

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Katherine A. Bowie.** *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand.* New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1997. xx + 393 pp. \$30.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-10391-6; \$83.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10390-9.

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Published on H-Asia (April, 1998)



## Rituals of National Loyalty Reviewed

Katherine A. Bowie's *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand*, will be welcomed by both general readers and specialists alike as a significant contribution to cross-disciplinary understandings of mass movements, violence, and the role of ritual in the formation of the nation-state. Through detailed historical and political analysis, in addition to an ethnographic account of Village Scout initiation practices at the local level, Bowie traces the development and transformation of what was initially an agrarian-based, democratically-oriented movement into what became an urban-based tool of right-wing ideology and violence.

The Village Scout movement was founded in 1971 to counter what was perceived as the "communist threat" spreading throughout Southeast Asia at that time. It succeeded in becoming the largest right-wing popular organization in Thai history, recruiting almost one-fifth of the adult population during the 1970s. Bowie situates the movement firmly within the context of regional Cold War politics and the changing Thai socio-political and economic landscape of the late 1960s and 1970s.

A significant element of Bowie's analysis is her examination of the social and political role played by the monarchy during this important period of Thai history, especially by Thailand's reigning King Bhumibol Adulyadej. King Bhumibol's patronage was vital to the initial success and surge in popularity of the Village Scout movement, and Bowie outlines how the in-

creasing polarization between the right and left in Thailand following the 1975 communist takeover in Vietnam led to an unprecedented politicization of the monarchy. The King's eventual alignment with right-wing military forces played a key role in the Village Scout participation in the October 6, 1976 massacre of university students in Bangkok.

Part Two provides rich ethnographic details of Village Scout initiation practices and gives the reader insights into the links between Scout ideology and the project of nation-building. Bowie looks at how the Scout movement was used by local gangsters and right-wing elite to expand their influence over provincial officials. She provides accounts of villagers' vastly diverse knowledge and experience with notions of "communism and communist ideals" and shows how often such notions became intermingled with class tensions and resentments.

Accounts of Village Scout initiation practices follow some of the classic anthropological rules of rites of passage where initiates are stripped of their individual status and identity in order to become members of society. Among the Village Scouts, characteristics such as obedience to authority and passivity were stressed as traits deemed necessary for a stable, secure nation. Here, the account would have been made stronger if Bowie had included more interview material and feedback from the initiates themselves, as she assumes ideological success based predominantly on her observations of the formal structure and content of the initiation rituals. In addition,

though Bowie argues for the importance of incorporating a class-based analysis, such an analysis does not clearly emerge in her ethnographic account. But these weaknesses hardly take away from what is a fascinating and powerful book about a pivotal period of Thai history and about the role of ritual in the formation of the modern nation-state.

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**Citation:** Sara Van Fleet. Review of Bowie, Katherine A., *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1973>

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