. 15). A key area in which some Thai monks have assessed power relations in terms of relieving suffering has been the environment.

Environmentalism has become a major site of contestation in Thailand since the mid-1980s. The state, business, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), people’s organizations, and monks, all vie to define concepts of development, environmental problems, and land usage. Forsythe and Walker (2008, pp. 25–26) linked the production of environmental knowledge with the politics of state-making through the use of “environmental narratives.”² They argue that two