

# “God’s Beloved Sons”: Religion, Attachment, and Children’s Self-Formation in the Slums of Bangkok

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## Abstract

This article examines the relationship between religion, attachment, and children’s self-formation with regard to children who were born in a slum of Bangkok, and raised as ‘slum children’ (*dek salam*) in a Catholic NGO, within a primarily Buddhist context. In moving between their home, school, and the NGO, these children are exposed to multiple – and divergent – models of care, which reflect specific religious and socio-political discourses on family, education, ethnicity, and urban poverty in Thailand. The article demonstrates that different forms of adult-child affective relationships represent the political outcome of historically situated relations of power that simultaneously provide *dek salam* with multiple possibilities of self-formation. While some of these confirm urban poor’s socio-economic and moral subordination, others open up the space for critique and the constitution of a particular kind of political subjectivity in the shadow of the Thai state hegemonic structures.

**Keywords:** Children, Self, Attachment, Religious NGOs, Bangkok

Political violence, poverty, natural disasters, and migration have a deep impact on the ways social groups care about their youngest members<sup>1</sup>. A significant proportion of the world’s children grow up outside a stable family environment, structure affective and kinship bonds with people others than their biological parents, form multiple attachments, and relate differently to caregivers in the elaboration of their self. Relevant examples include categories of marginal childhood such as ‘left behind children’, ‘street children’, ‘child soldiers’, ‘child prostitutes’ and the like (Beazley 2003, De Boeck and

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Honwana 2005, Rosen 2007, Montgomery 2001, Stodulka 2016). Within public action and policy making, there is often an intrinsic tension in the interpretation of these children that oscillates between victimisation and sanction, vulnerability and deviance: on one hand they are considered particularly at risk – and thus victimised – because of their distance from the supposedly universal model of ‘childhood’ as established by international discourses such as the children’s rights (Boyden 1997, Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2013), on the other hand they are regarded with suspicion when this distance is construed as deviance from the norm of ‘the dependent child’. As a result, many of these children are targeted by ‘corrective’ educational measures and ‘protective’ aid intervention, supported by NGOs, or hosted in institutions of care as disadvantaged, not ‘properly attached’ or ‘too independent’ children. Religious aid organisations and charities, in particular, are historically at the forefront of humanitarian endeavours to address children’s marginality (Bornstein 2011, Vignato 2012, Bolotta, in press-a). In these institutions, educational goals and theories of child discomfort are framed in religious views of the world and the person that may conflict with both global ideologies of child development and local cultural understandings of child-rearing (and by extension social reproduction) (Dahl 2009, p. 28). While raised by differently positioned caregivers, disadvantaged children, for their part, are confronted with a variegated institutional apparatus that pluralises the discursive and emotional references they draw on in the elaboration of their self.

Based on ethnographic research in the poorest districts of Bangkok (Thailand), this article contributes to anthropological scholarship on attachment and self-formation by exploring the specific case of children (roughly aged 4 to 16) who were born in a Thai capital’s shantytown and are raised as ‘slum children’ (*dek salam*) in a Catholic NGO, within a primarily Buddhist context. Moving between their home and various institutions committed to protect-moralise *dek salam* in varying degrees, these children are taken care by adults in different ways. Instead of being involved in a dyadic relationship with a single caregiver, they are exposed to multiple – and divergent – models of care, which reflect specific religious and socio-political discourses on family, children’s education, ethnicity, and urban poverty in Thailand. Depending on the social stage they act on, the children make different uses of such discourses, constructing and deconstructing their hybrid self throughout the process.

After some theoretical considerations on children’s attachment and self-formation, I will begin my analysis of this particular case by describing practices of childcare in the slums of Bangkok, where local ethno-cultural theories of childhood, family configurations, and poor living conditions contribute to collective child-rearing and to *dek salam*’s relative autonomy from adults. I will discuss vernacular and public interpretations of such

practices of childcare and show how – especially within the context of schools – *dek salam*’s apparent independence from parents is denigrated by public officials as in contrast to Thai Buddhist morality and the normative socio-political hierarchy, and explained as the result of urban poor’s ‘inferior ethnicity’. Next, I will present the care environment slum children encounter once they move to humanitarian organisations such as the Saint Jacob Centre, the Catholic NGO where I first met them, focusing especially on the particular ‘religious attachment’ between slum children and Father Nicola<sup>2</sup>, the missionary at the head of the NGO. I will highlight the ways this overlaps or contrasts with adult-child relationships observed elsewhere, and how children negotiate diverging (un)attachments, their own (in)dependence, and the internalisation of specific socio-political and religious discourses of childhood and poverty in the cultural construction of their selves. It will finally become clear that the alternative venue of the Catholic charity and the affective bond with its radical priest led the children to experience their self in a way that is distinct from the stigmatised view of the ethnic poor promoted by the Thai state.

This analysis will demonstrate how unitary theories of attachment and self-formation are complicated by existing socio-economic, religious, and political frameworks that shape childhood. It will particularly show that different forms of adult-child affective relationship, and the associated institutional infrastructures, represent the political outcome of historically situated relations of power that simultaneously provide *dek salam* in Bangkok with multiple possibilities of self-formation. While some of these confirm urban poor’s socio-economic and moral subordination, others open up the space for critique and the constitution of a particular kind of political subjectivity in the shadow of the Thai state hegemonic structures.

### **Attachment and self-formation**

Modern psychology identifies in mother-infant relationships the fundamental precursor of children’s development and growth as humans. Especially within childcare and child welfare work, John Bowlby’s (1953) evolutionary theory of attachment is often an underlying element of dominant understandings of children’s dependency on their main caregiver. Its fundamental assumption is that children have a psychobiological need to maintain proximity to an “attachment figure”, especially the mother, and that a child’s experience of repeated patterns of interaction with a significant caregiver cause it to internalise and embody relational models that provide the tem-

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2 To protect the identity of my informants, all names of places and people throughout the article are pseudonyms.

plate for future emotional orientations, social relationships and sense of self. Children involved in a secure dyadic relationship with a responsive caregiver would accordingly develop a balanced self, that is to say an internally coherent and synthesised personal identity.

Anthropological research and cross-cultural investigation, however, have widely shown the ethnocentric (Western) character of these approaches to child development (Levine and Norman 2001, Levine 2003, Quinn and Mageo 2013). According to Quinn and Mageo (2013, p. 4) attachment theory has turned a specific, twentieth-century, “cultural ideal of parenthood – the attentive, supportive, stay-at-home middle-class mom – into a standard for all the world against which the practices and norms of a vast variety of people were [...] inappropriately judged”. Feminist scholars such as Callaghan and colleagues (2015, p. 255) have further argued that Western universalising claims such as attachment theory “constitute powerful discursive resources in regulating women and families, in marginalising working class and ethnic minority people, normalising western, middle-class family forms, and in pathologising people’s lives [...] particularly the lives of those who were not members of dominant social groups and classes”. Children’s attachments are shaped by precise cultural realities. They also have political qualities as children’s need to be taken care of might imply their subjection to caregivers’ specific ideas of social hierarchy and moral discourses on proper adult-child relationship (Butler 1997).

In the analysis of children’s self-formation<sup>3</sup> in and out of the slums of Bangkok I contrast unitary visions of attachment, joining the position of a number of anthropologists who have recently scrutinised subjectivity and processes of the self<sup>4</sup> in contexts of the Global South characterised by social suffering, state violence, and poverty (see e.g. Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007). These studies have shown that the individual self, far from being unitary, is multiple, hybrid, composed of conflicting representations of the self and the otherness. The self cannot be solely understood as an individual psychological reality as it is shaped by institutional processes, economic policies, socio-political inscriptions, and historical trajectories (Strauss 1997).

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3 Unlike other scholars examining conceptions of the person in Thailand (see e.g. Cassaniti 2012), I do not use the term self only to refer to specific theories of the individual or to doctrinal debates such as, for example, disquisitions between Hindu teachings of the Self (*atta*) and Buddhist teachings of non-self (*anatta*). More fundamentally, I refer to human beings’ attribute of self-reflexivity and to the processes through which a subject is able to identify and think of herself/himself (Holland et al 1998, pp. 291-292). This processual definition of the self recognises variations in conceptions of the person, both across cultures and individuals (Spiro 1993).

4 I use the term ‘self’, rather than related concepts such as ‘identity’ or ‘individual’, as the latter more easily subtend a modern (Western) idea of personality as an essentialised, unitary, static, and ‘internal’ reality.

As Holland et al have observed:

We can discern at least three interrelated components of a theoretical refiguring of the [...] self. First, culturally and socially constructed discourses and practices of the self are recognized as neither the “clothes” of a universally identical self nor the (static) elements of cultural molds into which the self is cast. Rather, [...] they are conceived as living tools of the self – as artifacts or media that figure the self constitutively, in open-ended ways. Second, [...] the self is treated as always embedded in (social) practice, and as itself a kind of practice. Third, “sites of the self”, the loci of self-production or self-processes, are recognized as plural (Holland et al 1998, p. 28).

As other categories of marginal childhood, children living in the slums of Bangkok are institutionalised as disadvantaged subjects in need of protection and/or correction. While relating to caregivers as diverse as parents, missionaries, teachers, and NGO social workers, they form multiple attachments, internalise politically divergent cultural discourses, and actively construct their hybrid self. The latter cannot be considered as aprioristically pathological. As we shall see, indeed, the plurality of these children’s attachments, and the multiplicity of their sense of self, are precisely the conditions allowing some of them the possibility to challenge their subordination within Thai religious, and socio-political power hierarchies.

## **Slum children’s independent self**

### *Childcare in the slums of Bangkok*

The children I present in this article were born at Tuek Deang, one of the nearly 2000 slums of Bangkok<sup>5</sup> (BMA 2007), in Bang Sue district, north of the city, where I carried out field research beginning in 2009<sup>6</sup>. The marsh-

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5 The UN identifies a slum household “as a group of individuals living under the same roof in an urban area lacking one or more of the following: 1. Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions. 2. Sufficient living space, which means not more than three people sharing the same room. 3. Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price. 4. Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable amount of people. 5. Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions.” (UN-Habitat 2006).

6 This article is based on an eight-year (2009-2017) multi-situated ethnography of children living in the slums of Bangkok. Over this period, I spent approximately five months a year in Thailand for fieldwork. Through my experience of living together with the same group of ‘slum children’ in all the different locations constituting their social geography (the slum, schools, Buddhist temples, Catholic charities, NGOs venues), I have been able to analyse how children respond to the expectations of institutional contexts that interpret them in different ways.

like land, on top of which wooden and tin-plated houses lie, looks like sludge, winding through the sheds and the cement paths built in the 1980's by the metropolitan authorities in order to facilitate dwellers' mobility within the slum. Most of the houses are supplied with water and electricity; however, the sewers are filled with rubbish and waste materials and are a vehicle for often-severe illnesses and bacterial infections (Bolotta 2014, p. 109).

Most of Tuek Deang residents are ex-farmers with no formal education, originating from every region of Thailand, especially the ethnic minority areas of the North and the Northeast, where matrilineal family structures are relevant kinship configurations. For many, migration to the city was the only chance of survival in a country where the urban-rural gap remains a major problem, both economically and politically. As the capital breaks the promise of socioeconomic mobility for ethnic migrants and former peasants, the majority of slum dwellers end up being peddlers of every kind. A growing part of the slum informal economy is also supported by gambling, prostitution, and drug dealing. In contrast with the extended matrilineal family of the rural reality they come from, social and material degradation, uncertainty and poverty have transformed traditional families into fluid relationships that leave space to women-led households as prevalent configurations (Thorbek 1987, Mills 1999, Bolotta, in press-b). Apart from mothers, households very often include grandmothers, a large number of nephews, and foster children (*luk buntham*<sup>7</sup>) not biologically related to their main caregivers.

While the nuclear family model is becoming increasingly prevalent among the middle/upper classes in the Thai capital, child rearing in Bangkok slums follows vernacular rationales instead. At Tuek Deang, as in the ethnic areas of rural Thailand most slum dwellers migrated from, the care of young children is primarily communal. Children move from shack to shack cared for by the women of the neighbourhood, alternating in order to fit the individual needs. (Foster) mothers, grandmothers, sisters or neighbours cover newborns in baby wraps, worn on the back, or rock them mechanically on fabric hammocks precariously hung from the ceiling while continuing their usual housework. In the house, the ones who take care of the baby most are the siblings, even whilst still very young. Through these coordinated and

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7 The term *luk buntham* (son acquired by merit) refers to practices of informal adoption or foster care, intended as a compassionate and praiseworthy action, which grants to foster parents the acquisition of karmic merits. A number of authors (see for example Goody and Tambiah 1973, Carsten 1991) have documented similar practices throughout Southeast Asia, particularly in rural contexts. According to these studies, it is common for children to be raised by non-biological parents, especially if the latter are too poor to take care of the offspring. Often, when families have many biological children into care, parents can decide to entrust some to families who do not have any.

collective activities, childcare is incorporated into daily routines.

This kind of parenting does not respond exclusively to the socioeconomic conditions of the context (material poverty, absence of the mother due to work reasons, high inter-familial birth-rate, etc.) but also to an idea of education that is formulated by some women in these terms: “It’s fundamental that children don’t attach themselves only to the mother (*tid mae*). They must not develop an exclusive dependence on the mother, but learn to socialise with everybody and with the environment”. It is possible to recognise in these words the convergence of a specific “parental ethno-theory” (Harkness and Super 1996). On one hand, it reflects memories of a rural sociality in which *vis-à-vis* relationships among individuals sharing a localised “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997) were supported by the communal management of the collectivity’s resources (including children). On the other, it answers to a Buddhist conception of attachment that identifies in it one of the fundamental *viaticum* to suffering. Such parental ethno-theory adapts perfectly to the contemporary characteristics of family in the slums, being a protective factor promoting the flexible attachment of the child to family and emotional configurations, which are precarious, uncertain, and, by necessity, scattered. It also shapes the children’s self within a social framework that is much wider and emotionally diverse than the mononuclear family, as the children develop multiple affective bonds within and outside their network of biological kin.

### ***Slum children’s autonomy***

Vernacular and rural practices of collective childcare leave children free to spend considerable time in each other company. In the maze of alleys that form the labyrinthine slum, young and older children run around barefoot, often scantily clad, independent and confident. During the first month of my stay at Tuek Deang, I would have been lost without them. It was the children that taught me, with a small degree of mockery, how to survive in the slum: small acts that were mammoth tasks for me. When a moped comes at breakneck speed, for example, it is necessary to go inside the nearest house without knocking. The alleys are extremely narrow. To avoid being run over, entering a house is necessary to make way for the coming vehicle. In the same way, I was taught to equip myself with a stick, especially at nightfall, in order to avoid stray dogs asserting their dominance. These are all automatic gestures that children make casually, which I instead had to train for, for a long time. Children normally engaged in activities more commonly considered for adults: taking care of younger siblings, collecting and recycling waste, selling food, even drug dealing. Dan, a 15-year-old boy, told me candidly: “Children are good in selling drugs because they are less subject to checks and run faster than grown-ups”. *Dek salam* did not appear

as ‘innocent children’ overly dependent on adults. When I had just arrived at Tuek Deang, I, the ‘adult’, needed instead to learn from the ‘children’ in order to move around in their world, the slum<sup>8</sup>.

*Dek salam*’s wider autonomy from adult caregivers was also reflected by the particular significance of friendships and the peer group, collective formations commonly labelled by public discourse as ‘gangs’. Despite the pejorative connotation given to this definition, for many children at Tuek Deang, the peer group represented an important emotional point of reference, an internally hierarchical social universe, deeply rooted in the territory, equipped with its own value system and slang. These peer-to-peer relationships define a relatively autonomous social realm where particular experiences of self take shape. In the absence of adults, the children feel the slum as a place free of formal rules, different from institutional contexts such as school and public environments, and characterised by ample areas of freedom that *dek salam* of both genders can benefit from. As Phud (10 years old) said: “There aren’t the rules that we have at school here. We are free to dress as we want, to run, and to play. Children living in the city, outside the slum, aren’t free as we are here”.

When in the presence of adults, however, children have to adjust their self-expressions to fit the role of *phu-noi* (small people) in relation to *phu-yai* (big people). The relationship with adults and the related role-dynamic between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* constitutes yet another social space that produces children’s self. This assumes a peculiar characterisation in the slum, which is different from what observable in public contexts throughout Thailand, especially state schools, where *phu-noi/phu-yai* interactions are rigidly organised according to a set protocol established by the state.

## “Selfless small people”: The Thai good child

### *Children as small people, adults as big people*

In the slum, children’s affective interactions with adults and older peers are a local reinterpretation of the formal relationship between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* as defined within orthodox Thai Buddhist society. To understand why the reinterpretation of this relationship in the slum is publicly stigmatised as a deviation from normative Buddhist morality and as a threat to Thai political order, a preliminary presentation of dominant religious and socio-po-

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8 The children’s ‘autonomy’ in the slums of Bangkok finds trans-cultural validation in the anthropological literature about childhood. As underlined by David Lancy (2008), while in Western hyper-industrialised countries children are “infantilized” and childhood progressively and indefinitely lengthened, in several contexts of the Global South the temporal extension of childhood seems comparatively sensibly reduced.

litical discourses of childhood, parenthood, and children’s due attachment to parents in Thailand is required<sup>9</sup>.

Here is, for example, the content of a Buddhist prayer class for children that I attended in a Bangkok state school in 2013. The title of the prayer was “Children’s duties” (*nathi khong dek*):

Dad and mum are children’s Buddhist saints (*phraorahan*). Do not stand in front of your parents. Do not dare to make arguments with them. Before leaving, pay respect to your parents by prostrating yourself and *krab*<sup>10</sup>. Good children (*dek dee*) must be selfless and show gratitude (*khwamkathanyu*) to parents every day because, while at home, dad and mum are the same as monks (*phra*). While at home you are *phu-noi* and must consider dad and mum as *phu-yai* (Field notes, July 2013).

The relationships between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* described in this prayer historically defines normative social, religious, and political organisation in Thailand. Within *sakdina*, the feudal system of pre-modern Siamese society, the term *phu-noi* was officially used to describe lower rank people or commoners with respect to nobility and higher rank (Chai-anan 1976). *Phu-noi* were considered as morally inferior subjects who must demonstrate selflessness, obedience, respect, and gratitude to *phu-yai*. As they are seen as having a higher karmic condition and provided with merit (*bun-barami*), *phu-yai* determine what is to be done while the person in the subordinate role is not expected to express any wishes. *Phu-noi* are not only children but also, more generally, anyone relating with big people (*phu-yai*). Children in relation to adults, laity to monks, the poor to the rich, as well as citizens to the state’s representatives, are *phu-noi* in relation to *phu-yai*. Kinship terminologies (*phil/nong*, elder brother/younger brother; *phol/luk*, father/son) are also inscribed into this status opposition, and used to reinforce social hierarchies even outside the family environment where individuals will address each other as kin according to rank and status (Bechstedt 2002, p. 242). *Phu-noi*, whatever their age, will often speak of themselves as *nu* (mouse<sup>11</sup>), a per-

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9 The cultural concepts of family, parenthood, and childhood can acquire a fundamental political value as metaphors of authority, (in)dependence, and subjects’ attitudes towards political power (Goddard et al 2005). As the Thai case clearly shows, the language of kinship can productively be used in governance, channeled into the public realm (school education, public rituals, national celebrations, etc.), and eventually contribute to the ways children negotiate their multiple (un)attachments with significant others in the cultural elaboration of their self.

10 *Krab* is a gesture of respect normally performed in relation to monks by placing both palms onto the ground three times.

11 *Nu*: literally mouse, animal that, although occasionally consumed, would not be particularly pleasing to Thais. Tambiah (1969) suggested the possibility of an analogy between the smallest and most marginal animals and children.

sonal pronoun used by children to refer to themselves, when in relation to *phu-yai*. Subaltern in any relationship, children occupy the lowest position of the hierarchy (Bolotta 2014, p. 115).

In Thai monarchical and military “paternalism” (Thak 2007), if children represent the quintessential *phu-noi*, the King, often designated as *pho* (father) and *dhammaraja* (the embodiment of the Buddhist *dharma*) (Tambiah 1976), is the exemplary *phu-yai*. The relationship between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai*, just as the related conceptualisation of family, are historically charged with political meanings. If we consider children and parents as respectively symbolising citizens and authority, then we can fully appreciate the political implications of such a construction of childhood. The ‘Thai good child’, like the citizen, should be passively prone to welcome parents’ (state authority’s) superior benevolent knowledge and abilities. Only by doing so, each child-citizen will harmoniously fit the Thai socio-moral and political hierarchies. If parents are *phu-yai* at home, the king and the military are the nation’s *phu-yai* (Bolotta 2016).

In today’s militarised Thai society, these are pervasive discourses. Especially within state schools, children practice ethno-nationalistic rituals of hierarchy via top-down teaching methods and by learning moral lessons stressing their status of *phu-noi* and the importance of their selfless devotion to parents and, by extension, the nation’s *phu-yai*. In the schools that Tuek Deang children attend outside the slum, child-adult patterns of interaction follow this logic and require them to recognise teachers’ moral authority without complaint – exactly as defined by the Buddhist prayer mentioned above.

If in schools and other institutional contexts the hierarchical roles of *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* are formally established, adult-child relationships in the slum have divergent characteristics from the paradigm established by the Thai state, presenting features that are quite typical of the private domestic dimension and are broadly shared across Asia<sup>12</sup>. In the relationship between adults and children, for example, it is possible to recognise a certain amount of gratuitousness of affection and performative flexibility, which are totally absent in public environments, where interactional codes between *phu-noi* and *phu-yai* are fixed within official regulations connoting their mechanical, compulsory, and even martial nature.

At Tuek Deang, notwithstanding the respect due to *phu-yai* and the differential nature of children’s expressions in presence/absence of adults, the

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12 Similar patterns of adult-child relationship have been described across Asia and respond to a general cultural model of hierarchically ranked relationships, which departs from what is expected in middle-class urban environments, especially (but not only) in western countries. See, for example, Bambi Chapin’s analysis of attachment in rural Sri Lanka (Chapin 2013).

military characteristics of *phu-yai/phu-noi* hierarchic verticality fail: children do not manifest a systematic submission all the times that they interact with known adults such as parents, relatives or neighbours. They do not pay respect to adults with the *wai*<sup>13</sup> or *krab* every time they meet them, as they must do with teachers. Moreover, they can transgress their role as *phu-noi* through irony (for example gently mocking an adult, or using informal speech) without such ‘standard deviations’ being codified as serious violations of the order to be corrected through public punishment, even corporal (as happens at school). Children are also allowed a supervised experimentation of ‘adult roles’ that would be not only immoral but also unfeasible in public contexts, where the individual’s self-expression is expected to match, without margins for interpretation, the prescribed hierarchy. This is why, from the state’s perspective, slum children’s ‘deviant’ relationships with adults and emotional attachment to peers may constitute a danger to the Thai hierarchical “social body” (Aulino 2014).

### ***Ethnic stigmatisation of slum children’s independence***

Slum children are dangerously distant from the political and ethnic standard of the ‘Thai good child’. Their perceived wider autonomy from adults is considered as improper. When they relate to Thai teachers at school, therefore, they usually meet *phu-yai* looking down at them as moral deviations. A schoolteacher I interviewed, for example, explained: “Slum children come from very poor family environments. They are not taught to respect *phu-yai*. That’s why there is no such thing as society for them”. In schoolteachers’ discourse about *dek salam* it is also possible to recognise a marked denigration of the privileged relationship among peers. Within this discourse, the strong bonds between *dek salam* represent a threat to the primary attachment expected towards parents and family, which are moral politicised symbols of traditional authority. Social stigma is thus an important aspect of many Thai teachers’ cognitive and emotional attitudes towards *dek salam*.

The stigmatisation of ‘street children’ doesn’t represent an exclusively Thai mind-set (Scheper-Hughes 1992, Davies 2008). The street child represents the supreme symbol of the immoral, undisciplined, dangerous subject, deprived of a ‘natural childhood’. According to such analysis, school and a (nuclear) ‘healthy’ family – in contrast with the streets and peer group – emerge as necessary answers for the promotion of healthy and happy children (Bloch 2003). In Thailand, however, referring to slum children as a social danger acquires a specific ethnic direction: the deviance is ultimately

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13 The Thai greeting referred to as *wai* consists of a slight bow, with the palms pressed together in a prayer-like fashion. The *wai* has its origin in the Indic Anali Mudra and is present, in similar versions, in several Asian countries (Anuman 1963).

conceived as a moral violation of ‘Thai-ness’, the modern national identity, or “the proper Thai mode of being” (*qwham pen Thai*) (Connors 2003). *Dek salam* are specifically assimilated to what historian Thongchai Winichakul (2000) has defined the “Other within”, a concept used to refer to the position of ethno-linguistic minorities of Thailand in relation to the ideological elaboration of ‘Thai-ness’ during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The royalist military governments attempting to transform Siam in a modern nation-state (Thailand), indeed, have selectively connected to an essentialised construction of the central Thais’ ethno-cultural traits, concepts of modernity, civilisation and development, assuming ethnic minority groups as a contrastive model of humanity (the ‘Others’) to which refer in the construction of a collective ‘Us’. Through the discourses that proceed by classifying *dek salam* in opposition to the Thai model, *dek salam* do not speak central Thai properly, they are dangerous, immoral, spiritually incomplete, lacking on an intellectual level, dirty and undisciplined.

Bang Sue district development officers at Tuek Deang, with whom I spoke on several occasions, often acted as vectors of such representation. This associates “not good” (*mai dee*) children with some fundamental traits: the abuse of amphetamine pills; dependency on technology; uncontrolled and precocious sexuality; violence and criminal behaviour; lack of practice of Buddhism; aggregation in gangs, and above all, disrespect for *phu-yai*. In addition, media representations give *dek salam* specific aesthetic connotations that present deviant children with a darker complexion, ‘messy’ hair, flashy tattoos and a ‘non-Thai’ dialectal lingo: phenomena associated with all the *phu-noi* of the country, and especially to children from north-eastern and northern rural areas (*dek ban nok*), ethnic children from the northern mountains (*dek chao khaw*), poor children (*dek chon*) and, indeed, *dek salam*.

Slum children’s lower adherence to formal hierarchies of seniority is ultimately explained by state officials and teachers as linked to their parents’ ‘immoral’ care giving, which, at the same time, is seen as a consequence of slum dwellers’ ‘backward’ ethnic traditions: parents are irresponsible, thoughtless or they ignore the ‘correct’ ways to build relationships with children<sup>14</sup>. Such explanations reinforce the state rhetoric identifying in slum inhabitants a social danger, this way legitimising the necessity of corrective governmental intervention. The latter will try to restore ‘Thai-ness’ by prescribing a new and superior model of Buddhist parenthood, namely the *phu-yai* cult related to the nation’s father, the King. Outside the slum, in particular at school, discrimination against slum children might thus retribute to *dek salam* an

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14 The criminalisation of slums (and slum dwellers) as ethnic spaces invisible to the state surveillance, potentially subversive because outside of the *panopticon*, represents the main rhetoric strategy used transversely by numerous regimes in the Global South to justify massive eviction campaigns (Davis 2006, p. 108).

image of themselves as inferior and rejected ethnic subjects.

The state, however, is not the only institutional actor involved in these children’s lives. Since the 1970’s, the advent of NGOs and transnational discourse of children’s rights in the slums of Bangkok added to the public representation of *dek salam* as social danger the image of ‘victims’ whose rights must be defended. Charitable organisations led by Christian missionaries and socially engaged Buddhist monks, in particular, have been playing a prominent role in pluralising the models of care for *dek salam*. In these organisations, children’s care and education respond to specific religious theories that can reinforce or challenge the stigmatising discourse of the state. In the following section, I will examine the particular case of the Saint Jacob Centre, a Catholic NGO dealing with some children at Tuek Deang, and show how the kind of care the children receive here embodies religious interpretations of ethnicity and urban poverty that subvert the Buddhist discourse of the Thai state. By means of a few exemplar ethnographical cases, I will then shed light on how collective practices of childcare in the slum, politically inflected discourses of the family at school, and the Catholic NGO’s religious approach, converge in distinct ways to shape the self among the children.

## **Slum children as God’s beloved sons**

### *Saint Jacob Centre*

Saint Jacob Centre is a Catholic NGO in Bangkok, which provides residential care, scholastic support, and ‘spiritual formation’ to about 90 *dek salam* from five to eighteen years old. Many of the children hosted at Saint Jacob’s are orphans, foster children, or have lived in the slums outside a standard family environment. Father Nicola, 72 years old, an Italian Catholic missionary in Thailand since 1978, is head of the NGO. He belongs to a new generation of missionaries who were sent to Southeast Asia after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to support the growth of the indigenous churches and to carry on humanitarian interventions based on a vision of Christian charity.

Father Nicola’s evangelical orientation was influenced by liberation theology, once marginalised as a Marxist deviation of Christianity by the Vatican, and now apparently rehabilitated by the geo-political and theological re-structuring of the Roman Catholic Church’s centre since the appointment of the Latin American pope Francesco Bergoglio (Francis I). His approach is grounded on a ‘preferential option for the poor’ and all who are marginalised in society. The missionary’s work has been specifically aimed at the various *phu-noi* of Thailand, including ‘hill tribes’ (*chao khaw*) groups

in northern Thailand, Thai Lao peasant communities in the North-East, and especially slum dwellers in Bangkok. In the 1980's the priest decided to move into his own shack at Tuek Deang in order to devote himself to *dek salam*. Soon after, he established Saint Jacob Centre.

Father Nicola's Catholicism enriched *dek salam*'s social environment with new socio-political discourses of childhood, poverty and ethnicity. During my conversations with the missionary, Nicola argued that the "inculturation"<sup>15</sup> of Catholicism should be realised in the context of the marginalised ethnic minority cultures of Thailand, rather than being placed at the service of the militarised Buddhist monarchical formation of 'Thai-ness', as is historically the case for the Thai Catholic church<sup>16</sup>. Contrary to most Thai Catholic priests, he was also reluctant to view a deified king as a Buddhist symbol of sacred fatherhood, compatible with his Christian belief of God's supreme fatherhood.

In Father Nicola's view, slum children become the first representatives of the Lord. Because they are the last in their society, they are God's most beloved sons. According to the missionary, in the relationship with them one has the opportunity to meet Jesus Christ, "a God who almost scares the powerful because of his identification with the dregs of humankind". By metaphorically linking the oppression northern and north-eastern ethnic minorities are subjected to in relation to 'Thai-ness' with children's normative position as *phu-noi*, Father Nicola further explained: "Those considered *phu-noi* by the Thai state are the closest to God's truth. The sacred elements of childhood and poverty coincide with the condition of slum and *chao khaw* children. They must be taught this so they can proudly claim their identity against social injustice".

This "theological-political construction" (de Vries 2006) of childhood moulded adult-child relationships and attachment patterns at Saint Jacob's where adult educators, mostly seminarians from the Thai-ethnic North under Father Nicola's pastoral guidance, were encouraged by the missionary to consider *dek salam* like they were their teachers. According to Father Nicola: "It is the children, as manifestation of the divine, subjects intuitively able to recognise the Truth, to promote the revelation of Christ in seminarians. Only those who demonstrate passion and participation in the service of the last [Saint Jacob's *dek salam*] will continue their spiritual journey towards

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15 The theological term "inculturation" gained a wider acceptance at the time of the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (December 1, 1974 - April 7, 1975) (Roest-Crollius 1984, pp. 1-18). It was intended to be an adjustment of the concept of "adaptation" that had emerged from the statements of the Second Vatican Council (Cuturi 2004, p. 22).

16 Father Nicola's approach represents a minority position within the Thai Catholic church. Elsewhere (Bolotta, in press-a) I have shown the contiguity between Catholicism and the Thai monarchy, highlighting Catholic missionaries' historical compliance with the state culture of 'Thai-ness'.

ordination”.

Father Nicola’s sacralisation of *dek salam* was also embodied in his affective and relational attitudes towards children. Rather than acting as a *phu-yai*, as Thai priests like Buddhist monks are expected to do in relation to laymen, he used to hug dirty slum children, hold little girls gently (whereas Thai Buddhist monks are not allowed to touch or be touched by women), sit at their level during meals, using impolite slum dialects – in short challenging all the embodied dimensions of ‘Thai-ness’, and overturning the normative social hierarchy, with the enactment of a bottom-up engaged Catholicism<sup>17</sup>. When he visited the slums, a swarm of joyfully squealing kids, all vying for his attention, announced his arrival. Carrying a boy on his back, holding another one’s hands, Father Nicola spent entire days playing around with children.

What is important to underline is that the emotional relationship with the missionary did not replace children’s attachment bonds with other caregivers. Instead, it offered *dek salam* a new possibility of self-formation, which the children can actively draw on to reframe, challenge, or restructure those representations of self that are shaped through other relationships. Over repeated interactions, indeed, children seem increasingly able to identify the discrepancies between the adults taking care of them. It is precisely in this difference in care giving between Thai *phu-yai* and Father Nicola that children’s agency and self-formation strategies found a hybrid cultural space to be organised. The majority of the children hosted at Saint Jacob’s developed a strong attachment to Father Nicola, considered by many as their real father (*pho tae*), while maintaining a relationship with their parents and relatives. These are, for example, Yut’s (14 years old) words on the missionary:

One day I saw *pho* Nicola coming to Tuek Deang with a bag full of chips and candies. He put me over his shoulders and I went to visit the whole community (*chum chon*) with him. He was very good to us children; he treated us all as his sons. He always bought us something to eat and he took us to the park to play. *Pho* brought me to Saint Jacob’s in a big house. *Pho* Nicola loves us all (*rak thuk khon*) (Yut, August 2010).

Even though Father Nicola did not embody the traditional Thai authority model, children felt the need to look at him as a new kind of *phu-yai* and father to whom rely on. *Dek salam*, ethnic children coming from fluid fam-

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17 Research has shown that missionary interventions have historically created opportunities for both submission and resistance. David Mosse, for example, has explored the genealogy of Tamil Nadu *dalit*’s “Brahmanic Christianity”, stating: “Even while the Church tolerated or helped reproduce hierarchical orders of caste, participation in Christian religion [...] inculcated capacities for the manipulation of symbolic meanings or transactions that would be used (alongside political action) by subaltern groups” (Mosse 2012, p. 20).

ily and attachment environments, saw Father Nicola as a *phu-yai* who didn't relate to them as *phu-noi*. The relationship with the priest became, thus, yet another element of affective, religious and political reference in the elaboration of the children's cultural self. The case of Kla is quite meaningful.

***"Heaven belongs to poor children!"***

I met Kla in 2008, when he was 12 years old and a guest of Saint Jacob Centre. He had been received at Saint Jacob's 6 years previously. He lived at Tuek Deang with his father, 30, and his paternal grandmother, a 65-year-old woman from the Northeast. His mother had separated from her partner when he was 5 to return to Chayaphum in the North, pregnant by another man. When Father Nicola began operating at the slum, Kla's father was serving a 6-year sentence for drug dealing and his grandmother would return home late in the evening after all day collecting plastic bottles and cans at the nearby Mor Chit bus station. Kla followed the missionary about like a shadow.

If the missionary assumed the role of new father (*pho mai*) for Kla, Thai *phu-yai* never earned the child's respect. Prasit, the chief educator at St. Jacob's, considered Kla difficult to manage. He didn't follow the rules, lacked respect for *phu-yai*, and only became a 'good child' (*dek dee*) in the presence of Father Nicola. During my stay at Saint Jacob in 2011, I noticed that Kla was somewhat influential to other children. The long relationship with Father Nicola gave him authority. For many children at Saint Jacob's Kla was *phi* (elder brother). His leadership, on the other hand, seemed to deviate from the Thai model of *phu-yai*. Kla emulated his hero, Father Nicola: he taught catechism to *dek salam*, gave advice on the most disparate matters, he reprimanded those who made mistakes, he took interest in the family problems of all *nong* (younger brothers), he taught the youngest children the basics of central Thai, while still encouraging them to recognise the cultural value of their parents' native idiom. In addition, the child was able to express himself in an anti-normative manner with respect to 'Thai-ness' ideology, in his opinion finalised to celebrate Thai militarism and the inferiority of the slum poor.

In particular, Kla proved to be critical toward Thai teachers' pedagogical practices and attitudes. He accused them of embodying negative moral models: "Dad Nicola taught me that children have to be listened to. Teachers, instead, only know how to give orders and impose rules. They think that *khon isarn* (people from the North-East) are stupid, dirty and dangerous". His judgment operated a systematic comparison between Thai *phu-yai* and the missionary: a comparison in which all *phu-yai* were defeated and that made Father Nicola an ideal model of unattainable perfection. For Thai teachers, it became difficult to manage a child who not only called *phu-*

*yai*’s authority into question but also identified as a perfect replica of the missionary. Kla felt he could educate *nong* better than any Thai *phu-yai* could. Between 2011 - 2013 he was expelled from two different schools for accusing some teachers of abusing their position of power, and of being unfair and discriminatory towards *dek salam*. Even Saint Jacob’s educators often complained about Kla’s irreverent behaviour but *pho* Nicola’s affectionate condescension seemed to protect him, legitimising implicitly the child’s ‘anti-leadership’.

When, in 2013, *pho* Nicola was transferred to another parish by Bangkok clerical authorities, things changed for Kla. After only 3 months, Kla left the NGO to go back to Tuek Deang. The young man, then 17, found a job at Mor Chit bus station with his grandmother’s mediation. Still in touch with Father Nicola, he kept dreaming about becoming a humanitarian operator dealing with poor children. He was still in touch with the guests (current and past) at Saint Jacob’s through *Facebook*, monitoring their evolution, and regularly providing the children with divergent indications in respect to those given by Thai educators. Additionally, Kla had started to take care of several *nong* in the slum. He often distributed tips or bought a meal to Tuek Deang children, squandering his measly salary in few days. He gained popularity thanks to the desecrating role he played to moralise the unemployed *phu-yai* who idly drink or gamble in the shacks of the slum. While I was staying at Tuek Deang, I often had to lend him money, or intervene in quarrels with *phu-yai* not willing to tolerate the child’s invectives. The fact that Kla was known as one of Father Nicola’s most beloved children has always protected him. Kla was not only aware of this, but he also used this knowledge within the slum as a “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 2005) to reinforce his own vacillating moral leadership.

One afternoon in 2012, during a visit, he showed me his diary where he wrote his reflections daily. He wanted to share the entry of that day, titled “Jesus in my everyday life” (*Phra Jesu chaw nai chiwit pracham wan khong phom*):

We can find Jesus with the poor, the sick, the orphans, the disadvantaged children (*dek doi okad*). God wants us to understand the importance of these people because they are God’s sons. Jesus said: ‘The kingdom of heaven belongs to children’. With these words, Jesus wanted to suggest to all of us to be like children, to serve people ‘lower’ (*tam kwa raw*) than us with faith and purity. God has seen the purity of children and has repeated: “If you do not become as the little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Kla, August 2012).

I asked Kla what the purity of children was. “Children don’t know what poverty is, what illness and disadvantaged conditions are. Children are pure

because to them all people are equal. There is no one up or down. Just people.”

Kla has never lived with his biological parents. He has mixed feelings towards them: when he harshly accuses them, he feels immediately guilty, realising he has pronounced the unpronounceable. He has often described them as irresponsible, but regrets not being able to support them. In his opinion, even if they have abandoned him, they gave him the gift of life nonetheless. Mom and dad are “the *phra* (monks) of the house” he affirmed more than once, recalling the ‘Buddhist State mantra’ of gratitude (*khwam-kathanyu*), and tormenting himself over not being a sufficiently deserving son. While his parents unsettle him, his paternal grandmother is a key figure he can rely on. Since he returned to Tuek Deang, he often attends the Buddhist temple with her. The last time I met him, in 2014, I asked him about his thoughts on state religion. I took for granted that he must have become a fervent Christian, but his answer took me by surprise: “Buddhism is a good religion, like all religions. It helps to calm your heart, it teaches *dharma* and compassion. I have not chosen my religion yet. When I was at Saint Jacob Centre, I was a Christian. Now that I am with grandma, I am a Buddhist. My *pho* [Father Nicola] is Christian and my grandma is a Buddhist, so I don’t know which my religion is yet”.

### **Reconfigured hierarchies: Religion, affective bonds, and children’s selves**

The story of Kla highlights how religion and the alternative models of care poor children encounter in religious NGOs such as Saint Jacob’s can become an important reference in children’s efforts to make sense of their growing (in)dependence, even to reframe the self in ways that entail a strong political critique of their ethnic and socio-economic subordination. Indeed, as a number of social scientists have shown, faith experiences are a potential site for self-definition and the exercise of choice (Hefner 1993, Bauman and Young 2012).

Kla adhered to Father Nicola’s Catholicism to resist social stigma, displace the *phu-noi* position, and to boost his (ethnic) self-esteem. Through affective interactions with the missionary, Kla learnt to re-conceptualise himself as God’s beloved son rather than *dek salam*, inferior subject, and moral abnormality. He also connected this self-formulation to his multiple attachments with younger peers in the slum, re-conceptualised as political victims towards whom he has moral responsibility. Not all children, however, internalised Father Nicola’s political-theological approach to *dek salam* as Kla did.

Consider for example the case of Miu, a 14-year-old girl, guest at Saint Jacob’s who, differently from Kla, had both her biological parents, wanted

to integrate into school and Thai society, and chose to move to the NGO just to benefit from the Catholic structure’s economic support. During an interview, she explained her relationship with Buddhism and Catholicism: “Both Jesus and Lord Buddha teach people how to be good. Father Nicola comes to Tuek Deang to help us. He is generous (*chaidee*). He brings us to his Centre and support our education, but I’m Thai, so I must be Buddhist!” While the missionary’s Catholicism was primarily perceived by Miu as a form of charity addressed to slum children, Buddhism was experienced as an essential point of reference in relation to the normative Thai self. Significantly, she added: “I really like Jesus because he has sacrificed himself (*siasala*) for the salvation of humankind. I’d like to be a soldier, so to give my life for the country and for Thai people. This action gives great merits (*bun*)!” Christ’s sacrifice, as the soldier’s, was interpreted by Miu within an horizon of meanings defined by the discourse of the Thai normative identity. It was for her emblem of a Thai nationalistic value (*siasala*), the actualisation of which is condition for the accumulation of great karmic merits (*bun*). Rather than using Catholicism to oppose ‘Thai-ness’, as Kla did, Miu identified in Jesus yet another symbol of Thai normative morality. She referred to his crucifixion as a source of inspiration to reinforce a desired image of herself as a selfless soldier serving the Thai nation. In order to be accepted into Thai urban society, Miu identified with the ‘Thai good child’ model and the discourse portraying *dek salam* as primitive ethnic small people, feeling deeply ashamed of her own origins as an end result. This is why, while relating to *phu-yai* outside the slum she was born in and to middle-class peers at school, Miu used to hide her identity as a *dek salam* and Saint Jacob’s guest, pretending instead to live in a condo in Bangkok downtown. When she finally gained her diploma, Miu decided to leave both the slum and Saint Jacob’s as a way to dispose of her secret self as *dek salam* and consolidate herself as Thai *phu-yai*.

Kla and Miu differently appropriated Father Nicola’s theological-political construction of *dek salam* in relation to the other embodied discourses shaping their hybrid self. Their stories show the variety of interpretations inherent in these children’s self-formation, which can even take quite ambiguous directions. In some cases, for example, even if Father Nicola’s Catholicism subtended a strong political-theological critique of Thai monarchical social hierarchy and ethnic nationalism, and although his caring behaviour differed intentionally from Thai *phu-yai*’s, children tended nonetheless to interpret him as such. Father Nicola could be perceived as another kind of *phu-yai*, but still as a *phu-yai*. Wat, 9 years old, drew a parallel between the missionary and recently deceased (October 2016) King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), who – as we previously discussed – is publicly attributed the emotional role of the nation’s father and embodies the vertex of the Thai Buddhist social pyramid:

In Thailand, the King is the best and most generous kind of man because he is patient and is an example to us all. He helps everyone and takes care of us children [Thai citizens]. But here at Saint Jacob's the greatest man is my dad [Father Nicola] because he is able to see deep into people's heart, cares about everyone, and considers all of us as his children (Wat, July 2011).

In the context of patriarchal regimes like Thailand, where the omnipotent, benevolent and right father, who acts for the sake of his children, constitutes the dominant political ethos, subjects might develop affective attachments to charismatic authority figures deemed able to provide protection and caring (Sennett 2006). While this attachment relationship provides the subordinate subjects with a sense of security, it implies their dependency, passivity, and a substantial lack of agency. Moreover, the bond of affection, kinship, and 'filial devotion' that links marginalised children to their 'saviours' is not without risks. Lovely fathers can turn in predators, as shown by the most reported cases of child sex abuse and paedophilia among Catholic priests (Scheper-Hughes 1998).

In slum children's self-formation, a key role is simultaneously played by many different caregivers – whether a biological parent, a friend, a Catholic priest, or a symbolic 'parent' with whom there is no physical proximity but subjective and emotional, as King Bhumibol is for most Thai people. Children's embodiment of different relational models, therefore, produce hybrid, contextually dynamic, and multi-layered configurations of self that might present a certain degree of ambivalence, at political level too.

Emotional, religious, and political dimensions are entangled in children's self. Amongst *dek salam* who prioritised Father Nicola as a self-model to identify with, many did not convert to Catholicism or, if they did, they still considered themselves as Buddhists while maintaining multiple attachments to their (foster) mothers, grandmothers, relatives, or friends in the slum. The relationship they established with their caregivers' religion did not seem to be based only on rational arguments<sup>18</sup>. Some constructed their self according to Father's Nicola religious beliefs simply out of their willingness to please their 'dad'. In this regard, these were the words of Fa, a 12-year-old orphan at Saint Jacob:

When I talk to dad [father Nicola] I often get emotional. He touches my heart because he always asks me about my feelings. Dad is not like Buddhist monks. When I see them arriving I have to move aside to avoid coming into

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18 Opposing an 'intellectualistic' understanding of conversion, Robert Hefner described it as a social process "emerging both from the ideas and intentions of individuals and from the institutions and circumstances that constrain and routinize the world in which people act, often outside their full awareness" (Hefner 1993, p. 27).

contact with them. Dad hugs me instead and always tells me that we (*dek salam*) are God’s most beloved sons. We are not *phu-noi* for him! This is why Catholicism is good (Fa, August 2011).

In fact, *dek salam* could temporarily turn Catholics not only for political reasons, or as a contextual identity strategy to fight against discrimination, but also because of their desire to benefit from Father Nicola’s caring and affective attentions.

Certainly, the alternative socialisation venues of the slum and the Saint Jacob Centre provided *dek salam* with possibilities of self-formation that are distinct from Thai school teachers’ and public officials’ stigmatised view of the poor. The emotional bond with Father Nicola, in particular, offered some children a religious space where their ethnic, class, and generational identities can be revalorised and potentially transformed into a subversive political self.

## **Conclusions**

Children living in the slums of Bangkok, as other categories of marginal childhood throughout the world, are subjected to multiple institutional interventions aimed at ‘protecting’ their rights and-or correcting their ‘deviance’. Besides the state and secular NGOs, religious organisations play a major role in these children’s lives, providing alternative venues of socialisation, and directly shaping how adults take care of children, as well as children’s self-interpretations (Campigotto et al 2012) – sometimes in ways politically conflicting with the state strategies of poverty governance.

In this article, I have shown the political complexity that frames self-processes in the specific case of a group of (apparently) ‘independent’ children, who were raised in a slum of Bangkok according to rural practices of collective childcare, and are supported as disadvantaged ‘slum children’ (*dek salam*) in a Catholic NGO. The place these *dek salam* come from, the slum, the state contexts of schooling, and the Catholic NGO, embody divergent interpretations of ‘childhood’, adult-child relationship, and poverty. In each of the places they circulate and grow in, these children are taken care of by adults in different ways and educated according to conflicting religious and political goals. Rather than being involved in a dyadic relationship with a single caregiver – as postulated within dominant approaches to child development and attachment theory – these children have formed multiple attachments and struggle to integrate them into a sense of self, which is anyway plural, dialogical, and inhabited by many ‘others’ (Van Meijl 2006).

For these children, Father Nicola – the head of the Catholic NGO they partly grew up in – represents an alternative parental model to the politi-

cised, Buddhist standard proposed by the Thai state. While *dek salam's* family background, ethnicity, wider autonomy from adults, and peer-to-peer solidarity are perceived by state officials and schoolteachers alike as a moral disorder to be corrected, the Catholic missionary's theological-political re-interpretation of Thailand's 'small people' (*phu-noi*) as God's beloved sons is appropriated by some of the children as a political resource to resist social stigma and challenge urban poor's subordination within Thai power hierarchies. My analysis of this particular case clearly illustrates how attachment and self-formation are deeply shaped by institutional, economic, and religious historically situated processes, which interact with children's agency. It also demonstrates the political relevance of NGOs and religious organisations in providing marginal children with knowledge and possibilities of self-formation that might (or might not) differ from those prescribed by the state.

While this article focuses on the children assisted by Saint Jacob Centre in Bangkok, there are many other aid organisations, both secular and religious, that are dealing with marginal children, poverty, social and environmental issues throughout Thailand. Not all Christian NGOs share Father Nicola's critical approach, just like not all Buddhist monks support the state rhetoric on urban poor. If the Thai state discourse of discrimination against *dek salam* makes historical use of Buddhist concepts as political instruments of moral legitimation, divergent interpretations of Buddhism have been flourishing across Thai society in recent years, including various strands of socially engaged Buddhism emphasising compassion and socio-economical justice – rather than unconditioned gratitude towards (ethnic Thai) 'big people' (*phu-yai*) – as core values (Lapthananon 2012).

What is certain is that *dek salam's* affective bonds with an Italian Catholic priest reveal much more than a particular type of charity in the slums of Bangkok. They rather bear witness to the complex interplay of religious, political and socio-economical dimensions that frame small people's self in today's militarised Thailand.

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