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The Festival, the Abbot and the Son of the Buddha

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In northern Thailand it is customary to hold a great festival (*poi luang*) to consecrate and celebrate newly constructed or renovated Buddhist structures. In the village of Ban Tiam, such a festival was held over five days in March 2004.¹ The *poi luang* was held to mark the renovation of the temple's main preaching hall, the installation of new Buddha images and improvements to the temple kitchen. It was an exceptional event.

After days of intense preparation, the festival commenced on March 19, late in the afternoon. A small procession wound its way out of the village, accompanied by drums, gongs and colourful flags. The purpose of the procession was to invite Phra Upakhut to join the festival. Phra Upakhut is locally believed to be the son of the Buddha who resides on the bottom of the small river that winds its way through Ban Tiam's paddy fields. On the outskirts of the village, the procession followed a narrow track down to the river, where the village's lay religious leader recited a prayer of invitation to Upakhut. He then reached into the river and drew out a small stone that was placed on the offering tray that he carried. Upakhut was a small, dark and smooth pebble, about three centimetres high, rounded at the edges and having a shape vaguely reminiscent of a small Buddha image or amulet. During this brief ritual of invitation, the procession was joined by two forest spirits with gruesome heads, toothy smiles and filthy robes. These spirits (*phi kon*) were also coming to join the festival as representatives of the many spirits who had become aware of the *poi luang* due to its



Figure 6.1 Reciting the prayer of invitation to Upakhut.

considerable fame. The procession then made its way back to the village, Upakhut silent on his tray and the spirits dancing around causing mayhem with young children and thrusting what appeared to be prominent erections beneath their robes in the direction of respectable village matrons. “This is just a small ritual”, I was assured, “it will be much more fun in the coming days.” When the procession reached the temple, the spirits had no hesitation in entering, dancing their lurid way inside the compound, until their skins and heads were eventually shed and hidden away in a back room. Meanwhile, Upakhut was installed in a temporary pavilion at the back of the temple compound, next to the spirit house of the temple’s protective spirit. Upakhut was provided with a monk’s robe, begging bowl, water bottle, pillow and fan. He was there to protect the festival. Food offerings were bought to him on the mornings that followed.

March 20 was the formal day of preparation. Friends and relatives of the village’s 120 or so households were already arriving, sharing in food and making contributions to their host household’s merit-making.

Late in the afternoon, a second key ritual took place. The Buddha's ordination objects (*khruang buat*) were presented to the temple. These were taken in procession by the family of the village's lay religious leader, who had made a donation to the temple for the privilege. The procession was accompanied by amplified music, a troupe of young boys playing percussion instruments, the dancing phi kon and a money tree elaborately decorated with paper flowers and 20-baht notes. Until this preliminary offering was made, others in the village could not make their own donations.

The main ritual of the poi luang took place during the night of March 20. This is called the "opening of the eyes of the Buddha". This is a reference to the fact that the new Buddha images had their eyes covered with pads of wax and their heads covered with white hoods. According to ritually informed villagers, the night-long ceremony can be seen as an ordination ceremony for the Buddha images or as training the images (*obrom prajaw*) in the Dhamma. Ban Tiam's abbot explained that the prayers recount the occasion of the Buddha's enlightenment (see also Swearer, 2004: 79). The ceremony involves the night-long chanting of a series of prayers and readings from Buddhist scripture and sermons. The prayers in the preaching hall were conducted by the village abbot, the district ecclesiastical head and his deputy, along with monks from temples within the district and from further afield, especially from the city of Chiang Mai. In all, there were about 20 monks present. At about midnight, a group of virgin (and non-menstruating) girls from the village started to prepare a special dish of sweetened rice (*khaw thip*) in a fenced-off area at the back of the temple compound. The ceremony reached its climax soon after four in the morning, when the cloth and wax coverings were removed from the Buddha images, accompanied by chanting of the eye-opening prayers (*suat boek phranet*). Soon after, the sweetened rice, which had been divided into numerous portions by the village maidens, was presented to the new Buddha images, the monks conducting the ceremony and then the congregation.²

The following two days were devoted primarily to celebration and to the presentation of offerings to the temple. Villagers received guests at their houses, the numbers of guests varying greatly according to the social networks, status and financial position of the receiving households. Guests were served food and drinks and usually made a donation to assist with merit-making and defraying the other costs of the festival. Over the course of these two days, villagers took their donations, elaborately displayed on merit-making money trees,

in procession to the temple accompanied by drumming, amplified music, drinking and, often, the dancing phi kon. Processions were also formed by the numerous merit-makers from other villagers coming as representatives of their own temples and participating in an extensive region-wide system of reciprocal donation and celebration. Arriving merit-makers were welcomed by performances of music and traditional dancing. Some groups from other villages arrived with their own singing and dancing shows. As the days progressed to evening and night, the crowds of merit-makers swelled, almost completely blocking the small road leading down to the temple. Modern and highly amplified bands took to the stage in front of the temple, accompanied, of course, by dancing girls (the “white legs”) in skimpy outfits. By eight or nine in the evening, merit-making had come to an end and the focus was very much on demerit. A large, rowdy and generally inebriated crowd of villagers and guests enjoyed the performances. Young men (and some older ones who should have known better) eagerly handed cash donations to their favourite dancers on stage. At about midnight, the national anthem signalled an abrupt end to the festivities.

March 23 was the final, cleaning-up day of the festival. Some villagers who had been too busy (or drunk) to present their money trees on the previous days formed small processions to the temple. The village women’s group and the youth group also made presentations. Late in the afternoon a merry procession — with snacks in hand and whiskey in bamboo cups — escorted Upakhut and the phi kon out of the village and back down to the river. Upakhut was returned to his watery home and the skins of the spirits abandoned in a clump of trees nearby. The festival had come to an end.

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It is anthropologically commonplace that religious festivals like this are constitutive of something that we might call community. There is an extensive literature on the role of public ritual in creating, enacting, reinforcing and maintaining various forms of collective sentiment. This chapter focuses critically on one specific issue within this vast anthropological literature on ritual — the commonly observed simplification of ritual communication. Durkheim’s work on the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* is a useful starting point. In this classic study, Durkheim writes of the totem as a condensed material manifestation of the diffuse moral force of the Aboriginal clan. “The clan”, he writes,

“is too complex a reality to be represented clearly in all its complex unity” (Durkheim, 1915: 200). Instead recourse is made to a totemic emblem — “the material form under which the imagination represents this immaterial substance” (Durkheim, 1915: 189). Durkheim points to two layers of simplification. First, the clan is represented “under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem” (Durkheim, 1915: 206). This totemic symbol is “simple, definite and easily representable”, in contrast to the complexity of the clan itself (Durkheim, 1915: 220). Second, the totemic species itself is represented by simple geometric figures on ritual objects and on the bodies of clan members. In fact “[i]t is the figurative representations ... that have the greatest sanctity” (Durkheim, 1915: 206). The hold these representations have is automatic, a seemingly emotional response based on condensed moral authority rather than on any rational assessment of “useful or injurious effects” (Durkheim, 1915: 207). Simplified symbols serve both to create and maintain collective sentiments.

Broadly similar observations about the simplification of symbols on ritual occasions have been made by a number of writers, but most relevant in this context is the work of Anthony Cohen (1985).³ From Cohen we learn the important lesson that symbolic simplification lies at the heart of the creation of community. Cohen’s (1985: 16) argument is that “attachment or commitment to a common body of symbols” is the basis of community. What members of a community share in common are the key symbols that, in Barthian terms, distinguish them from outsiders. However, as Cohen points out, the sharing of symbols is not the same as the sharing of meaning. The meanings attributed to shared symbols are not uniform within the community of members. There is considerable room for individual interpretation. This variation does not undermine the symbolic construction of community because symbols of community are vague, simple, superficial and unelaborated. Unelaborated symbols are able to accommodate the diversity of meanings that more elaborated or specific symbols could not. Community exists in what has been called “an excess of banalities” (Howell, 2002: 94).

This chapter provides a critically sympathetic exploration of this conceptual framework. There is no doubt that Ban Tiam’s great festival is a ritual event, or a series of ritual events, in which simplified symbols of community are mobilised, energised and enacted. It is an exceptional event which “set[s] collectivity in motion” (Olaveson, 2001: 110). The festival asserts the virtue of communal enterprise and marks the community as a sacred entity through the deployment of particular

forms of symbolic representation. However, in the symbolic construction of community, the festival has important limitations. In most general terms, the simplification of symbols becomes unsustainable. Despite the exceptional nature of the festival — and the various ritual efforts to demarcate the sacred — the symbols deployed cannot shake off the diverse meanings that proliferate in day-to-day life. They are entangled symbols. Ultimately this reflects the fact that community is constructed not just symbolically but also through day-to-day social relations and in these relations the simplified symbols of community are an ambiguous and contentious basis for action.

THE SUAN HUAM

The Thai word most usually translated for community (*chumchon*) is infrequently used in Ban Tiam.⁴ There is, however, a more general term that appears to encapsulate much of the sentiment and sociality associated with the concept of community. The term is *suan huam*, which can literally be translated as ‘the group as a whole’, ‘common’ or ‘collective’. As will become clear, there is an array of meanings associated with this term. Nevertheless, there is what might be called a core or simplified meaning underpinning the term’s use in relation to, and during, public rituals such as the *poi luang*. In this simplified sense, stripped of all ambiguity, the *suan huam* denotes a morally desirable domain of common endeavour. Activities falling within this *suan huam* domain include, for example, taking up positions on the village’s various committees; attending meetings; contributing labour to public works; contributing to the management or maintenance of irrigation systems; assisting with the organisation of public activities; participating in festivals and collective rituals; assisting with food preparation at funerals and other large gatherings; and voluntary work for the various village welfare associations. These *suan huam* activities are stereotypically locally based and oriented to the village (*ban*, another key term in this constellation of meaning). Activities in the public domain outside the village are only really part of the *suan huam* to the extent that they involve attempts to assist the village in some way, such as representing the village at a district-level planning meeting. The *suan huam* also embraces key collective assets such as the temple, not so much because of the way they are managed or used — though this is by no means irrelevant — but because they are seen as physical manifestations of previous collective enterprise. The *suan huam* is

surrounded semantically by broadly inclusive kinship terms, most commonly *pho mae phi nong* (parents and siblings) a term that is often paired with *ban haw* (our village) to convey a general sense of localised solidarity and interdependence. It is also symbolically close to ideas about tradition (*prapheni*), with many *suan huam* activities routinely justified in terms of their role in the maintenance of tradition. Conversely, one of the most common ways in which the decline of the *suan huam* is expressed is in terms of a decline of traditional practices.

The moral desirability of the *suan huam* is based on its contrast with another key term in local discourse, *suan tua*. This latter term can be literally translated as referring to the personal or the individual, though in Ban Tiam its contrast with *suan huam* more often refers to matters of the household (*ban*, but in quite a different sense to *ban* as village) and the family (*khopkhrua*). There is a strong sense in which *suan huam* activities are seen as diverting time, labour, money and other resources away from this more private domain. As such, the *suan huam* has the moral force of altruism, and involvement in *suan huam* activities is often spoken of as involving some level of sacrifice (*sia sala*). Here there are close parallels with the broader Buddhist emphasis on the moral value of the “selfless giving of gifts” (Tambiah, 1970: 342). Those who make these sorts of sacrifice are regarded as the appropriate occupants of leadership positions within the village. When criticised, village leaders often respond indignantly, referring to the extent of personal sacrifice they have made for the *suan huam*. In the days leading up to the *poi luang*, there were regular discussions about who should be the new head of the village women’s group, a position that had recently fallen vacant. The two key candidates were assessed explicitly in terms of their history of sacrifice for the *suan huam*. Both key contenders were ‘active in the community’ but, in the view of some village opinion leaders, only one of them was regularly involved in a way that involved sacrifice. The preferred, and ultimately successful, candidate was locally renowned for her contribution to the women’s group and the health group and was a much sought-after cook at public gatherings such as weddings and funerals. These activities have bought her little personal benefit, as reflected in the parlous state of her own family’s economic position. In Durkheim’s terms, the *suan huam* can be seen as a more or less sacred domain that is set off from the profane domain of day-to-day private concerns by the act of sacrifice.

Here we have an understanding of the *suan huam* in its most formalised sense. Deeper exploration, however, reveals a high degree of fragmentation and ambiguity. Another important way of understanding

the *suan huam* is in terms of the numerous projects (*khrongkan*) that appear to be the key preoccupation of village politics. These *khrongkan* are usually local initiatives aimed at mobilising funds for local development activities and are typically justified in terms of their *suan huam* character. While working in the village, I have become aware of a large number of these projects. Here is a sample: a community shop; a wood-carving project; a music group; support for children with disabilities; lighting for public events; construction of visitor facilities in the nearby national park; a new concrete pavilion for the village territorial spirit; a handicraft centre; uniforms for the women's group to wear on public occasions; new stoves for the temple kitchen; a village history project; dolomite for the paddy fields; funds for the leaders of one of the irrigation groups to travel to the irrigation office to request further funds for renovation of the irrigation system; a toilet for the community shop; the banana group; the proposed village cultural centre; and the community rice mill. These are communal projects and they are regularly referred to as *suan huam* activities that provide for generalised benefit (*prayort*). The word 'community' (*chumchon*) is sometimes used to make them attractive to potential donors in the government and non-government sectors. But it is crucially important to note that these *suan huam* projects bring together quite specific coalitions of interests and are the focus of ongoing conflict within the village about the allocation of resources and the distribution of benefits. Most projects are subjected to withering criticism and gossip, including regular allegations of financial mismanagement and misappropriation, by those who support other elements of *suan huam* activity.

These persistent conflicts often revolve around what might be called the moral economy of the *suan huam*. As I have shown, in its most simplified domain of meaning, the *suan huam* refers to activities that benefit a broad group of people, ideally the entire village. However, in its deployment in the world of projects, *suan huam* refers to more narrow fields of activity and benefit based on often temporary and sometimes unlikely coalitions. In this more fragmented and ephemeral domain, the relationship between *suan huam* and *suan tua* also starts to shift and the clear distinction starts to break down. In fact it is broadly accepted that many of those who are active in the *suan huam* will gain some private benefit for themselves or for their family, kin and close friends. As such, while there is a flow of resources — labour in particular — from the *suan tua* to the *suan huam*, there is general acceptance that some level of benefit — cash and goods — will flow back in the other direction. The *suan huam* here is associated less with

altruistic giving than with calculated exchange. The key is to maintain this exchange at a level that is appropriate and which, in particular, avoids overly explicit advantage at the expense of others. For example, using suan huam funds to support a private money-lending business (with high rates of interest) is generally seen as an inappropriate diversion from the suan huam to the suan tua. Using donated funds to visit a mistress in the city, however, is broadly acceptable, provided sufficient of the funds are paid back in time (perhaps even diverted from another suan huam fund) to avoid overly conspicuous budgetary anomalies. Giving family and friends first choice of donated clothing is probably also acceptable, provided a reasonable proportion of the clothing finds its way to people regarded as deserving of charity. Nevertheless, this is a highly unstable and contested area of public life. In the absence of unambiguous sacrifice, the boundary between the sacred domain of the suan huam and the profane domain of the suan tua becomes blurred. It is at this blurred conceptual frontier that conflict erupts.

Suan Huam Symbolism and the Great Festival

The suan huam was symbolically conspicuous throughout the great festival (poi luang). Prior to the festival the village was cleaned, decorated and widely advertised. An impressive new village sign was erected at its main entrance. In the days leading up to the festival, regular announcements over the village-wide loudspeaker system urged participation in the festival, with the public exhortations constantly resorting to the suan huam language of village, kinship and tradition. During the great festival itself, the collective was expressed and created through the simple fact of assembly: community was created through proximity (Rappaport, 1999: 84; Tambiah, 1970: 57). Large numbers of Ban Tiam's residents assembled both for the consecrating rituals and the public entertainment. The suan huam became clearly evident as a result of physical proximity, with crowds literally jammed into the narrow road leading to the temple and an inescapable cacophony of sound: drumming, highly amplified music and ritual chanting coming from the temple itself. For much of the festival, the cacophony of sound was such that individual conversations were forced to give way to the babble of Durkheimian effervescence. Village traditions were resurrected, learnt and performed. Elaborately dressed village girls performed graceful Thai dances and an orchestra of school children performed northern Thai tunes.

That this was an exceptional time of collective assembly was made clear in a *sor* performance that took place on the first full day of the festival. *Sor* is a distinctively northern Thai form of musical performance, much appreciated by the audience. It is not unlike rap in its use of repetition, rhyme and irreverence:

Everyone please come. Come and form processions together. When we don't have festivals, we don't see the faces of our relatives. Some people are trading, some people are working, coming and going. But today we will unite to make merit. We will have music. We will lift the low things up high. We will commit to make merit.... When we don't have a festival, we don't meet. We are drunk with buying and selling and we don't meet. When we have a great festival, we come together to meet.... Working hard for a living, working hard for whiskey. The grandmother is looking after the grandchildren. If we don't have a festival, we don't have merit and we don't have music. Some people are relatives but they don't visit each other. Now we have problems because we don't meet together. We can come together and have fun as brother and sister. Some people don't talk to each other but today we will talk together non stop.... We will be together as brothers and sisters, even though we are not born from the same stomach. We will come and help each other. We love unity.⁵

Later the performer sang the praises of the village, comparing it to places outside where the young people pursue education and do not help to harvest rice, where the girls wear spaghetti-strap tops and show off their pierced navels and the boys dye their hair red. In Ban Tiam, by contrast:

They have used their tradition to build a new preaching hall. The brothers and sisters from their various houses don't just disappear. They are good clean hosts and help each other as a group to make merit. And they help each other to protect culture, they dance and have beautiful parades. When the faithful come to make donations they don't argue. Their parades are lots of fun. They are very good people. They don't play cards or have cock fights. They don't play 'high-low'. They are a model village. They even have a foreigner who has come to study them.

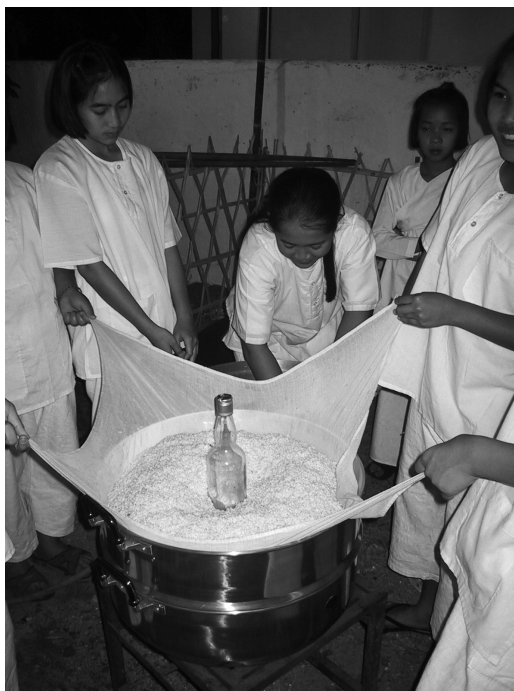


Figure 6.2 The village maidens preparing the “rice that has never suffered”.

The sense of collective moral virtue is expressed most explicitly during the central ritual of the great festival, the all night “opening of the eyes” of the new Buddha images. Many people are present at this event but the village is most vividly represented by the white-clad virgins who prepare the sweetened rice that is presented to the Buddha images, the assembled monks and ultimately the congregation. During the “eye-opening” ritual, the virgins are physically demarcated by a temporary fence surrounding the area where the rice preparation takes place. No one else can enter this area or even pass anything into it. Here the *suan huam* is represented in its most simplified, pure and detached form. Donning white robes, the young girls temporarily enter into — in fact they are said to be ordained (*buat*) — a clearly demarcated community of world renouncers. Unencumbered by sexual relationships — or, on this night, the worldly concerns of menstruation — they are well placed to express the moral value of altruistic giving. The night is long and the work is difficult and their disinterested sacrifice is clearly evident. The rice they prepare is referred to as the “rice that has never suffered”, sweetened sacred rice that is, like the virgins themselves, detached from

the day-to-day dealings of production, distribution and consumption. Unlike most other rice, this sweet rice is consumed communally, uniting the congregation in a sacred communion that, as one villager told me, dates from the time of the Buddha himself.

These, then, are some of the ways in which the great festival represents and enacts Ban Tiam's *suan huam*. The village is constructed in terms of a morally valued common purpose. A sacred state of collective enterprise is set apart from the profane world of individual, day-to-day pursuit. But a large and complex festival like this requires considerable planning and coordination, quite apart from the effort involved in actually achieving the temple renovations. Here Durkheim's model of a seemingly spontaneous and clear-cut transition from the profane time of economic pursuit to the sacred time of ceremony becomes more symbolically complex. As recent analysts of ritual as performance have argued, there are important logistical challenges involved in staging effective and compelling ritual (Alexander, 2004). The great festival faced two key challenges: the mobilisation of labour and the mobilisation of funds. Though exhortations rich with the symbolism of the *suan huam*'s disinterested virtue have a role to play in this mobilisation, these resource challenges were met primarily through administrative elaboration, drawing on idioms and practices much more resonant with the *suan huam*'s broader set of project-related meanings. Communal ritual may well be "a mechanism that periodically converts the obligatory into the desirable" (Olaveson, 2001: 98) but the shadow of obligation is ever-present as simplified symbols become entangled with the complexities of day-to-day politics.

A brief consideration of the days immediately before the festival provides a good indication of the scale of the labour mobilisation challenge. During this period I observed the following activities: the temple itself was elaborately decorated both inside the preaching hall and outside; a supplementary water supply system was installed to cater for the many guests; flags were placed along both sides of the village's main road; a new village sign was erected; banners advertising the festival were prepared and strung up in other villages; numerous items of ritual paraphernalia were prepared, usually requiring the careful cutting, folding and pinning of banana leaves, flowers and other raw materials; large numbers of presents were purchased and wrapped for the festival's distinguished guests; two large stages were erected outside the temple gates; loudspeaker systems were installed; the village's drains were hosed out; vacant blocks of land in the vicinity of the temple were stripped

of all vegetation to provide for car parking; “beautiful” electric lights to illuminate the car parks were installed; temporary fences and signs were erected to direct guests; members of the village women’s group went to Chiang Mai to buy supplies and disposable plates for the food that would be served at the temple; practice sessions for dancers and musicians were held late into the night; costumes for performers were prepared and those who would be applying make-up to the dancers were carefully trained.

The festival also required significant financial resources and each household in the village, regardless of financial position, was required to contribute 400 baht. This was a cause of some resentment, particularly among poorer members of the community, though in the end it was reported that only one “stingy” household had failed to contribute. The levy was justified by the village head as being considerably lower than that levied by other villages on similar occasions and also as being barely sufficient to cover the various costs of staging the festival. A large donation was also made by the richest man in the village, a substantial landowner and the district’s representative in the provincial assembly. The great festival was timed to take place just after the election for the new provincial assembly, in which he was seeking re-election.

The mobilisation of labour and finances was achieved through a series of committees. At a village meeting held about two weeks before the festival, no fewer than 12 committees were formed. Despite the fact that there were only about 40 people at the meeting, a total of 72 people were recruited onto the various committees, illustrating the mobilising ambition of this bureaucratic procedure (the village has about 120 households). Committees included: the financial planning committee; the committee for Buddha images; the electricity and loudspeaker committee; the advertising committee; the law and order committee; no less than four financial committees; the hospitality committee; the cleaning up committee; and the committee for coordinating food and drinks. Of the 72 committee members, only four were women, three of them making up the food and drinks committee. This process of committee formation, though in this case rather elaborate, is typical of the mode of operation in the *suan huam*’s project domain. Here the moral desirability of the simplified *suan huam* domain is less relevant than the ability of committee members to use their personal networks and influence to draw people into their various areas of responsibility. There is nothing inevitable about this mobilisation. It is not uncommon for key people to withdraw from aspects of public festival activity.

In fact this appears to be an important mode of expressing displeasure, not with the collective writ large (the simplified *suan huam*) but with specific people in it. For example, at a much smaller festival held a few months before the great festival, one of the women most skilled at creative handicrafts — essential for the production of ritual paraphernalia — refused to participate as a result of her husband's dispute with the village headman about illegal timber cutting.

This bureaucratisation of ritual preparation comprehensively entangles the simplified symbolism of the *suan huam* with its more fragmented and contested meanings. The challenge of marking off a morally desirable *suan huam* becomes all the more difficult as a result of the resource mobilisation required for the staging of a successful festival. The problem is that the collective must be mobilised before it can be ritually enacted. Attentions, energies and passions come to be focused on the *suan huam* as a domain of compulsion, negotiation, political promotion and budgetary shenanigans. This bureaucratic elaboration provides numerous opportunities for conflict and for elaboration of the persistent discourse about the appropriate balance between the *suan huam* and the *suan tua*.

At the meeting held to form the various *poi luang* committees, a bitter dispute erupted as to how some of the festival's expenses were to be met. At one stage Jakkrit spoke up saying that his wife and a number of her friends were teaching traditional dancing to a group of young girls who would perform at the festival. He asked that they be allocated some funds to buy cosmetics for the girls and perhaps provide them with a small amount of pocket money. He suggested that this money could be provided from the funds that the village had received as compensation for trucks passing through the village from an illegal sand-mining venture in the adjacent national park. This question was directed primarily to Attajak, who was the chairperson of the village's natural resources committee. Attajak is a highly influential but controversial figure in the village: he is one of its richest men as a result of his successful farming, shopkeeping and money-lending activities; he occupies a key position on the temple committee; and he is a key political rival of the current headman. Attajak responded to the request by stating that the members of the natural resources committee had taken the initiative in relation to requesting the compensation money and had divided the money between themselves as payment for their efforts. Aranya, one of the dance teachers, responded that the villagers on the natural resources committee had been selected to work for the

suan huam and that there had been no talk of payment at the time of their selection. Someone from the back of the room added: “again and again the money is gone, there is nothing we can do”. As tempers rose, various people urged Aranya and Jakkrit to drop the matter and the meeting soon moved on to the selection of the great festival committee members. But an important statement had been made: Attajak had asserted the right of those who worked for the suan huam to receive payment for their efforts. Coming from the man who, as a result of his position on the temple committee, would be managing the funds raised during the great festival, this was a fundamentally destabilising statement. The morally valued altruism of the simplified suan huam domain was, in a sense, contaminated by its contact with the world of projects, budgets and faction-ridden committees.

THE TEMPLE AND THE ABBOT

It is an anthropological truism that the rural Thai temple is a key expression of the collective identity of the village community (Moerman, 1966; Ingersoll, 1966: 68; Somboon, 1977: 20) and there is no doubt that Ban Tiam’s temple was the symbolic focus of the great festival. The temple is a concrete representation of the suan huam. The various buildings in the temple compound are substantially the product of suan huam labour and financial contribution, with the donations of the faithful carefully noted on the numerous signs that dot the temple compound. The temple is, quite literally, inscribed with the sacrificial flow of resources from the suan tua to the suan huam. Its prosperity not only symbolises the suan huam but is also an explicit indexical measure of it. For the duration of the festival, the temple was elaborately decorated with banners, flags, rosettes and ritual offerings. The roads leading to it were lined with decorative flags and its gardens adorned with flowering plants. The open space in front of the temple compound was the site of the major public assemblies and the communal property stored at the temple — cooking utensils, tables, chairs, canvas awnings, public address systems and electric lighting — was on conspicuous display. In brief, the great festival marks, celebrates and enacts the central position of the village temple in suan huam endeavour.

The abbot (Tu Sonthi)⁶ is the primary representative of the temple in village affairs. Obviously he paid a crucial role in both organising the renovations and the festival itself. This management role sits easily with the suan huam ideal of altruistic effort for the common good. The

formal name adopted by the abbot when he entered the monkhood reflects, through carefully chosen linguistic referents, his alignment with the community-wide objective of development. This alignment and the extent of the abbot's sacrifice for the *suan huam* was emphasised during the *sor* performance:

Tu Sonthi is a virtuous and kind man. He is the ecclesiastical head for the sub-district. He has the patience to develop this temple. Even when it's rainy or windy, he does not give up. He has many followers from many villages and they respect him highly. He lives in the temple and uses donations to develop it. He thinks about construction and renovation. And he doesn't take any money at all out of the temple. He has many followers from other villages and cities and is the abbot of the temple. He doesn't concern himself with commerce. He is a man with a lot of money. But he uses the money for the renovation of the temple. He doesn't take the money for any other purpose. He uses it to restore the preaching hall of the temple.

In this simplified account, Tu Sonthi is a personification of *suan huam* virtue. However, this is a formalistic and fragile construction that bears little scrutiny. In fact the abbot is a divisive and controversial figure. The recent history of this dates to Sonthi's elevation to the position of abbot. This followed the sudden death of the previous abbot, an elderly monk said to have had considerable sacred power. There were two contenders for his position, Sonthi and Phaithoon. In the normal course of events, Phaithoon would have become abbot. He was, from all reports, well liked in the village, though at the same time considered somewhat unusual because of his effeminate manner and his particular skill in what were considered to be feminine handicrafts. But Phaithoon's elevation was scuttled by an extraordinary event. When the temple committee was cleaning out the deceased abbot's room, a pair of women's underpants was apparently found under his pillow. Accusations — perhaps encouraged by Sonthi — were directed against Phaithoon. The central accusation was that he had murdered the former abbot by bringing his sacred head into close proximity with the spiritually defiling underwear. The incident split the village along kinship lines. Sonthi's kinship connections were impeccable. His father's brother was a previous headman, as was his paternal grandfather. And his father's sister was (and still is) married to the sub-district head — the same man, in fact, who was the main donor for

the poi luang. Not surprisingly, Sonthi triumphed. Phaithoon was persuaded by his family to leave for a temple in another district, where he remains to this day. He visited the village during the great festival but played no part in the main public rituals.

Concerns about Sonthi's controversial elevation resonate with more recent concerns about his behaviour as abbot. Among some sections of the village there is considerable gossip about Sonthi's personal habits: his abrupt and hectoring manner and his liking for cigarettes, alcohol and dubious DVDs. However, the more persistent concern is that Sonthi uses his quintessentially *suan huam* position for personal gain and to enrich his immediate family, who are already affluent and well connected. Suspicious were aroused by, for example, anomalies in the receipts produced for temple expenses. Some villagers suggested that the abbot and members of the temple committee were cooperating in diverting temple funds into their own pockets. There were also quietly spoken claims that Sonthi was involved in the trading of timber illegally cut from the nearby national park. Around the time of the great festival a number of other stories and complaints were circulating. One related to the temple photocopier, for which Sonthi charged two baht per page, despite that fact that it had been purchased with village donations. Even more scandalous was the rumour that Sonthi had used temple funds to install a closed-circuit television in some of the buildings of the temple compound, something considered an unnecessary luxury and an indulgence in personal play-things. When the young women gathered at the temple just before the great festival to wrap the presents that were to be given to visiting monks and other dignitaries, there was hushed talk of being careful not to steal anything as the abbot would be watching. One of the women stood and pointed her bottom towards an imaginary camera and, accompanied by much laughter, invited the abbot to take a good look. During the festival a rumour also emerged that Sonthi would be taking a payment of 10,000 baht for his role in officiating at the festival. This was seen as particularly unacceptable in the light of the financial hardship the festival had imposed on some households within the village. The village headman remonstrated with me when he heard that I had donated 2,000 baht to assist with the purchase of robes for some of the visiting monks. He suggested that my money would have been better spent on one of his projects, in this case the purchase of uniforms for the village soccer team.

So, at one level, the abbot symbolises the virtue of collective enterprise and personal sacrifice for the common good. This is the nature of his role, a role that is symbolically marked by bodily transformation (the shaved head), clothing (the monk's robe) and the outward trappings of a monastic lifestyle. However, this simplified and unelaborated representation starts to unravel when aspects of the person, rather than the role, are emphasised. These alternative meanings strain the credibility of the simplified symbolic construction. These alternative meanings regularly circulate within the village, but they gained particular salience on the occasion of the great festival because it focused attention on issues of resource mobilisation, budgetary management and the abbot's control of communal property. While the great festival celebrates and consecrates the collective effort involved in renovating the temple, it also strengthens the view that the temple is an unworthy site of communal enterprise and an unworthy recipient of private donation. Its simplified status as a *suan huam* institution is compromised by the view that the abbot has breached the subtle moral economy of exchange between collective benefit and private gain.

UPAKHUT

A focus on the figure of Upakhut provides a rather different perspective on the great festival. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Upakhut is represented by a small stone that is taken from the river and installed at the temple to watch over the festival. Upakhut is a complex figure with a number of different mythical explanations.⁷ The complexity of this symbolism appears to be inversely proportional to the simplicity of his physical representation (Davis, 1984). In northeast Thailand, Upakhut is sometimes referred to as a swamp spirit (*phi*) (Sparkes, 2005: 185), though I have rarely heard him referred to as a *phi* in Ban Tiam. Nor is he ever referred to as a *jaw* (lord), the term used for more powerful tutelary spirits. But he does have close relations with spirits given that his usual home is in a natural setting. This setting is seen as giving him the power of coolness, which is bought into the village to counter the potentially disruptive 'heat' generated by the great festival. Two forest spirits accompany him into the village and, when he is summoned from the river, a small offering is made to the territorial spirit (*jaw thi*) in the vicinity, requesting permission to take him. It was no accident that Upakhut was taken from the river adjacent

to a large and old tree, the typical home for tutelary spirits. Other occasional offerings made to Upakhut in Ban Tiam are very similar to the offerings sometimes made to *phi khun nam* (river guardians) in northern Thailand.

However, while Upakhut is clearly associated with the spiritual forces of nature, he is more readily associated with the domesticated and civilised power of Buddhism. One woman made the important comment that “Ban Tiam is only a small village with one temple, unlike the city of Chiang Mai where there are many temples, so Upakhut is needed to come and offer his protection.” According to one villager, the close relationship between Upakhut and the Buddha is signalled by the similarity of sound and rhythm in their names: *phra upakhut* and *phra phutthajaw*. Most often, however, the link is made by suggesting that Upakhut is, in fact, the son of the Buddha. The broad outline of the story of his conception is that the Buddha was bathing in the river and some of his semen came to be ingested by a water creature that, as a result, gave birth to Upakhut. In most local versions, the water creature is a fish of no particular type, though some suggest that the creature was in fact a *nguak*, perhaps best translated as ‘mermaid’. There are different explanations for how the Buddha’s semen came to be in the water, though all avoid any suggestion of the Buddha’s active involvement in the conception. Most suggest that the semen just “dropped” (*tok long*) into the water. A more refined version, recounted to me both by a monk and by a villager who had spent a significant period as monk, was that while he was sleeping (and dreaming) the Buddha emitted semen onto his robe. When he washed the robe in the river, a fish ate the semen and became pregnant.

In order to appreciate the significance of Upakhut, it is necessary to consider the extra-local character of the poi luang festival. This may seem to something of a diversion, but it is essential in order to approach a more nuanced understanding of the nature of modern northern Thai community. As I have indicated, the central ritual of the poi luang festival is the night-long ‘opening of the eyes’ of the Buddha. During this ritual, the Buddha images are quite literally charged with sacred power. As Swearer (2004: 78) suggests, the ceremony involves the transformation of a material image into the form of the Buddha. This charging is achieved by the chanting of sacred texts. In order to maximise the sacred potency of the chanting, monks from a wide network of temples are invited to participate. Special letters of invitation (*tikanimon*) are despatched through the district and provincial temple

networks, some nominating esteemed monks whose attendance would be desirable. In some cases attendance is considered automatic because of personal connections between the abbots or an established history of reciprocal visiting. Local sacred potency is established by drawing in sources of potency from outside the village.

This external ritual orientation is matched in other aspects of the festival. For many villagers, the status of Ban Tiam is expressed in its ability to attract large numbers of people to the festival. In the days leading up to the festival I was regularly told that there would be huge numbers of guests “from near and far” coming to help the local villagers make merit and to join in the festivities. While one of the key terms highlighting the suan huam dimension is *phi nong ban haw* (brothers and sisters of our village), a sense of external connection is conveyed by the broader but similar *yat phi nong* (relatives):

The festival is the blessing of Ban Tiam. Our relatives from far away will come and join us to make merit. Anything not good has to be fixed. Places to stay and things to eat have to be prepared. This is how we welcome them. The food has to be ready. Relatives will be coming from other sub-districts, from other districts, from other villages. There will be relatives from Chiang Dao, even Fang. Everyone’s relatives have to come and join us because it is a really big occasion for making merit. It is a very famous festival.

One of the most important manifestations of this external network was the arrival of numerous *hua wat*, probably best translated as the ‘representatives of temples’, from other villages. In the days before the festival, I was told that the village could expect perhaps 300 *hua wat* to come and make merit. The system was explained in reciprocal terms: Ban Tiam villagers had participated in the festivals of those temples so they could be expected to reciprocate the honour. As it happened, over 100 *hua wat* came to the festival, arriving in noisy groups carrying the money-tree offerings aloft, dancing, clapping, beating drums and joining in the festivities. Some provided their own performances on the stages erected in front of Ban Tiam’s temple. Most carried banners announcing the name of their temple. There were many representatives from neighbouring villages and districts and a number of temples from Chiang Mai city were also represented. There was a strong sense that the most distant temples were the more important and the local welcoming dances were organised primarily for the temples from other districts. As one woman said, “we don’t need to dance to welcome the temple from the village across the fields”.⁸

Of course these external linkages are not without risks and it was well recognised that ritual effervescence may result in an explosion of the volatile combinations bought together. There was also the potential for the fame and reputation of the great festival to attract “bad people who will make trouble”. A particular concern was that fights would break out among the young men, especially members of the “gangs” for which Chiang Mai and its surrounding districts have become famous. There was also the risk of theft. Theft is not unknown in the day-to-day life of the village and those suspected of theft are subject to enduring gossip, but the presence of large numbers of people unevenly integrated into kin networks and moral codes greatly heightens the risk. My host warned me many times that I should keep my shoulder bag, containing my money, camera and other effects, on my person at all times during the festival. There were also more mundane logistical concerns: that food would be sufficient; that domestic water supplies could cope with the influx of guests; that parking of cars would be orderly; and that the weather for the festival would be satisfactory. With the large number of people assembled and the enormous amount of electrical equipment set up outdoors, rain would have been highly disruptive.⁹

So, once again it is evident that the ideal symbolic state of the festival was entangled with the logistical realities of staging it. But how does all this relate to the figure of Upakhut and my broader concern with the symbolic construction of community?

Upakhut is an infrequent visitor to the village. All of the villagers questioned stated that he is only invited to the village for these great festivals. Some reported that offerings are made to him on other occasions, especially when the full moon falls on a Wednesday, but these are small-scale and essentially private offerings undertaken in the river at some distance from the village. But his role at the prestigious great festival is crucial and without him the festival is considered to be “not appropriate”. His primary role is to protect the peace and security of the festival (*raksa ngan*). He is a sacred entity (*sing saksit*) that possesses coolness (*khwam rom yen*) and he brings this coolness from his cool and watery home to the village itself for the duration of the festival. This protective role appears to be widespread (Sparkes, 2005: 186). The legendary charter for this role derives from the Sanskrit account of Upakhut’s role in subduing Mara at a festival organised by the great king Asoka (Strong, 1991: Chapter 5). None of the villagers in Ban Tiam make specific reference to this story, though it is present in

northern Thai iconography and legend. However, they do repeatedly emphasise Upakhut's role in maintaining peace and harmony at the festival. The spirits that accompany Upakhut play a similar role. There is a real concern that the reputation of the festival will attract spirits from far and wide, who will want to come and join the celebrations and make mischief or disturb (*ropkuan*) the festival. To prevent this, two representatives of the spirits are specifically invited, with the declaration that "this village already has two spirits so others are not welcome".

There are two important points to be highlighted in relation to Upakhut. First, in many respects Upakhut symbolically underlines the weakness and fragility of the local *suan huam*. Despite the constant symbolic emphasis on harmony, goodwill, and collective merit-making, there is an underlying recognition that the *suan huam* is fragile and that the time of collective assembly is a time of heightened vulnerability. Of course, attempts are made to attribute the problematic aspects of assembly to a clearly demarcated outside, to troublemakers from those other places where girls "expose their navels and boys dye their hair red". However, this demarcation is unsustainable, precisely because the success of the festival depends on mobilising external networks to assist in the recharging of local power and potency. The Buddha images and the village are charged primarily by external power, not by the moral force of the local collectivity. So, in order to secure protection during this period of heightened vulnerability, the villagers of Ban Tiam draw on powerful entities whose usual home is well outside the village. Upakhut is invited from the river but his real home lies in a great palace beneath the sea. And the spirits who join him are unambiguously forest spirits, covered in filth and behaving in ways that mark them as lying outside the domain of the village. Ban Tiam's own territorial spirits — and there is no shortage of them — play no significant role in the great festival.

Second, while Upakhut underlines the hazards and fragility of the *suan huam*, he is perhaps the most effectively simplified and idealised representation of it. Upakhut works for the common good with no hint of earthly reward or entanglement. If only, for the purpose of the great festival, Ban Tiam could have an abbot like Upakhut. He lives alone in a watery home, a palace perhaps, but clearly an other-worldly one. He possesses the detached coolness of the forest meditator. He is installed in a modest pavilion with the simple possessions of a monk. He does not receive elaborate offerings, only a small daily serving of rice. At the end of the festival he is returned to the river to resume his

solitary life. In other words, Upakhut represents an ideal of altruistic effort for collective, rather than private, benefit. The irony is that the central idealised meanings of the *suan huam* are most effectively represented by a loner, a hermit who lives in the sea.

THE DEVIL IN THE DETAIL

In Ban Tiam, the local concept that comes closest in meaning to the English-language term 'community' is *suan huam*. In its simplified form, this term represents altruistic sacrifice for the common good as opposed to the more interested activities of the private *suan tua* domain. As a vague and simplified symbolic representation, the *suan huam* encourages a sense of localised belonging that forms a basis for various types of cooperative enterprise. *Suan huam* symbolism, most concretely in the form of the temple itself, was regularly deployed and enacted during the great festival, which was morally justified as a triumph of collective endeavour over more individualistic pursuits. Clearly, the great festival contributes to the construction of what we call community.

Nevertheless, this construction is highly problematic and must contend with an array of alternative meanings and interpretations. A mundane accounting for this difficulty would be to suggest that the ideas symbolically expressed in a ritual such as the great festival conflict with the pragmatic realities of day-to-day life. This is true but unremarkable and provides no explanation. All rituals involve some demarcation from the domain of the everyday and, indeed, many in the Durkheimian tradition would see this as fundamental to the nature of ritual. In fact, the key reason that the great festival struggles to construct compelling community is that the contrast between the ritual and the everyday is not strong enough. The main problem is that the simplified symbols of community deployed during the great festival are fundamentally entangled with the complex domain of the everyday. Effectively deployed, simplifying symbols are compelling but they are undermined by elaboration. The dancing troupe of young girls is a lovely representation of the harmony and virtue of collective enterprise but when this symbolism becomes entangled in a bitter debate about who should pay for the young girls' make-up, a less harmonious tangle of disruptive meaning emerges. Similarly, the role of abbot is a fine representation of leadership, development and collective benefit but when rumours circulate about the use of great festival funds for

personal benefit, ideal roles are forgotten and memories of knickers, photocopiers and closed circuit televisions are all too readily recalled. In the symbolic domain, the sacred relies on simplification and unelaborated imagery. The devil is in the detail.

One important constraint on the great festival's symbolic endeavour is that it was a very elaborate festival that required significant and complex resource mobilisation. Alexander's (2004) work on the "cultural pragmatics" of ritual as performance can assist in understanding this constraint. He notes that the "practical pragmatics of performance" are "different from the cultural logic of texts" (Alexander, 2004: 530). The great festival cannot be read simply in terms of the relationships between various symbols existing in a clearly demarcated sacred domain. The symbolic superstructure has to be related to the ritual's practical, material base. An elaborate exercise in resource mobilisation like the great festival provides an unstable basis for the simplified symbolic construction of community. Resources inevitably get caught up in the contested moral economy of compromise between collective and individual pursuits. Quite simply, community is stretched and strained under its own organisational weight.

Ritual events such as the poi luang are often seen as a central feature of traditional Tai community. So what does the case of Ban Tiam tell us about the nature of this traditional practice? First, it underlines the point, also made by High (Chapter 5), that communal ritual practice has strong external orientations. The potency and auspiciousness of the poi luang's localised display of the suan huam depends on drawing in people, donations and spiritual power from a widely dispersed ritual network. While accounts of traditional Tai community often point to the primacy of local cultural and economic resources, the poi luang highlights the importance of external connections in local expressions of belonging. Second, the messy micro-politics of the poi luang shows that ritual events often seen as representing classic Tai values of solidarity and common interest are also occasions of dispute, contest and rivalry. They are occasions for the exercise of power and the expression of political difference. Accounts of traditional Tai community capture the symbolic simplification of ritual occasions but often fail to capture the political complexities of their actual implementation.

The case of Ban Tiam also demonstrates that 'traditional' ritual occasions are by no means displaced by modernity. Ban Tiam is well integrated into global and regional market networks. Local livelihoods

are dominated by cash-crop production, wage labour and government employment. However, this modern livelihood orientation co-exists with a desire to participate in simplified ritual statements about the desirability of the *suan huam*. In contemporary Ban Tiam, the simplified moral discourse of the *suan huam* retains its salience, just as in broader Thai public life the modern discourse of 'community' (*chumchon*) shows no sign of abating. The extroverted template of village ritual copes readily with the even more spatially dispersed networks of employment, education and political patronage that characterise the modern era. In fact, given this dispersal, the simplified and nostalgic appeal of ritual assembly is potentially even more salient and the resources that can be mobilised via external networks provide for an even more elaborate event.

There are also historically specific reasons why the symbolic production of community is so challenging. As earlier chapters in this volume have demonstrated, over the past few decades the symbolism of community has been comprehensively linked to diverse forms of official and alternative development discourse. No grant can be made without a committee; no resources can be allocated without a group; no donation made without a consensus. The *suan huam* has become the preferred symbolic vehicle for development, a vehicle that the residents in Ban Tiam and elsewhere have enthusiastically embraced. In this process, the sacredness of community has been diluted. In their, quite justified, focus on livelihood improvement, development workers have overlooked the fact that community operates best as a specialised form of ritual communication, promoting sentiments of belonging through simplified and un-entangled statements about the moral virtue of the collective. Those interested in promoting community would do well to leave it alone — put it back in the river and let it return to its palace under the sea.

