

Standing in the shadows:

Of matrilocality and the role of women in a village election in northern Thailand

ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze a village election in Thailand to show how anthropological insights into kinship systems can provide important avenues into understanding the gender dynamics of electoral politics. Because few women hold public office in Thailand, Thai politics has been considered a male domain. Exploring four social dramas in which conflicts made the hidden role of women visible, I argue that the public domain of electoral politics in rural Thailand is embedded within village practices of matrilocality and matrilineal kinship. [*politics, elections, public sphere, women, matrilocality, matrilineages, Thailand*]

Anthropologists, their emphases shaped by earlier interests in stateless societies and by the prevalence of colonial forms of indirect rule, have paid remarkably little attention to electoral politics.¹ Because men often hold elected office and because women have long been denied suffrage in many countries, the arena of formal electoral politics is “typically presumed to be an exclusively male sphere, with women regarded as ‘private’ actors confined to homes and charitable associations” (Skocpol 1992:30). Feminist anthropology has gradually undermined the simple dichotomy that “the world of the domestic and familial is the world of women, and that of the public and political the world of men” (Lamphere 1974:97).² Although earlier studies illustrated the general principle that “actual methods of giving rewards, controlling information, exerting pressure, and shaping events may be available to women as well as to men” (Rosaldo 1974:21), more recent studies are revealing the fundamental role of gender in the processes of state formation.³ Thus, the field of political anthropology has come a long way from the days when political activity could be defined, without caveats or other forms of verbal flinching, as the means through which “a man achieves command over resources, or power over men, or both” (Bailey 1960:10). Nonetheless, anthropological insights have rarely been applied in the domain of formal electoral politics, allowing the public–private dichotomy to remain largely unchallenged.

In this article, I provide an analysis of a local election in Thailand to show how anthropological insights into kinship systems can provide important avenues into understanding the gender dynamics of electoral politics. Despite the recognition of the village practice of matrilocal (uxorilocal) postmarital residence among anthropologists of Thailand,⁴ scholars of Thai politics have repeatedly described politics as a man’s world. Under a framework developed by Thailand’s first Minister of the Interior, Prince Damrong Rajanuphab (1894–1915), rural administration was organized into villages, subdistricts, districts, and provinces. Elections for village and subdistrict heads were instituted in 1897 under the Local Administrative Act. Although this act institutionalized suffrage for women, it also

stipulated that only men could serve as village heads or as subdistrict heads (*kamnan*). Elections for municipal, provincial, and parliamentary offices were established in subsequent decades and allowed both men and women to run for office; in 1982 the Local Administrative Act was amended to also allow women to run for village head and *kamnan*. Nonetheless, few women hold elected office. As of 1999, a mere 2.4 percent of village heads are women (Ockey 2004:57).⁵ As of 2000, women composed only 10 percent of municipal and provincial council members; in parliament women composed a mere 5.6 percent of the house and 10.5 percent of the senate (Ockey 2004:57; Tasker 2000:56; see also Supatra Masdit 1991:18). In remarking on this relative absence of women from elected office, Khunying Supatra Masdit, herself a long-standing member of parliament, comments, “In our history, Thai women have not been directly involved in politics because it has been the norm that household matters are women’s matters while national matters are men’s matters” (1991:16).⁶

Ignoring the fact that Thailand was one of the first countries in the world to grant women voting rights (see Bowie n.d.),⁷ studies of electoral politics have had an androcentric bias. Analyses of provincial and national level elections repeatedly highlight the importance of *kamnan* and village heads in mobilizing village voters. Because *kamnan*, village heads, and household heads are generally male, men appear as the primary political actors in the prevailing narratives of electoral decision making. Although these studies recognize that kinship networks underlie the efficacy of these local leaders, their bland definitions of kinship networks as “members of a family and their circle of friends and neighbors” contribute to an image of women as politically irrelevant (e.g., Nelson 2005:17). This androcentric paradigm has led concerned feminists to conclude that Thai women are politically disadvantaged because the rules of the game are “set up by men who dominate the political process” (Juree 1997a); because women lack political networks (Nongyao 1994:128–130); or because women suffer from, according to Rosa Linda Miranda, “low self-esteem, a lack of confidence in understanding national and global issues, and a sense of inability to communicate, lead and manage people” (Doneys 2002:179; see also Thomson 1995:11–23).⁸ Even in cases in which women are themselves candidates, scholars have suggested that “women who enter politics as candidates in Thailand do so through kinship ties to men” (Fishel 2001:242, also p. 177; Ockey 2004:78).

More recent studies are beginning to recognize women’s involvement and challenge the conclusions that women lack political networks or management skills. Most studies of electoral politics have focused on national elections for parliament. Increasingly, these studies are beginning to make mention—at least in passing—of the role of male candidates’ wives, mothers, and sisters in successful campaigns.⁹ Former prime minister Chawalit Yongchaiyut (1996–97) has

suggested that he would probably lose an election if his wife were his rival: “She is very popular among the local people. She has extended her mercy to everyone from housewives to monks” (Ockey 2004:62). The mother of former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai (1992–95, 1997–2001) is widely understood to have played an influential role in his campaign. Similarly, the election of Thailand’s last elected prime minister, Taksin Shinawatra (2001–06), owed much to the efforts of his wife and sisters. Taksin’s sister, Yaowapha Wongsawat, was herself elected to parliament and was said to have at least 60 members of parliament in her faction (McCargo and Ukrist 2005:82). Noting that wives of members of parliament often do most of the constituency work and build up a rapport with the voters in the provinces, one parliamentarian commented that “sometimes voters will even vote for an MP they dislike, because of the efforts of a wife” (Ockey 2004:70).

Because these analyses of national and provincial electoral politics are not grounded in anthropological insights into kinship, politically active women appear as mere exceptions. British anthropologist Daniel Arghiros is the first to ground a book-length study of electoral politics in village dynamics. Although gender is not the focus of his pioneering ethnography, he nonetheless provides tantalizing comments that support a radical reexamination of the prevailing paradigm and suggest that the role of women—far from anomalous—is fundamental. First, he finds that village women are keenly interested in politics (Arghiros 2001:58). Second, he notes that a male candidate’s female relatives play a critical role in forging links between candidates and village kinship networks, concluding that “[it] would not be an exaggeration to say that at all levels candidates win because of their wives and female kinfolk” (Arghiros 2001:164). Third, he recognizes the political implications of uxorilocal marriage practices, noting that, “since most households are related through women (due to a heritage of uxorilocality), they play a very important part in enlisting support for their husbands” (Arghiros 2001:93). Last, Arghiros draws attention to the fact that women “are relatively invisible” (2001:93), adding later that it “is easy to miss the importance of women in electoral politics because their role is rarely public” (2001:164). Thamora Fishel also notes that election studies have ignored “the behind-the-scenes maneuvering where women play key roles” (1997:445). If women are indeed interested in politics and such vital members in successful electoral campaigns, then why are women’s political activities “invisible,” “rarely public,” or “behind-the-scenes”? (See Figure 1.)

The paradox of women as both important and invisible suggests that a more complex realm of gendered politics lies hidden between the right to vote and the right to hold formal office. In 1995, I had occasion to observe an election in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai, in which three village headmen, representing the largest of the 12 villages in a subdistrict I shall call Thungnaa, competed for the position of *kamnan* or subdistrict head. My primary vantage point was



Figure 1. A village polling station. Photo by K. Bowie.

the home of an influential middle-aged couple who lived in a village that I shall call Baan Dong. The husband, Dii, was a respected teacher who had married uxorilocally.¹⁰ The wife, Phorn, was the daughter of a former kamnan and herself the former president of the village housewives' association. Unlike previous local elections in this subdistrict in which the winner was a foregone conclusion, this election was highly contested, replete with vote buying and a murder. Long interested in agrarian politics, I was initially trying to understand the factors underlying the explosion of vote buying (see Bowie 1997, in press).

My consciousness of gender emerged as I was forced to reflect on how my relationship with villagers had changed over the course of the past 30 years. When I first began conducting fieldwork as a young, single woman, I was seen as gender neutral (or, perhaps, even as an ornamental object of amusement) and had no particular difficulties in observ-

ing all-male meetings of village elders. Time and the births of my two children both feminized and personalized my relationships. Now classified as female, I realized that it had now become awkward to request to observe the generally all-male campaign planning meetings. Instead, I relied on postmeeting discussions with male participants and their female relatives to keep abreast of the fascinating, even nefarious, campaign strategies (see Bowie in press for details). Increasingly, these various discussions made me aware of both the emotional anguish the election was causing individual village families and how well informed village women were. Ironically, I might not have developed this awareness to the same extent had I been able to attend the campaign meetings in person.

As the campaign intensified, villagers, torn by conflicting loyalties, went to seemingly absurd lengths to avoid an appearance of partisanship. The public election

campaign was composed largely of candidates' supporters driving trucks through the village; the vehicles were festooned with campaign banners and carried loudspeakers blaring out the names and ballot numbers of their respective candidates. Some truck owners, when approached by different candidates asking to borrow their vehicles, carefully balanced the number of days each candidate was allowed to use their truck. Other truck owners let their candidate's supporters drive their vehicles but refused to drive their trucks themselves. One villager who was considered to have an especially good voice worked as an announcer for two days for his village's candidate but made sure to work one day for another candidate. A schoolteacher who lived in one candidate's village but taught in the other candidate's village painted signs for both campaigns. Many villagers went to visit competing candidates' homes to help with campaign preparations; men drove trucks and women helped with cooking. Yet, despite their efforts to maintain an appearance of neutrality, these villagers found themselves suspected of being spies or "two-headed birds" (*nok song hua*) working on behalf of the other camp. The aftermath of the bitterly fought campaign was no less tense; villagers who were accused of selling their votes or betraying their villages were denounced as traitors.

Even though I knew all three candidates, my own efforts to maintain neutrality as a foreign observer failed. I found myself inexorably being identified with the politics of the village in which I was residing to the point I could no longer interview the other two candidates for a time. Seeing village friends in tears or unable to sleep at night began to make me appreciate the emotional toll of this election. Gradually, I began to understand more of the deep interpenetrations of the domestic and the political in the Thai village context. As Victor Turner notes in his discussion of social drama, conflict brings "fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse, into frightening prominence" (1974:35).

In this article, I argue that the public domain of electoral politics in rural Thailand cannot be understood apart from the domain of women because it is embedded within village practices of matrilocality and matrilineal kinship. After summarizing the political economy of Thai village kinship and the historical changes that generated such a hard-fought election, I explore four electoral dramas that developed as the maelstrom of campaign politics swirled through Baan Dong village. These vignettes reveal the intense pressures campaign politics was placing on individuals, both men and women, on marriages, and on intermatrilineal relations both within and across villages. Understood in the context of the political economy of Thai matrilocality, these examples reverse the prevailing interpretation of the gender dynamics of electoral politics in Thai villages. If in everyday life the men in these examples bridged across matrilineal villages, electoral conflict forced them to support candidates in their wives' matrilineal villages. If in everyday life women

were embedded in their own matrilineal villages, electoral conflict forced them to become actively involved in efforts to maintain harmony first within their villages and, secondly, across villages. As the partisanship of electoral politics threatened to spin myriad matrilineal maelstroms, the normally invisible political role and concerns of women became visible. As I show, women's roles go beyond the immediate electoral goal of supporting specific candidates and address a broader goal of ensuring harmonious intermatrilineal and intervillage relations.

Understanding the political importance of matrilocality and matrilineality

Resolving the apparent paradox of the simultaneous importance and invisibility of women in electoral politics involves an understanding of how village men and women are integrated into the political economy of Thai kinship. In Thailand, men are generally considered as the heads of Thai households; they also hold formal village offices ranging from village heads to members of the village temple committee, funeral society, or school advisory board.¹¹ Sulamith Heins Potter notes that "the assumption of the structural significance of men has made it more difficult for anthropologists to grasp the structural principles of female-centered family systems" (1977:2).¹² Although Thai villagers have been described by some anthropologists as neolocal, a closer reading of the literature reveals a widespread tendency in the northern, northeastern, and central regions to follow matrilocal postmarriage residence. As Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1888–1969), widely considered the founder of Thai anthropology, explains, it is the custom "for the young man to leave the home of his parents, that is, to marry out of his own home and into his wife's home" (1988:286). In the northern village she studied, Potter concluded that "matrilocal residence is explicitly the ideal; it occurs in 73 percent of all marriages in the village" (1977:62).¹³

Matrilocality ensures the maintenance of strong matrilineal bonds.¹⁴ After marriage, a new couple usually lives in the same home as part of an extended household with the wife's parents, siblings, and grandparents (most likely maternal grandparents). Over time, the couple may build their own home, residing neolocally in the wife's family compound.¹⁵ Their neighbors are most likely to be members of the wife's matriline. As one elderly villager explained, "Kinship is like a banana tree that starts out with one central trunk and then gradually sends out shoots around it; even after the mother trunk has died, the clump of surrounding seedlings remains" (Potter 1976:141; see also Potter 1977). Because members of the same matrilineage tend to reside near each other, each matrilineage "tends to inhabit its own section of the village" (Potter 1976:141). Thus, geographical divisions in a village correlate with clusters of households (a *pok*) related to each

other primarily through a woman's mother, maternal aunts, sisters, and daughters.

In northern Thailand corporate matrilineal identity is reinforced by a belief in a shared matrilineal ancestral spirit (*phii puu njaa*),¹⁶ which is inherited through women and into which men must marry. Women are members by virtue of matrilineal descent and never belong to more than one group.¹⁷ Even after the time when she might have had influence in daily household decision making, the eldest woman in the matriline oversees the periodic ritual offerings to the matrilineal ancestral spirit in which "spirits are asked for forgiveness for any offences committed against them and for their continuing protection" (Cohen and Gehan 1984a:249; see also Potter 1977:117). The matrilineal spirit must be informed of marriages of its members. In addition, expiatory offerings are made to the ancestral spirit in cases of extramarital sexual relations or other offences that cause dissension between members of the matriline (Cohen and Gehan 1984a:249). Offended matrilineal spirits can become witch-spirits (*phii ka*), which cause their descendants to become ill (Anan 1984; Cohen and Gehan 1984a:249; Davis 1984:265–266; Potter 1976:142; Potter 1977:18; Turton 1972:233). Koichi Mizuno describes a similar phenomenon in northeastern Thailand, noting that if a husband fails to please his wife's parents, "he is denounced by his wife's relatives, and it is said that his children will fall sick under the influence of ancestral spirits" (1968:851).

Far from an independent political actor, an uxori-local husband is embedded in a domestic political economy in which he is often dependent on his wife's parents for his home and his access to agricultural land. Newly married couples depend on the wife's parents for ploughs, buffaloes, buffalo pens, and granaries (Mizuno 1968:846). Although many scholars have characterized Thai inheritance patterns as bilateral, in practice there is a tendency toward matrilineal inheritance and even a form of female ultimogeniture. As Charles Keyes notes, "Agricultural land passes from a couple to their daughters and sons-in-law" (1983:852; Tambiah 1970:12).¹⁸ Because the youngest daughter is usually the last to marry, she is most likely to remain with her parents to care for them in their old age; in return, she generally receives an extra portion of the parents' land and is also likely to inherit the parental home (see also De Young 1966:23; Mizuno 1968:850; Potter 1977:19; Sharp and Hanks 1978:56; Tambiah 1970:13; Van Esterik 2000:188).¹⁹ Even when a young couple is able to reside neolocally, their home is usually built next door to the wife's parents' home (the "big house" or *hyan luang*) and on land they provided.

Although a couple may seek assistance from the husband's natal matriline, the high percentage of uxori-local residence means that the wife's matriline is much more likely to provide the primary kinship network through which needed labor and other resources are mobilized. Cooperative labor exchanges—both within and across matrilineal lines—are crucial

for a wide variety of undertakings, including transplanting and harvesting rice, maintaining the irrigation systems, and helping build each other's houses. These relatives may be asked to provide assistance ranging from outright gifts of money in time of need, interest-free loans, and loans of buffaloes and other agricultural supplies to help with child care, schooling issues, and finding jobs in the city (e.g., Kaufman 1960:23–25; Piker 1964:62–63). In addition, kin groups depend on each other to share the costs of expensive ritual occasions such as New Year's festivals, funerals, ordinations, and the like. The wider one's kinship network, the wider one's sources of support. Although everyday life is more likely to involve intravillage ties, ritual events draw on a wide network of intervillage bonds. Just how wide this network can be became clear to me when I was doing research for my dissertation; my Thai sister was able to mobilize contacts for me in all nine districts in which I sought to conduct interviews. The better a woman's relations are across matrilineal lines and across villages, the better her position in an agrarian-based political economy.

In addition to mobilizing labor and other resources through matrilineal lines, village women can also exercise considerable economic control in their own right. As many observers have commented, women play a key role in village markets, both in selling and buying (Bowie 1988, 1992).²⁰ Market trading is so much a job for women that "a man in the marketplace . . . is an uncommon sight" (Potter 1977:70). As De Young noted, through marketing, village women "produce a sizeable portion of the family cash income, and they not only handle the household money, but usually act as the family treasurer and hold the purse strings" (1966:24). Given their control over financial transactions, women also play a primary role in deciding whether or not to extend credit to relatives and fellow villagers.²¹ Village women are often the primary organizers of mutual credit associations in which members each contribute a fixed amount of capital; such financing facilitates a new village market venture, the expansion of the family store, a child's education, or the purchase of such items as a motorcycle, refrigerator, or television. A woman's economic position is further safeguarded by traditional laws that ensure to varying degrees that, in cases of divorce, a woman has "control of the property that she may have brought to the family and of what she may have accumulated during her married life" (Suwadee 1989:58).

Matrilocal residence places stress on husbands and wives in somewhat different ways. Despite their positions of formal authority as household heads or office holders, men are dependent on their wives' families. Although women find themselves needing to mediate conflicts between their husband and members of their matriline, many in-married men experience feelings of isolation in their wife's village.²² As Steven Piker notes, men have to leave the village in which their own family and kin live and move to the village of their wives, where all are strangers (1964:12–16). Various

anthropologists have remarked in passing that village festivities are marked with circles of men engaged in drinking and gambling (Kaufman 1960; Piker 1968:783–784; Potter 1976:24). Although alcohol consumption has various motivations, these drinking circles provide a form of escape from the alienation men may experience in their wives' families.²³ As one village son-in-law explained to me, "It was so difficult moving into my wife's home. I didn't know anyone else in the village and there were times I just needed to get away from her family." That their position as "sons-in-law" is an important aspect of male identity is revealed in the formation of a village men's group in Baan Dong village explicitly called "Sons-in-Law of Baan Dong."

Understanding the respective positions of men and women in a matrilineal kinship system helps to shed light on the complex role of women in electoral politics: it illuminates both the social network and the economic position of the candidates' wives and other female relatives that underlie their ability to mobilize votes. As Daniel Arghiros has keenly observed, although they are rarely candidates themselves, women are often effective canvassers who have access to households and to trading and credit relations that men lack (2001:164). He describes the winning candidate for provincial council, Sergeant Khem, who, together with his wife, Oy, owned a lucrative construction contracting business and building supply store. Prior to her marriage, Oy had helped her mother run the market's largest food and general supply store, extending credit to villagers when they hosted their life-cycle ceremonies. Oy continued this practice in her own business, extending credit districtwide to villagers and monks for their construction projects. As Arghiros explains, "As everywhere in Thailand, it was the wife (Oy) who ran the store on a day-to-day basis rather than her husband and it was often to her rather than Khem that villagers and temples expressed a personal obligation in return for receiving credit." He concludes, "This personal obligation was translated into electoral support" (2001:132). Khem's victory is all the more remarkable because he was widely disliked and had alienated many people by verbally abusing them when he was drunk. Revealing how marginal to the political process men may be, Arghiros explains:

Again, reflecting the critical but relatively invisible contribution of women to men's electoral campaigns, without exception local commentators considered that Sergeant Khem would have no chance of success were it not for his wife Oy. She would consistently repair the damage he did to his reputation by personally approaching people whom her husband had abused, patching up social relations. [2001:192]

Recognizing the importance of matrilineal kinship in village politics also sheds light on why women would be more reluctant to seek office or to become publicly identified with

either a political candidate or political stance. Because cooperative labor exchanges underlie so many village activities, harmonious intra- and intermatrilineal lineages are very important. Conflict challenges the ability of all villagers to maintain harmonious intermatrilineal and intervillage relations. However, because of a matrilineal structure, women are better positioned than men to mediate its resolution. By appearing neutral (even if she agrees with her husband), a woman protects a useful claim of "plausible deniability." Having one's husband as a candidate rather than one's self allows a woman room to mediate and negotiate conflicts. Villagers expect the members of a candidate's immediate matriline to be partisan. However, villagers who have bonds to more than one candidate make every effort to safeguard their apparent neutrality. When these efforts fail, women play a crucial and active role in ensuring intramatrilineal, intermatrilineal, and intervillage bonds, respectively.

Historical background to the 1995 election

Historically, elections for kamnan had provoked little public discord in this region. Until 1972, village heads elected one among themselves to serve as kamnan. In 1972, the law was changed such that kamnan were now elected by the all eligible voters residing in the subdistrict. The first popular election for kamnan in Tambon Thungnaa was held in 1986. There were three candidates, but campaigning was minimal because consensus had been achieved long before the formal vote was taken.²⁴ The victor won by a landslide; he came from a fairly wealthy family and lived in Baan Dong, by far the largest village in the tambon. His retirement triggered the 1995 election I observed. After Baan Dong elected its new village head, the tambon was ready to hold its new election for kamnan.

However, the 1995 election for kamnan took place under greatly changed circumstances. The passage of new laws governing rural elections and the rapid expansion of capitalist development were leading to dramatic changes in village electoral dynamics throughout the country. A new law governing the village headmen and kamnan established that those elected after July 1992 could only serve five-year terms; those elected prior to this law were grandfathered, thus being allowed to remain in office until their retirement. In March 1995, a new law increased the administrative power of tambon councils. With the government budget for rural development expanding, gaining control over the tambon council became more important. The significant government budgets at stake and the differential in office terms meant that village heads able to serve until their retirement had greater incentives to invest heavily in election campaigns (for more details, see Bowie in press). The result was a widespread surge in vote buying and turmoil nationwide.

Of the 12 headmen in Tambon Thungnaa, four were elected under the new term limits; eight would serve

until their respective retirements. The three candidates were headmen of the three largest villages in the tambon. Headman Kaew was the newly elected head of Baan Dong village; he had the advantage of representing by far the largest village in the subdistrict, comprising some 1,000 voters. Headman Ngen came from the smallest of the three villages fielding candidates, a village with some 400 voters. However, Ngen had the advantage that he was the wealthiest of the tambon's headmen, running a lucrative road construction business; furthermore, he was elected headman under the old laws. Ngen proceeded to shore up a coalition of support with the other seven headmen who had also been elected under the old law, making a variety of promises of financial support to them personally and to their respective villages. These eight headmen agreed to "close" their villages (*pid muubaan*) by not allowing other candidates to campaign or hold public forums in their villages. The third candidate, Headman Kham, was also a newly elected headman. Although he represented a village with some 500 voters, he was not considered a serious candidate by anyone, including himself; as he explained to me, he was running primarily to position himself and his village for the future.

Unlike the previous election for kamnan, this election campaign lasted 30 days, beginning in earnest from the date the candidates registered at the district office. For weeks, the candidates' wives, relatives, and friends were busy preparing meals three times a day for all the campaign workers. If the previous election had cost a few thousand baht (most spent for the victory celebration), the present election costs were in the tens and hundreds of thousands of baht.²⁵ Campaign strategists for each of the candidates had the vote count down to a very narrow margin of error; they knew the vote would be close. Vote buying could easily make a difference. Although Headmen Kaew and Kham refused—and could not afford—to buy votes, Headman Ngen did so unabashedly. As Headman Ngen's campaign tactics became clear to villagers in Baan Dong, frustration, anger, and bitterness mounted.²⁶

Villagers in Baan Dong felt devastated by the election results. Even though the position of kamnan had always been filled by someone from their village, Headman Ngen won. The final vote was 1,710 for Headman Ngen, 1,453 for Headman Kaew, and 480 for Headman Kham (see Figure 2). In Baan Dong itself, the final vote was 36:916:2, representing their almost unified support for Headman Kaew. Attributing their loss to Headman Ngen's dirty campaign tactics and vote buying, outraged villagers in Baan Dong held a village meeting immediately after the election. Many who spoke wanted to track down the 36 who had voted for Headman Ngen, seeking to punish all those who had "betrayed" Baan Dong. Some denounced vote sellers as lower than dogs: a dog sold for 200–300 baht, but these people had sold their votes for less. Others lamented the pitiable honesty and stupidity of villagers who felt that once they had taken the money they were obligated to vote for the briber (*syy con syy*, "honest



Figure 2. A woman at a voting booth. Photo by K. Bowie.

to the point of stupidity").²⁷ Tellingly, Headman Ngen never held the traditional inaugural feast; he was afraid there might be violence. The passions inflamed in the course of this election campaign continue to reverberate to the present, albeit in an attenuated form. That the intense passions have subsided owes much to the actions of village women described in the following vignettes.

Vignette 1: The pork seller

My first personal encounter with the stress this election was generating occurred about two weeks before the election, when one of the men who sold pork at the local village morning market stopped by the house where I was staying. Although he had married into a nearby village, the pork seller was originally born in Baan Dong and returned daily to sell in Baan Dong's market. His saga reveals the plight of men who

straddle two villages that have decided to support different candidates and illustrates the political role of women in applying pressure to vote in line with their village's decision. As was to be expected, the pork seller voted in accord with his wife's village, causing a rift with the women in his natal village. However, because of the importance of maintaining intervillage and intermatrilinal relations, women from his natal village also took the first steps to heal the rift after the election.

When the pork seller arrived, it was not even 7:00 a.m. and everyone else in the house was still sleeping. The pork seller, clearly upset, begged me to wake Dii up. I did so reluctantly. Dii came downstairs and the two men headed outside for a private conversation. As Dii reconstructed their discussion afterward, the pork seller was distraught about the election campaign and could not sleep at night. The head of the pork seller's wife's village was part of Headman Ngen's coalition; consequently, his village head was refusing to allow the supporters of Headman Kaew to campaign in his village. Although this headman broadcast campaign advertisements in favor of Headman Ngen day and night over the village loudspeaker system, he refused to broadcast any of Headman Kaew's advertisements. Furthermore, the headman was not allowing Headman Kaew to hold any public meetings in his village. As the headman's intransigence became apparent to Headman Kaew's campaign supporters, they had asked this pork seller, as someone from Baan Dong, to allow them to hold a public meeting at his wife's home.

Initially, the pork seller had agreed to host such a gathering. His promise of support came at a particularly important moment because it followed on the heels of Headman Kaew's supporters' anger and frustration with another village headman who had double-crossed them (he had promised the use of his home to hold a campaign meeting and then later refused it). However, when the head of the pork seller's wife's village found out about the plan, he went over to their home, telling them that he could not guarantee their safety or future happiness if they allowed this meeting to take place. Frightened, the pork seller changed his mind and told Headman Kaew's campaign workers that they could not use his home. Ever since, he explained to Dii, he has been having a hard time at the Baan Dong morning market. He said that the market women were teasing him that if he did not vote for Kaew, they would force him to sell his pork at Ngen's village; this was an oblique reminder of his dependency on Baan Dong village because the other villages did not have a market. He did not know what he should do. Caught between the politics of his wife's village and Baan Dong, he lamented that he just wanted to sell his pork. He assured Dii that he had no intention to vote for Ngen and planned to vote for Kaew; after all, he said, he was originally from Baan Dong. But he complained that the marketers did not believe him and were making him feel miserable. Dii was reassuring, saying that he understood how the pork seller felt and realized

that emotions were beginning to run high. Dii noted how he was also torn between Headman Kaew, who had been a student of his, and Headman Ngen, who was married to Phorn's cousin.

After the pork seller left, Phorn joined us in the kitchen to make breakfast. Dii explained to her the pork seller's dilemma. In the course of the day, various of the market women stopped by, as they often did, to chat with Phorn. Phorn took the occasion to raise the issue of the pork seller. After some discussion, the various women agreed they had teased him a lot, and some said they had already begun to feel sorry for him (*induu*). Recognizing that he had no real choice, the harassment subsided for a time.

However, after the election, the pork seller became a target of Baan Dong villagers' wrath. The pork seller's wife's village had voted 121:9:5 in favor of Ngen. Although the pork seller may well have provided one of the nine votes in favor of Kaew, Baan Dong villagers heard rumors that, when he was in his wife's village, he was actually telling people to vote for Ngen. Furthermore, Baan Dong villagers still held him responsible for the inability of Kaew supporters to campaign in his wife's village. He was denounced as a traitor at the village meeting. Notably, one of the most outspoken proponents for sanctions against the pork seller was another man who also sold pork in the village market. The pork seller's brother rose to speak in his defense, saying that everyone should understand that of course he needed to support his fellow villagers in the village where he was living. Someone else added that he had given a large contribution to Baan Dong's village temple. But these defenses were of no avail. The following morning, the pork seller found his chopping block destroyed. Rumors spread that eating his pork would make people sick (*lut thohng*). None of the women would buy pork from him. His competitor, a man who lived in Baan Dong, was the beneficiary of the boycott. One woman who was at the market three days after the election told me that the competitor's pork stall still was so swamped with all the villagers trying to buy from him, one could not see the seller himself.

And, yet, gradually, life returned to normal. As noted earlier, women are the primary villagers who buy and sell in the market. For a time the pork seller stayed away from the Baan Dong market. Village women in Baan Dong began to comment about how they felt sorry for him. Some of them remarked to me that, if it was true that he had actively campaigned for Ngen, he should not have done that; however, they did not know for sure if he had. Maybe he had voted for Ngen; maybe not. If he had, he did not have much choice really because that was his wife's village and he had to live there. After a brief absence, he returned. Baan Dong village women resumed buying their pork from him, as well as his competitor. Slowly, the damage was repaired.

The case of the pork seller illustrates several interlaced issues at once. The pork seller's natal village and his wife's

village were supporting different candidates. The women in both villages participated in their villages' efforts to obtain unanimous support for their respective candidates. When forced to choose, the pork seller voted in accord with his wife's village. The women of Baan Dong played an active role in supporting the campaign of their village head and showed a willingness to implement sanctions on traitors, as evidenced in their boycott. However, these women also had a sense of the difficult situation in which out-marrying men found themselves, recognizing that men were under heavy pressure to vote in accord with their wives' families. Men who married into Baan Dong had much weaker bonds with the pork seller because they would not have shared childhood memories with him. Consequently, it is not surprising that it was primarily Baan Dong women who sought to heal the rift with him because many of them were his relatives and had known him since childhood.

Vignette 2: Funeral society expulsion

The plight of Thong developed because, like the pork seller, Thong was born in Baan Dong but had moved to his wife's village after marriage. In addition to providing a second example of a man following the political will of his wife's village, his case illustrates how village women worked "behind the scenes" to counteract a public decision reached by men at a village meeting. The village headman of Thong's wife's village was solidly in Ngen's camp, refusing to let villagers from Baan Dong campaign in his village. Like the pork seller, Baan Dong villagers had tried to convince Thong to campaign on Headman Kaew's behalf, but he said he had no influence so it would be a waste of time. He assured Baan Dong villagers that he had not forgotten his natal village, and he promised Kaew supporters that there would be at least one vote for Headman Kaew.

However, he would not let Kaew supporters meet his fellow villagers at his wife's home. When evidence mounted that Thong and others in his wife's village had sold their votes, anger with Thong grew. The assistant headman from Thong's wife's village had paid Headman Kaew a visit in Baan Dong before election day, informing him that Headman Ngen had offered them money for their votes and asking him whether he would be willing to pay them more for their votes. Although the cost of votes varied across villages, it seems the going rate in this village was 70 baht per vote. Headman Kaew refused their offer to buy their votes for a higher price. In the election, Thong's wife's village voted 164:0:2 in favor of Ngen. That not a single vote in this village had been cast for Headman Kaew created a serious problem for Thong because he could not plausibly claim to have supported Kaew.

At the village meeting, irate villagers expressed the view that Thong was a traitor and, therefore, should not get the benefits of membership in the Baan Dong community. Although not all villages have established organized funeral so-

cieties, Baan Dong has. Funerals, which generally last three to five days, are the most expensive and most important of the life-cycle rituals of ordinary villagers. Every villager aspires to a huge funeral with friends and relatives attending from villages far and wide.²⁸ In Baan Dong, on the occasion of the death of any society member, all other members contribute 30 baht to help defray the funeral expenses. Thus, membership in village funerary societies holds a deep emotional resonance. Because Thong had grown up in Baan Dong, he had decided to maintain his membership in Baan Dong's funeral society even after his marriage into another village. At the meeting, Baan Dong villagers said that he should not have sold out his natal village for 70 baht if he wanted to get the 20,000–30,000 baht at stake through the funeral society. Although women can speak at village meetings, they are more likely to remain silent and allow men to do the public speaking. When the menfolk decided to expel Thong from the funeral society, the women remained silent.

The next few days had the feeling of suspended animation. The topic in every home I visited was the election and its aftermath. Anger against traitors was high, but no one had ever been expelled from Baan Dong's funeral society before. Some villagers questioned whether it was then fair to invent new rules for the society post facto. Was selling one's vote any worse than murder or theft? Even villagers who had ended up in jail had not been expelled from their funeral society; surely those crimes were worse than selling one's votes? Furthermore, others commented, what choice did Thong have? If he had voted for Headman Kaew, he would have been accused of being a traitor to his wife's village. Maybe he had sold his vote, but was it fair that he be the only person punished when others had sold their votes as well?

Stunned by the village meeting, I pursued the matter in the evening male drinking circles that formed with some regularity in a neighbor's backyard; many of the most outspoken participants were men who had married into Baan Dong from outside and were not part of either the pork seller's or Thong's natal matriline. Although I introduced my questions gingerly at first, the exchanges became more heated and frank as the discussions continued. Replying to my question about precedence, one man retorted that the law covers cases of murder and theft; Thong had violated the rules of the community and had failed to provide his cooperation (*khwaam ruam myy*). Pressing further, I asked whether revenge against specific individuals was right when the underlying issue was the refusal of various village headmen to allow free access to "their" villages for all the candidates. The men explained that they wanted to punish everyone who had sold their votes; however, they could only act definitively in cases like Thong's, in which they had clear evidence. I also asked if there may have been some who voted for Ngen because they truly thought he was the better candidate, asking if they were not being antidemocratic by trying to enforce village unity at the expense of freedom of expression. One of

the most well-read men in the circle suggested that perhaps I could understand village politics by viewing Baan Dong as the Democratic Party; if a Democrat voted Republican, he or she should be kicked out of the party. In these first few nights, the men in this drinking circle were adamant that Thong was a traitor and deserved his expulsion. One villager, whose friendship with me has survived many such debates, warned me that I could only ask such things with them.

A few days later, the village temple leader stopped by to talk with Phorn. He told her that the evicted funeral society member was planning to press charges. An opinionated, in-married male neighbor who had been chatting with Phorn commented that Thong had no grounds to press charges because funeral societies are not legally registered entities. He said that the funeral society is at the discretion of its members and that there was no rule saying that anyone was necessarily in or out. Besides, he said, the village had already voted on their decision to expel this man and so the matter was settled. He added, "One can't just keep redoing old votes, or nothing is authoritative [*dedkhaad*]." Phorn and the temple leader sighed. After the neighbor left, Phorn commented that hot-blooded people were creating problems for the senior funerary committee members to solve. The temple leader, a native of Baan Dong village, nodded in agreement.

About two weeks after the election, the head of the southern subgroup of the village funerary society (in effect, the southern matrilineal cluster), who was responsible for collecting funeral payments from Thong, came to visit Phorn. It seems that Thong had asked him to put his expulsion from the funeral society in writing. The subgroup leader did not want to be the one signing for fear of legal ramifications. He had talked to the village temple leader, who suggested that he talk to various other village elders for advice about how to proceed. One of the ever-present visiting male neighbors retorted that there were no legal ramifications because the funeral society was not a legally registered group. Another man suggested that this would have to be brought up at a village meeting. It never was. Because there was no official documentation establishing that Thong had been expelled, Thong made his contribution to the funerary society when the next funeral occurred. No formal objections were made and the subject was never raised again. After all, Thong had many relatives in Baan Dong who were sympathetic to his situation. As emotions cooled in the intervening weeks, interest in revenge waned. Private discussions held by Phorn, members of Thong's natal southern matrilineal cluster, and members of affiliated matrilineal lines in Baan Dong were gradually, invisibly healing the wounds caused by outspoken men at the village meeting and in their drinking circles.

in its support for different candidates. However, the village leadership is not always able to achieve such unanimity. In such cases, villages are most likely to split internally along matrilineal lines. This next vignette shows how the 1995 election also threatened the unity of the various matrilineal lines that made up Baan Dong itself and shows how women played a role in resolving this conflict.

Of the 36 villagers in Baan Dong who voted for Ngen, the majority were members of a matriline located in the north end of the village.²⁹ This northern cluster (*pok*) was considered one of the poorest in the village; indeed, many of them had joined the Christian church in part to obtain scholarship support for their children. After election day, rumors were flying that these 36 had sold their votes.³⁰ However, other factors were also involved in these villagers' decision to vote for Ngen. This matriline had long been disgruntled that the roads in their part of the village were still just dirt roads. Headman Kaew tried to explain that the tambon council budget is for the main roads; only once all the roads in the tambon connect will the budget be used for secondary roads. Because they were part of Baan Dong village, sharing the same cemetery and temple, they were not eligible for separate tambon council funds. Already under the preceding *kamnan*, this cluster of the village had begun debating seceding from Baan Dong and forming a separate, new village; in this way, they would be eligible for tambon council funds because the road to their community would then be defined as a main road. Their other alternative for tar topping their road was the development budgets overseen by members of parliament because these funds could be used for secondary roads. Consequently, villagers in this cluster decided that they would have a better chance at getting money through this parliamentary budget if they supported Ngen because in his previous years as village headman he had developed links with various parliamentary candidates by serving as one of their local campaign coordinators (Headman Kaew was too newly elected to have formed such links).

Although villagers who had supported Headman Kaew were angry at the northern matriline, village reaction was more muted. At the public meeting, the 36 who betrayed Baan Dong were denounced in the abstract; however, no specific names were given. Some villagers said that if there was a way to prove who had taken money, they should be expelled from the funeral society as well. Others noted that they had no definitive proof on which they could take any action. However, other village elders were concerned that aggressive action against the northern cluster might provoke the lingering sentiments in favor of secession. Indeed, in the days after the election, the northern cluster, recognizing that there was considerable anger at them from the rest of the village, began to talk about forming a separate village. The flames of secession were fanned by the newly elected *Kamnan* Ngen, who evidently saw dividing Baan Dong into two smaller villages as a way to break its strength. Word spread

Vignette 3: Possession by the village spirit

The previous two examples revealed the plight of men who straddled villages, each of which was virtually unanimous

throughout Baan Dong that a “third hand” (*myy thi saam*) was trying to destroy their village.

By the end of the first week after the election, Headman Kaew began consultations with other village leaders about how to handle the situation. He was leaning toward appointing someone from the northern cluster, a man who not only represented the discontented north end of the village but was also related to the pork seller. Although this man had been a supporter of Ngen, he had always been helpful to Kaew in other village matters in the past. However, appointing a villager from the northern cluster meant displacing one of the two deputy village heads who had served his predecessor. Both of these deputy village heads had served as active supporters in Kaew’s campaign. Village elders with whom Headman Kaew consulted agreed that it would be best to replace one of the former assistants. To minimize the possibility that this new appointment might cause hurt feelings, Headman Kaew approached Phorn to seek her assistance. He knew that she and her family were close to this villager’s wife; Phorn agreed she would talk to his wife to make sure she understood Kaew’s reasons and ensure that this villager’s feelings were not hurt. Headman Kaew then appointed a member of the northern matriline as one of his new assistant heads.

With the groundwork in place, Headman Kaew called a new village meeting and asked those in favor of secession to speak. Only one person, Tukh, spoke up; Tukh was a younger man who had married into the northern matriline. The new assistant village head from the northern cluster was asked to speak; he said that he was neutral and thought that the issue could be revisited in another five years. Other villagers from other village matriline then raised various counterarguments to secession. These comments included noting that secession would entail lengthy bureaucratic procedures and numerous legal headaches; that Headman Kaew had only just been elected as village headman and should be given a chance to address village problems; and that if the cluster broke off, it would only form a small village and small villages do not get much attention from MPs anyway because they only represent a few votes. Therefore, various villagers suggested that it was better to stick together. Furthermore, they shared the same temple and the same cemetery. After a silence in which it became clear that no one else wanted to speak publicly in favor of secession, a former kamnan (Phorn’s father) suggested that it was best to wait to press the issue. Everyone applauded and the meeting went on to discuss other business. At the end of the meeting, one village woman mentioned her delight in seeing Tukh get his comeuppance. She exclaimed gleefully, “He was so embarrassed that he looked ready to fall into a hole and disappear. That will teach him a lesson for falling victim to the third hand trying to destroy village unity!”

That night, in the middle of the night, Tukh suffered some kind of seizure. Some irreligious village skeptics ex-

plained to me that Tukh had probably suffered some sort of nightmares from the tension and frustration of being publicly humiliated at the village meeting that morning. However, the public story circulating held that he had been attacked by the temple spirit (*phii wad*). His father-in-law exorcised the invading spirit and shortly thereafter Tukh apologized to his fellow villagers for seeking to cause dissension. Clearly, Tukh sensed the condemnation of the spirit of the village, whether defined sociologically or animistically. With his exorcism, there was no further talk of dividing the village. With the deft maneuvering of the village headman and the assistance of Phorn, the rift across Baan Dong’s matriline had been patched.³¹

Vignette 4: Of women, vegetables, and healing

The foregoing examples have revealed the stress local electoral politics placed on intervillage and intermatrilineal relations. However, the pressure electoral politics placed on individual women was made most clear to me as I watched Phorn negotiate between her husband, her village, and her extended matriline. Although Thai village marriages are generally uxorilocal, many families have more complex relations. Phorn’s mother is a younger half-sister of Ngen’s wife’s mother; they had the same father but different mothers. Phorn’s maternal grandfather grew up and married a woman in Headman Ngen’s village; they had two children together, but she died young. After she died, he remarried and had two more children with his second wife; one was Phorn’s mother. Although his second wife lived in a different village, the grandfather maintained close ties with both families. These ties have continued over the decades. Since childhood, Phorn has traveled frequently with her mother and other relatives in Baan Dong to visit Ngen’s wife’s family in their village and vice versa; during large festival occasions they often stayed overnight in each other’s villages to help with preparations. About two weeks before the election, two of Phorn’s cousins came to visit her, conveying a message from Ngen’s wife that they were very upset that Phorn’s husband was being so outspoken in favor of Headman Kaew and urging her to ask her husband to become more neutral.

The following week, Phorn went to Ngen’s village to pay her respects to her aunt, a traditional visit she makes annually as part of the April New Year’s celebrations (*dam hua*). Phorn found herself under siege as her aunt and other relatives criticized her for not reining in her husband better. They informed her that her husband had been involved in a drinking circle several days earlier in which he was reported as having told the local medic that if he did not vote for Headman Kaew, he should quit his job. The relatives told Phorn that when her husband drinks, he goes too far. They said that they heard frequent reports about everything her husband was saying in the various drinking circles he attended. They cautioned her that, although they were trying not to

pay much attention to his drunken remarks, she should remember the importance of relatives. As the aunt explained, “We’re relatives and we shouldn’t be separated from each other [*khaat kan bo daj*]. We need to be able to depend on each other. After all, who else but relatives do you rely on when you are sick in hospital or have other problems?” They told Phorn to remind her husband that he should also remember the importance of relatives.

Phorn came home that evening, very upset. Not only was her husband being criticized, but she also had learned that her father was being derogatorily called “a two-headed bird” (*nok song hua*) for his efforts to remain friendly with both sides. But when she told her husband about her trip, he got angry. He denied having made the remark to the tambon medic and insisted that he had never directly criticized Ngen; he had only said people should consider the respective term lengths in office when voting. Turning to me, he complained that his wife never understood him. He added that other local schoolteachers were far more outspoken, even going around in the trucks speaking for Kaew. Besides, he felt an obligation to support Kaew and the younger generation of village leaders because they had been his students. Clearly feeling frustrated, Phorn’s husband left the house and went over to the headman’s house to seek refuge in the evening discussion of electoral strategies. He returned, intoxicated, a couple of hours later. Phorn was still upset and they started arguing, the focus now on how her husband should watch his mouth when he drank because he often said more than he should and upset people in the process. As the argument escalated, Phorn fought back tears. Finally, Phorn decided not to respond and went into the bathroom to take her evening shower. I could hear her crying in frustration. No less upset, her husband went upstairs to bed. The following morning, nothing more was said about the previous day’s incidents at breakfast, each clearly understanding the respective pressures their spouse was feeling.

Three days later, Phorn decided to take motorcycles with two other relatives from her village, both also cousins of Ngen’s wife, to help Ngen’s wife with the food preparations for the day. Phorn told her husband she was going; he said nothing. Phorn told me that she had no intention of hiding her support for her own village headman’s candidacy, but she did not want others in Baan Dong village knowing about their visit and starting rumors. Their plan to head south to Ngen’s village unnoticed was a complete failure because they kept running into fellow villagers. The three women stopped the motorcycles to confer; they decided they had better turn back and go to Kaew’s house to help. When they arrived at Kaew’s house, people there asked why they were seen going south. Phorn confessed that they were going to go and help for a day at Ngen’s house. “What am I to do?” she asked the other women. “After all, they are my relatives and I should go to help out.” Intriguingly, Headman Kaew’s mother spoke up and said that of course they should go and help. After

helping with food preparations at Kaew’s house for a couple of hours and enduring considerable teasing, Phorn and her cousins concluded they would wait until after the election and then go to visit.

In the days after the elections, there was little contact between the two villages. The victory feast that newly elected kamnan and headmen normally host for all their constituents was never held; the rumor circulated that the new kamnan was afraid it might trigger violence. The new kamnan never came to visit Headman Kaew to offer him a position as deputy kamnan, a customary way of healing rifts.³² Then, about a month after the election, the new kamnan and his wife held a housewarming to celebrate the completion of their new house. Although they made nervous jokes about going into enemy territory, Phorn and one of her cousins decided that the housewarming was important enough that they should go. Their reception turned out to be worse than they expected. As Phorn recounted to me, the housewarming was a gala event, replete with live *likay* theater performances. At the head table sat the new kamnan, surrounded by a member of parliament and the seven village headmen who had been his supporters; the other four village headmen were noticeably absent. Remarkably, the kamnan’s wife was also sitting at the head table next to her husband instead of mingling with the women as would have been customary. No one else from that village that she knew was present, nor was anyone else from Baan Dong there. Despite her effort to reach out, Ngen and his wife ignored her. Consequently, Phorn and her cousin had a miserable time and came home without even eating properly. Phorn commented in frustration, “They have no reason to be angry with me. I didn’t do any campaigning and my husband had only campaigned in our village. Of course we had to support our village.”

After this disastrous visit, Phorn and her cousins in Baan Dong vowed to sever relations. The election had stressed kin relations to the breaking point (*phoh naa kan bo tit*, lit. “unable to look each other in the face”). However, the inevitable flow of funerals and other important occasions gradually softened their angry resolve. Although Phorn has told me that she no longer feels as close to her aunt and her relatives in Ngen’s village as before the election, she has resumed visiting on important village occasions to help with vegetable chopping and other aspects of meal preparations. The seemingly apolitical acts of women chopping vegetables at each other’s homes for various special occasions are, in fact, highly political, serving to transmit information and maintain networks for future times of need.

Conclusion: The art of the neutral partisan

That the dominant paradigm of electoral politics has ignored the role of women even in a matrilineal society with a pioneering history in women’s suffrage indicates the extent of its androcentricism. In analyzing this village-level election,

I show that anthropological understanding of kinship dynamics can provide important insights into the often hidden role of women in electoral politics. Local elections are far more threatening to village harmony than provincial and national elections (see also Arghiros 2001:2).³³ As these four vignettes reveal, electoral politics generate partisan conflicts that threaten marriages, matrilineal, and broader intervillage networks. These intense social dramas made the multiple roles of women, normally invisible, more visible. The case of the pork seller revealed village women's efforts to ensure internal village unity and, to a lesser degree, to further their candidate's campaign in another village. The case of the expelled member of the funeral society revealed how women ignored the decision of the public meeting and worked to reestablish intervillage relations. The case of the man possessed by the village spirit revealed how Phorn and other women helped to heal an intravillage intermatrilineal rift by facilitating the appointment of an assistant headman from the northern matriline. The final case revealed the political significance of women's attendance at the never-ending succession of village funerals, housewarmings, weddings, and temple festivals in maintaining and mending important everyday kinship relations. Far from uninterested, women played an important role not only in their efforts to mobilize votes for specific candidates but also in their efforts to achieve unity within their villages and to heal divisions both within and across their villages.

Anthropological insights into patterns of kinship help to reveal a complex realm of gendered politics hidden between the right to vote and the right to hold office. Seeking to minimize electoral partisanship, any villager with multiple links to various candidates faces the contradiction of supporting each candidate while casting a vote. Invisibility can be an important strategy in the art of partisan neutrality. In July 2005, I had occasion to observe an internal village election for two positions as village representatives to the tambon administrative organization. Nine candidates ran. The lack of discussion was deafening; almost everyone in the village was related to all nine candidates in some manner. Villagers were willing to declare one vote for whomever was their closest kin; they were noncommittal about their second vote, resolutely restricting themselves to a description of each candidate's respective strengths. When I delicately probed into who might win, the standard response was a politic refrain, "depends on their kinship network" (*laewtae khryayaat* or, alternatively, *yaat phai yaat man*). More likely to remain invisible, women are in a better position to perfect the art of neutral partisanship and ameliorate the impact of local electoral campaigns on intra- and intervillage relations.

Although few women have sought public offices, an understanding of the dynamics of matrilocality and matrilineal kinship reveals that women nonetheless have an important political presence. Embedding male leaders, be they as candidates or canvassers, within their matrilineal suggests that

the political networks provided by their wives, sisters, and mothers are not incidental but, rather, fundamental to an understanding of successful campaigns. Not holding formal office has allowed women to claim plausible deniability, enabling them to mitigate discord. At the village level, the art of neutral partisanship enables women to pursue the broader interests of their matrilineal and safeguard village harmony. Although villagers still compose the majority of Thailand's population, the country's overall political economy is changing. As villages are becoming increasingly less agrarian and less dependent on cooperative labor exchanges, the importance of matrilineal as an organizing principle of social organization is also weakening. These broader changes may well explain why the number of village women seeking formal political office is beginning to increase.

Michel Foucault notes that silence "functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies" (1979:27). My point is not that men are irrelevant to village politics but, rather, that women are also relevant. With matrilineal as the key structural principle of village social organization, women's roles have been to safeguard their matrilineal and ensure the functioning of intermatrilineal relations both within and across villages. Because men are more likely to be outsiders, it has been safer for them to engage in the overt conflict office-seeking entails. Even though women may agree with the explicit positions of their husbands, their public silence allows them to heal any wounds their husband's positions may create. Thus, the principle of matrilocality has given village politics a particular character in which women have an important, but often covert, role in the politics of everyday life and elections alike. In the politics of matrilineal kinship, conflict is the arena for ignorant, drunken husbands and sons-in-law; resolving conflict is the arena for knowledgeable, sober wives and mothers. If formal politics is necessarily divisive, women's political role is in avoiding conflict and healing division. The processes are diametrically opposed, but each is political.

Noted parliamentarian Khunying Supatra Masdit suggests that increasingly "the norm of politics being exclusively the men's realm is being shattered" (1991:16). I would like to suggest that it is time to shatter the myth that Thai politics has ever been exclusively the domain of men. In 1974, Jane F. Collier remarked that "although male informants may treat women as politically irrelevant, the anthropologist who seeks a deeper understanding of political processes cannot ignore women's goals and strategies" (1974:89). Her admonition remains current.

Notes

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1. Joan Vincent's masterful overview of anthropology and politics includes no mention of elections in her bibliography (1990). Notable exceptions to this generalization include F. G. Bailey 1969, Peter Loizos 1975, Michael Herzfeld 1985, and, more recently, John Pemberton 1994, Mariane Ferme 1998, and James McLeod 1999. Herbert Phillips wrote the first anthropological account that focused on village perspectives of a national election in Thailand (1958; see Bowie in press for an overview of the literature on village electoral politics in Thailand).

2. As Susan Gal suggests, the terms *public* and *private* are relational and "do not simply describe the social world in any direct way" (2002:79; see also Atkinson and Errington 1990; Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Ortner 1996; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Reiter 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Sanday 1981; Sanday and Goodenough 1990; Weiner 1976).

3. Examples include Cynthia Enloe 1989, Christine Gailey 1987, Tamara Loos 2006, June Nash and Helen Safa 1986, Sally Engle Merry 2000, Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz 1995, Theda Skocpol 1992, and Ann Stoler 1985.

4. I use *matrilocal* rather than *uxorilocal* throughout this article because it is more accessible to nonspecialists and to highlight the social networks formed by mothers and their daughters rather than the relationship between husband and wife.

5. The 1982 law allowed previously elected village and subdistrict heads to remain in office until their retirement, further impeding women's opportunities (see Nongyao 1994). Women have been eligible to serve as assistant village head since the creation of that position in 1943; however, I have not found any figures on the number of women appointed to this position. Although Thailand held its first national parliamentary elections in 1933, the first woman was not elected to parliament until 1949 (Amara 1988:83).

6. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker phrase this view more tersely: "Most women work. A few manage. None govern" (1996:114; see also discussions in Amara 1988; Darunee and Pandey 1991; Doneys 2002; Juree 1997b; Nongyao 1994; Thomson 1995:11; Thomson and Maytinee 1995; Virada and Kobkun 1994).

7. New Zealand is considered to be the first nation in the world to extend suffrage to women, in 1893. Unlike New Zealand, Thai women obtained the vote without a suffrage movement (see Loos 2004). See Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan 1994 for a chronological list. Although this list dates Thai women's suffrage to 1932, when elections for the national assembly were instituted, they have had the right to vote in local elections since at least 1897.

8. Such interpretations encourage the view that "the strategy of informing and reaching women at the grassroots level is an important public precondition for women's entrance in the political sphere, and to reform a political system dominated by men" (Doneys 2002:179; see also Nongyao 1994; Thomson 1995; Thomson and Maytinee 1995).

9. Similar observations have been made at the provincial and municipal levels. Fishel notes the role played by various candidates' mothers (2001; see also Askew in press; Nongyao 1994:127; Ockey 2004:113; Thomson and Maytinee 1995:9).

10. All names have been changed.

11. The institution of surnames in 1913 has introduced a complicating element of patrilineality. For discussion, see Andrew Walker 2006.

12. Foreign travelers and scholars alike have long remarked the "pan-Southeast Asian pattern of female autonomy" (Reid 1988:153) and "the importance of the role conferred on women and of relationships in the maternal line" (Andaya 2000:1; see also Van Esterik 1982:1). A new wave of feminist scholarship is revealing the political significance of women's positions in matrilineal societies in Southeast Asia (e.g., Andaya 2000; Atkinson and Errington 1990; Blackwood 2000; Brenner 1998; Carsten 1997; Lepowsky 1993; Ong and Peletz 1995).

Nonetheless, even in matrilineal societies the study of gender "has been dominated by androcentric analyses of kinship, inheritance and marriage" (Blackwood 1995:127). De Young provides an example of how bias develops, writing, "In north Thailand one of the daughters and her husband remain in her family's house. . . . If there is more than one daughter, the eldest daughter and her husband remain in her father's house." The woman's father's house is also her mother's house. To his credit, he also noted, "The social position of the Thai peasant woman is powerful: she has long had a voice in village governmental affairs" (1966:24).

As a female anthropologist who has had to wash her clothes in buckets kept separate from those used to wash men's clothing, hang her laundry in the back of the compound, and refrain from entering the ordination hall (*bot*) of the village temple, I would not want to minimize the complexity of understanding the role of women in Thai society. Pioneering studies of the position of women in Thai society include Amara 1988; Chatsumarn 1991; Cohen and Gehan 1984b; Darunee and Pandey 1991; Eberhardt 1988; Fishel 1997; Hong 1998; Jackson and Cook 1999; Juree 1997b; Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1985; Loos 2006; Mills 1999; Morris 1994; Muecke 1992; Ockey 1999; Sinith 1996; Sinnott 2004; Suwadee 1989; Van Esterik 1982, 2000; Virada and Kobkun 1994; Virada and Theobald 1997; Wilson 2004.

13. Matrilineal societies may practice bilocal, oscillating, avunculocal, and even patrilocal postmarriage residence (see Carsten 1997:67; Gough 1961; Lepowsky 1993:47; Malinowski 1978, respectively; see also Schneider and Gough 1961). The Malay region of southern Thailand practices oscillating residence (Fraser 1966:30).

14. Konrad Kingshill, who began his fieldwork in northern Thailand in the 1950s, noted that "there is a definite tendency toward matrilineal residence" (1976:60; see also De Young 1966:64; Gehan 1967:69). Richard Davis writes, "My reconstruction of genealogies . . . did not reveal a single case of the rule's being contravened" (1984:52). For the northeast, see Keyes 1983:852; Koichi Mizuno 1968:845; Stanley Tambiah 1970:14–15. For the central region, see Jeremy Kemp 1970; Herbert Phillips 1965:24; Piker 1964:41, and Lauriston Sharp and Lucien Hanks 1978:56.

15. For the northeast, see Keyes 1983; Tambiah 1970:14. For the central region, see Sharp and Hanks 1978:56.

16. The ancestral spirits can be narrowly defined as an original grandfather–grandmother traced through female descent; however, both the number and gender of these spirits appear to be ambiguous in the minds of most villagers.

17. The position of males is more ambiguous. Turton suggests a man enters his wife's descent group on marriage and "is thereby lost to his mother's group" (1972:220–221). Walker 2006 suggests a more complex situation. For fuller discussions, see also Davis 1984, Potter 1977, and Paul Cohen and Gehan Wijeyewardene 1984b. Because two women of different matrilineal spirit lines should not live together, my own marriage prompted a discussion among relatives of the family with whom I had resided as a single woman. Although some relatives suggested it was not a problem because I was American and probably did not have a spirit line, we built a small separate sleeping quarter within my host family's compound.

18. In northern Thailand, sons who married into their wives' villages, although they have a right to a share of the inheritance, may donate or sell their share to their sisters in their natal village.

19. According to one 19th-century report, the political allegiances of northern Thai households appear to have transmitted largely through women, men changing their allegiance to their wife's lord (Hallett 1890:131).

20. As early as 1693, de la Loubere remarked that "the wives of the people managing all the trade do enjoy a perfect liberty" (Van Esterik 2000:43). In 1934, J. M. Andrews estimated that every village household sent at least one of its women to the market every morning (1935:136). Men were more likely to engage in long-distance trade (see Bowie 1988, 1992).

21. Sharp and Hanks noted villagers turned to the daughter of the kamnan in their area for loans because "she was one of the larger landholders in Bang Chan" (1978:153).

22. Sulamith Potter, noting the important role of wives in mediating family conflicts, concludes that "the effect of all this is to give a woman an important voice in the management of family life, a position of power which comes from her place in the structure of the family" (1977:101).

23. Juree suggests men drink to "flaunt their independence and freedom from mother's and wife's control" (1997:441).

24. Each candidate had a few posters made, and, the day before the election, their supporters drove a few trucks blaring their poll numbers from loudspeakers through the tambon villages.

25. Headmen Kaew, Ngen, and Kham spent about 100,000 baht, 400,000 baht, and 60,000 baht, respectively (in 1995, \$1.00 equalled approx. 25 baht). Food and liquor were major expenses. In addition to posters and leaflets, the candidates hired professionals to make taped advertisements to broadcast from loudspeakers affixed on the back of trucks. Headman Ngen hired advertising trucks; the other two candidates relied on supporters donating trucks, drivers, and gas. With as many as 40 vehicles driving through the tambon on a single day in support of each candidate, the amount spent on gas alone was considerable.

26. Villagers often ended their denunciation of Headman Ngen's tactics, saying:

*Ngen,
Thaa thuk hii, hii aa
Thaa thuk yaa, yaa daaj
Thaa thuk khwaaaj, pen chin laap.*

Money,
If it lands on a vagina, the vagina opens
If it lands on grass, the grass dies
If it lands on a buffalo, it becomes chopped meat

Laap is a village delicacy eaten on special occasions, made of finely chopped meat mixed with spices.

27. The modified version of Haas phonetics does not reveal the very slight differences in the vowels between these two words.

28. So important are such funerary gatherings that present and potential candidates for provincial and national office will often try to attend, or at least send a contribution to be announced over the funerary loudspeaker system. See discussion in Fishel 2005.

29. Other likely defectors included a couple who were upset with the village headman over a decision to relocate their village store to make room for a new health station and a woman who had borrowed money from Ngen on various occasions.

30. The minister called a meeting of his congregants. Although some non-Christians attended in the hopes that the minister would

obtain confessions from those who had sold their votes, instead the minister merely made a general admonition that vote selling is wrong.

31. This rift has reemerged in the course of an election for the tambon council in 2005.

32. Instead, he appointed his assistants from the seven headmen who had supported him.

33. In supravillage elections, villagers may decide to remain unified to gain leverage with a winning candidate (even selling their votes as a block), or they may decide to deliberately split their votes to ensure an alliance with whichever candidate wins.

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