

CHAPTER III

THAI RELIGIOUS SYSTEM : A GENERAL VIEW

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The Thai religious system is a syncretism of Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism and magico-animist beliefs and rituals. These have been derived from several historically discrete traditions and combined to form a single distinctive tradition. Besides, Islam and Christianity have a handful of Thai following, and Chinese Māhāyāna religious complex is mostly followed by the Chinese. These are considered as foreign religions and treated as peripheral to the former.

Thai magico-animism points to popular beliefs and practices in relation to "Phi" (spirits) and attendant magic classified as the indigenous. Apart from these there are a number of beliefs and practices that are not indigenous. They are clearly derived from an Indian tradition and could be differentiated as Court and Folk Brahmanism. The Court Brahmanism is closely associated with royal institutions and the capital city while the Folk Brahmanism is more widely defused throughout Thai society.¹ Whereas Buddhism encourages the other worldly orientation (escape from the worldly Karma by means of achieving Nirvana), Brahmanism and magico-animism provide the Thais with the this-worldly orientation through ceremonies

seeking such ends as good luck, prosperity, good health, happy life etc. These three religious components are inter-related to form an enduring pattern of Thai religion. The latter two components work in conjunction with the Buddhist element, being complementary rather than in opposition to it in spite of the incongruity between their world views.²

I. A. Historical Background

There is no evidence establishing what form of a religion the Thais professed before their exodus from their original homeland in the present-day South China into the land now known as Southeast Asia, which had already been strongly influenced by animism, Brahmanism and Buddhism. Chinese records indicate that in Nanchao a section, perhaps, aristocracy were Mahayanist, whilst the rest were more or less animists worshipping the beneficent spirits of the hills and forests and propitiating numerous demons with sacrifices and offerings.³ It seems that the Thais of Siam, after having settled down in the 13th century in today's Thailand, found no critical difficulties in adopting the religious beliefs and practices especially of Hinayana Buddhism and animism predominantly practised by the indigenous people there. Animism obviously formed the first layer of Thai religion. Later on Buddhism and Brahmanism were accepted and adapted. The simple faith of animism survives in Thailand to the present day and is still more truly the religion of the countryside especially in the North, Northeast and Central parts. The

Thais absorbed Hinayana Buddhism through a cultural contact with two ethnic groups, namely, the Mons of Dawarawadi (third to seventh centuries), the inhabitants of the western and upper Menam (modern provinces of Lumpon, Loburi and Nakorn Pathom) and the Khmers of Kampuchean Empire in the eastern territories and the lower Menam. They had adopted Buddhism through the missionary movements of Emperor Asoka of Magadh in India about the first century B.C.⁴ and later the Burmese missions under leadership of Anuruddha (11-12th centuries), who was a staunch Buddhist king, often referred to as Asok of Burma.⁵ After establishment of independent Sukhodaya kingdom, the Thais of Siam firmly adopted Hinayana Buddhism as their national religion, continuing right down to the present time.

Thais also had a contact with Mahayana Buddhism through the Khmer Empire of Kampuchea and the Srivijaya Empire of the Malay Peninsula. But it was not warmly accepted by the people at large.⁶ Mahayana gradually declined and was subsumed by Hinayana Buddhism adopted from Sri Lanka by the Thais of Sukhodaya kingdom under King Ramkamhaeng in the mid-thirteenth century.⁷

Thais inherited a fair portion of Brahmanism through the influence of Khmers who politically dominated the lower Menam and the upper Mekhong and were religiously influenced heavily by Sanskrit Brahmanical forms especially Saivism and to a lesser extent Vaishnaism. The Thai people never became Hindu but the

Thai kings did recruit Court Brahmins to perform court ceremonies.⁸

It is worth noting that whatever cults and beliefs were adopted by the Thais, they modified such beliefs and practices to suit their temperament and surroundings. Not surprisingly, when they adopted Buddhism they modified and integrated their basic beliefs in magico-animism into the fold of Buddhism. Likewise when they adopted some aspects of Brahmanism, they adapted it as a subordinate element to the former.

Buddhism is essentially an ethic code and as such has appealed more than other religions to the majority of the Thais. Brahmanism or Hinduism with its code of temporal laws and customs was the instrument of government and more generally the religion of the administrator elites. Because it has its own sphere of action, there was no cause for friction or antagonism. A Thai king would resort to Buddhism in spiritual matter but strictly follow the precepts of Brahmanism in temporal affairs and in ritual ceremonies.⁹

By the thirteenth century the Thais of Siam had established a number of powerful states in the area now a part of northern Thailand. According to King Ramkamhaeng's inscription, Theravada Buddhism, in Kirsch's words, occupied a prominent place in these states, although specific agencies through which the Thais first encountered Buddhism are not completely clear. From the fourteenth century on, the major centre of Thai power shifted southward to

Ayudhya, which was influenced in important aspects by the Hinduized Khmers, especially after the Thai conquest of Ankor in the late fourteenth century. Despite these Khmer influences, however, Buddhism retained its paramount position in the Ayudhyan religious system. In the eighteenth century, a further southward shift in Thai power took place, centering it on Bangkok. Rama I's inscription reiterates the centrality of Buddhism to the Thais. In contemporary Thailand Buddhism is recognized as the state religion and enjoys special governmental support. The Thai king must be a Buddhist, to maintain his role as Defender of the Faith. The official sanction of Buddhism formalizes and affirms the commitments and attitudes of the Thai people generally. For them, there is a close link between being Thai and being Buddhist.¹⁰

One may conclude that Buddhism has dominated, but not displaced Brahmanism, the then religion of the ruling class; nor has it eliminated magico-animitic beliefs and practices of the people at large. Superimposed on a more deeply rooted belief in pervasive magico-animism, both Buddhism and Brahmanism have existed as intermingling streams so as to meet the religious requirements of the Thais at different levels for centuries. They are complementary to each other.

II. The Primary Concepts : Karma, Samsara, Nirvana, Bun-Bab, Merit-making and Cosmology

The primary concepts as listed above are the core concepts of Thai religion. The three interrelated key terms : Karma (Pali : Kamma; Thai : Kam), Samsara and Nirvana (Pali : Nibbhana; Thai : Nippan) deal with the problems of theodicy, sin and salvation in Buddhism.¹¹

In Thailand, it is generally, though not universally, believed that all present situations, events and statuses of beings : human beings or nonhuman, seen or unseen, strong or weak, rich or poor, powerful or powerless etc. are determined by their karma - ethical actions either good (Pali : Punya; Thai : Bun) or bad (Pali : Pāpa; Thai : Bab). Karma or each act carries its own residue of religious merit or demerit leading to compensatory differentials through cycles of multiple rebirths. These phenomena, in most religions, are explained by ideas of God, Soul and Nemesis. However, such beliefs are no part of Thai Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism explains Karma¹² as Conditioned Genesis or "Paticcasamupapada" or the Law of Causation. All beings - deity, man or animal - are determined by Karma, which cannot be altered by the action of a deity. Divine existence is not destroyed by Buddhism but only dethroned to a status which is subordinate. Buddhism turns the doctrine of Karma into a belief in impersonal, all-powerful law of cause and effect.

Individual's vicissitudes - past, present and future - are entirely determined by Karma in an endless cyclical series of births, deaths and rebirths known as "Samsara" which is full of suffering.

Thus Elimination of Suffering (salvation) must entail the elimination of Karma so that the flow of continuity can be arrested for good. To break this samsara circle and to eliminate the total suffering, one has to achieve the summum bonum, namely, "Nirvana", which can be realized in the life after if not here and now by means of meditation and asceticism. Everyone can achieve it through one's own will, morality, meditation, concentration and wisdom.

However in actual practice, ascetic religiosity or salvation religion is beyond means of common men. Therefore, under the pressure of mass needs there has developed a peasant (little) tradition from the salvation, in the present instance, Buddhism (great tradition) because the orthodox (great) tradition is not centrally interested in lay soteriology. The development of this kind of dichotomy is more than obvious in Thai religion which has successfully syncretized Buddhism, Brahmanism and magic-animism subsuming both elitist and mass trends.

In spite of great difficulties in achieving Nirvana a lay Thai Buddhist by and large hopefully expects to achieve it sooner

or later even if not in this life itself. In the course of a long trial period and on the way to salvation, he tries his best to follow the fundamental doctrinal proscriptions of Five Precepts (Pancha sila), which are obligatory to all Buddhists, and are considered as "lay religiosity". He usually takes steps to avert or minimize the effects of bad karma or sin and at the same time to accumulate maximum of good karma or merit with a strong intention to be born in a better form of life at least in the form of human being if not in heavens and finally to be able to achieve Nirvana. In addition, in order to improve his karma, he probably takes to a monastic life for a certain period of time. He may return to secular life at any time without prejudice. From this standpoint the prominent religious concern is not with the total elimination of suffering, i.e., with the attainment of Nirvana, but with the reduction of suffering through improvement of karma. This constitutes the popular religion of the Thai people.¹³

Bun and Bab : Popular Beliefs in Merit and Demerit or Sin

Bun (merit) referred to as above arises from conformity to ethical norms of a religious tenet whereas Bab (demerit or sin) results from its violation. Both are assessments of secular action transformed into religious categories.¹⁴ Merit is required through action; therefore merit is behaviour and a goal in itself. Actions performed in previous existences, if moral, have produced merit (bun), or if immoral or evil, demerit (bab). Accumulation

of "merit" and "demerit" from previous lives determines karmic heritage. Thai villagers explain inequalities, both physical and social, which are observed among men in terms of these.

One is a man or a woman, whole or deformed, healthy or sickly, a lord or a peasant, rich or poor because of karmic inheritance.

Merit is not only a legacy from previous lives but also the reward for moral action undertaken in one's present life. Moral action, as defined by Buddhist authority found in the canon, in the teachings of the monks, or in the traditions of Buddhist society, is undertaken by individuals in order that they might enjoy the fruits of merit in a future life.¹⁵ Table 3.1 shows that such popular beliefs in karma, merit (bun), demerit (bab) and rebirth (chatna) work effectively in the minds of the Thai people. Achievements in education, (occupation and others - an index of modernizing forces) remain peripheral to such beliefs. In this regard one informant has recognized this fact with the reasonable caution that the doctrines of karma, bun, bab and rebirth as such are misunderstood or misinterpreted and teaching about future life is overstressed. As a result, due attention is not paid to solution of day-to-day problems that are encountered. Karma, like Fate, is mistakenly held as responsible for consequences in this regard.

To most Thais merit is a tangible good and a concrete way of behaviour. They strive to acquire merit and to improve their karmic balance. For them merit is an unquestioned ingredient of

of life, providing explanations for individual and collective behaviour and rationalizations for one's position in life. Merit gives a reason to collective ritual and delineates one's relationships within community. Merit also motivates pious behaviour.

Merit-making (Tambun)

There are three recognized Buddhist ways to acquire merit, and a meritorious life, - each succeeding one more difficult than the former, viz., (1) to give (Dana or Tan); (2) to respect the religious rules (Sila or Sil); and (3) to cultivate, control and develop mind (Bhavana), i.e., meditation with the purpose of understanding the Dhamma.

The first way includes helping others, sharing merit with them and spreading the Dhamma. This path is considered to be the most feasible for an ordinary Thai. People who stand in need of more merit, must constantly respect the religious rules, abstain from excessive behaviour, pay respect to the elders and rejoice in the merit and good fortune of others. The third way (meditation) is thought to be almost beyond the capacities of the layman; it is the way of the monks. This last way includes a study of the Dhamma and a striving after the knowledge of good and evil or right insight.¹⁶ In popular Buddhism, it is believed that merit generated through the performance of moral

acts redounds to the merit-maker, as also his co-sharers. The beneficial results of transferred merit can be enjoyed by others also.¹⁷

Traditionally, an obligation of the Buddhist layman is that he should render material support to a monk or wat. For a layman offering two meals of daily food to a monk is the most common religious merit-making act particularly in the villages.¹⁸ In the villages of Wangchai and Nampong on which the present study is partially based, no food is cooked in the wat except for certain special festivals. It is regularly provided by the villagers. This pattern is considerably changed in the urban sector. Evidently in Khonkaen Municipality and Bangkok-Dhonburi Metropolis monks and novices are made to be self-dependent or dependent on either their parents or senior monks of their own native places. Notably, if the merit-making acts are hierarchically graded, becoming a monk ranks at the top. Observing the Five Precepts ranks at the bottom. Table 3.1 indicates the ranking order of merit-making acts by 419 lay informants. The nature of merit-making pattern is with more emphasis on donation (dana) than strict observance of the religious basic rules (Five Precepts).

These findings are comparable to Kaufman's¹⁹ study of Thai village life in the Central Plain and Tambiah's inquiry of Northeast Thai villages. According to Kaufman, the most meritorious acts, arranged in descending order of importance, are :

Table : 3.1 The Ranking of Merit-making Acts by Male and Female Respondents - Rural and Urban - differing in Education (Empirical Study in Thailand 1975).

Categories of merit-making acts	Rural (N = 190)						Urban (N = 229)						Rank Order
	No formal schooling upto primary			Secondary and/or higher			No formal schooling upto primary			Secondary and/or higher			
	Total			Total			Total			Total			
	M	F	%	M	F	%	M	F	%	M	F	%	
Becoming a monk	11.05	8.94		8.42	5.78		34.20	3.93	1.31	16.15	10.04		1
Offerings to monks	7.89	5.26		3.68	5.26		22.10	0.87	0.43	10.91	6.98		2
Donation to a wat	3.15	2.63		5.26	3.68		14.73	1.31	0	14.84	6.98		3
Donation to public establishments (schools, hospitals etc.)	5.26	3.68		7.36	1.05		17.36	1.47	0	6.98	8.73		
Strict observance of the Five Precepts	2.10	1.57		6.31	0		10.00	0.87	0	4.36	2.18		4
No response	0.52	0		1.05	0		1.57	0.43	0	0.87	0		1.31
Total	30.05	22.10		32.09	15.78		100	9.17	1.74	54.14	43.93		100

M = Male
F = Female

1) Becoming a monk. 2) Contributing money for construction of a new wat. 3) Having a son ordained as a monk. 4) Making pilgrimage to Buddhist shrines. 5) Making contributions towards the repair of a wat. 6) Food offerings to monks daily and on holidays. 7) Becoming a novice. 8) Attending the wat on all holy days and obeying the eight laws on these days. 8) Obeying the Five Precepts. 10) Giving money and clothing to the monks at Kathin festival (post-lent ceremony).¹⁹

Tambiah's observation for the Northeast shows some differences in emphasis :

1) Completely financing the building of a new wat - this is the act par excellence that brings merit. 2) Either becoming a monk or having a son become a monk. 2) Contributing money to the repair of a wat or making Kathin. 4) Daily food offerings to monks. 5) Observing every Wanphra (Buddhist Sunday). 6) Strictly observing the Five Precepts.²⁰

The ordination ceremony is more communal in nature. In case the ceremony takes place in a village, every villager is bound to participate in it either directly or indirectly. This is a festive occasion in which everybody should have an opportunity to contribute and share in the merit. In case the ceremony takes in towns or cities, it will be partaken of by the people of not only the same locale but of different occupations and social classes. It is generally believed that most of the merit goes to parents, relatives, friends, who

make the largest contributions to the ceremony. The parents especially the mother who can never be ordained as a monk acquires extra-merit by ordaining a son. The young monk replays a debt of gratitude to his parents and go through a rite de passe that marks his transition to adulthood.

Associated with the concept of merit-making is that of "merit-transfer" (Tambun Udit) which is based on Theravada Buddhist belief that the living can make merit and transfer it to the deceased and thus enhance salvation prospects of the latter. Many people seek to transfer merit (bun) to their dead kinsmen or alternatively to all living beings. The idea of merit transfer throws light on the relationship which is presumed to exist between man and his gods.

In Thai Buddhism gods are seen as potential Buddhas. By transferring merit, the devout worshipper is enhancing the salvation prospects of gods. The gods in turn may reciprocate by assisting the worshipper to achieve his immediate objectives. Merit transfer links man and deity in a complex ethic of mutual self-interest-man interested in the good of this world and the deity interested in the rewards of salvation.²¹ Around this concept operate mortuary rites performed by the Thais, which are seen as a social matrix among the kinsmen of the dead. In general the rites transferring merit to the dead are at least held once a year usually on Thai New Year's Day (Songkrant) in April. The rites take place in the temple compound where

the token ashes of the dead are ritually kept, objectifying a face-to-face contact between laymen and monks on the one hand and among the kinsmen of the dead themselves on the other.

The Thai Cosmology : A Popular Eschatological Belief

The concepts of merit and merit-making are very closely related to the popular beliefs in cosmology : the belief in death, judgement, heaven and hell, especially the so-called "Kamaloka", consisting of all the levels or forms of desire - the heavens, the earth, gods, men, beasts and demons.

The Thai belief in the nature of cosmology came from very ancient Indian and possibly Babilonian sources via the Khmer.²² The present discussion focuses on the three-world cosmology, consisting of Kamaloka (the Realm of Desire), Rupaloka (the Realm of Pure Form) and Arupaloka (the Formless Realm), which are further divided into thirty-one levels.²³

Kamaloka or the Realm of Desire is divided into eleven levels : six are heavens inhabited by gods, five are worlds, four of which are inhabited by human beings, animals, ghosts and demons; and the fifth consists of numerous hells. It is in this Kamaloka that mankind dwells with six levels of deities above it and four levels of less meritorious creatures below it. Of the six desirable heavens, the fourth called "Tusita", in (Buddha-to-be), Meitreya, awaiting the time when he would come

down into the world of men as the next Buddha and Savior. The Thais by and large believe that during his time under his Dhamma the whole world will enjoy an absolutely peaceful life and happiness; and human society will be classless one of a utopian type. More importantly Kamaloka is more meaningful to the most of the Thais and expressed in many symbolic forms.

Rupaloka or the Realm of the Pure Form, the next upward level, consists of sixteen heavens of brahma-deities who are conditioned by forms but have no sensual enjoyment. These heavens can be entered only through meditation. Beyond and above them are four Arupa heavens of brahma-deities - formless insensate beings who have no needs and no desires. They can be reached through highest meditational requisites. These two are of minimal significance for the Thais.

All the forms and levels of existence as already indicated are of temporary duration and through which all human beings (except for those who have entered the path to salvation) may at one time or another pass. The gods may be reborn as demons, animals, or men etc. or contrawise. A change of condition is realistic possibility, depending on one's karma and ethical status.

The Buddha, Bhodhisatva, Arahant and Mara

An exposition of the Thai cosmology won't be complete

without taking into consideration the concepts of the Buddha, the Bhodhisatva, the Arahant and the Mara.²⁴ They are those who have attained a supreme religious state and appear significantly in ritual and worship performed by the Thais. The Buddha is the one who has reached Nirvana; the Bhodhisatva, who is a Buddha-to-be; and the Arahant, an ascetic, who has entered the path of salvation and credited with miraculous powers. They have become the worshipped objects for the Buddhists. The Mara is the Buddhist counterpart of principle of destruction. He is considered as a symbolic manifestation of demerit in opposition to merit-making, liberation and Nirvana. They are discussed in their order of significance.

According to Buddhist tradition there had been several Buddhas in the past and some twenty-four have appeared in the preceding cycles of time. In the present aeon or Kappa, the Gotama was the fourth to appear. He was preceded by Kakusandha, Konakana, Kassapa and will be succeeded by Meitriya. The most important Buddha, is, of course, the historical Gotama who embodies the ideas of all Buddhas. And the orientations to this Buddha in popular Buddhism are complex and paradoxical. The relation between the Buddha and gods in Buddhist pantheon is worth attending. The Pitaka (Pali: Canon) characterize the Buddha as omniscient and pure but do not suggest that he is a god; however, they do represent him as instructing the devas and receiving their homage. The Buddha is believed to be superior

to all deities (Devatidevum) and a teacher of human beings and gods (Satthadevamanussanum), instructing them and receiving their homage. That is why in Thailand all Hindu gods and other forms of divine entities are found playing a subordinate role to that of the Buddha. The main functions of the gods are, according to traditional belief, to protect Buddhism and help men cope up successfully with secular activities, so as to support Buddhism. From this point of view the Buddha appears as the Deva who is above all other devas.

On the other hand, the Buddha as a human being, is dead and has reached Nirvana. This does not affect human beings or influence their future status because salvation is personal quest. But the most significant is that Buddha has been credited with supernatural powers - when he had extraordinary makings and qualities and after his death his relics, Mahadhatu (which significantly include ordinaments and holy texts) have spiritual powers (Rit); so do consecrated images. Thus these objects are conserved as magical charms and are associated with ceremonies for secular purposes in Buddhist countries. Buddhist symbols thus play a significant role in the variety of rituals performed by both monks and lay followers such as coronation and ploughing ceremonies at the national level, and marriage and house-warming ceremonies at the personal level, both of which are based on Buddhist and Brahmanist elements. Here a compromise is worked out between the great tradition of Buddhism

and the little tradition of local non-Buddhist beliefs of magico-animism or Brahmanical astrology etc. It does not, however, mean that the Thais do so at the cost of their religion - Buddhism. They are well aware that such activities are substitute or subordinate to the Buddhist goal of salvation or Nirvana.

With regard to Bhodhisatva, the Buddha-to-be, one destined to be a Buddha must be finally born as human being so as to attain Buddhahood. The Bhodhisatva, who casts a spell on Thai Buddhists is Meitreya, the next Buddha who will arrive and bring a salvation to the world. Meitreya is revered by all Buddhist sects as a coming saviour and his name signifies one who is full of love towards all beings. He is believed to reside in the Tusita heaven, watching over and promoting interests of Buddhism. He awaits the time when he will appear on earth as Meitreya Buddha. To the Thais he is to be their saviour. The world of his days under his Dhamma is called "Lok Pra Sri Aryameitreya", an ideal type world.

As regards the Arahant (an ascetic or saint), he is the Buddha's disciple who has, by the performance of certain ceremonies through observance of the prescribed course of moral action and the exercise of meditation, achieved salvation or Nirvana. He is believed to have attained supernatural or highest spiritual powers on the basis of his enlightenment. He

has been sanctified and worshipped as the Sangha - one of the main triple sacred objects in Buddhist countries. "Moggullana" and "Sariputta" are the case in point. Such beliefs and practices have substantial influences upon contemporary religious behaviour patterns of Thais ^{in a way} such that some contemporary monks of extraordinary or spiritual powers (Rit or Khlang) have been venerated and worshipped or deified.

Finally, the concept of Mara (the demon), the Buddha's demon antagonist appears in Thai Buddhist myth and ritual frequently, for he is to Buddha as bab (demerit) to bun (merit). Mara is generally regarded as the Buddhist counterpart of the principle of destruction - demerit. He is a sign of ominous things attacking and tempting human beings as satan in Christianity. More philosophically, he can be equated with the whole world of sensual existence and the realm of rebirth as opposed to liberation and Nirvana. Such a world is under the sway of desire and death. In Padhana Sutta and in Thai mythical legend Mara acted counter to "Gotama" while the latter was engaged in his final effort to attain Buddhahood under Bodhi Tree. Finally, the former was defeated at the instance of the Earthly Goddess (Nang Thoranee) by Gotama, because of his previously shared merit while being a Bodhisatva.

This encounter is recalled by the Thai villagers in a ritual act performed widely and habitually - "Kruadnam", i.e., the pouring of the water on the ground when transferring merit.

The Thai villagers today, as Tambiah observes, whenever they have done an act of merit which is rewarded by blessings chanted by monks, transfer some of this merit to the dead, to the gods and to other humans by pouring upon earth, thereby calling the Goddess of Earth - "Nang Thoranee", to witness the act.²⁵ The practice of this kind is common for all Thai Buddhists of modern Thailand.

III. The Thai Religious Complexes

In modern Thailand, Buddhism, Brahmanism and magico-animism often overlap, reinforce, or exist in a state of peaceful coexistence. They work in conjunction with rather than in opposition to each other. The ceremonies and festivals followed by the Thais are often an admixture of two or three of these elements.²⁶ These three religious components, according to Kirsch, can be examined along a number of dimensions; such as, goal-orientation, world-view, ritual, specialists, participants and social focus.²⁷

Theravada Buddhism : A Popular Perspective

Philosophically, Theravada Buddhism emphasizes the Four Noble Truths, including the Eightfold Path as laid down by Lord Buddha. Buddhism, according to its doctrinal view, postulates two levels of reality : one, the phenomenal world of everyday experience, which is a world of ignorance and illusion; the

other, the world conditioned by Karma is the domain of ultimate religious reality. These two are not completely distinct and separate. They are two perspectives of the same world. The Karma-conditioned acts motivated by desire and attachment to worldly things constitute the cause of suffering. The aim of the Buddhist is to free himself from such things, and to escape from the world to gain Nirvana or extinction. The formal goal of escaping from the clutches of Karma is the basis for characterizing Buddhism as radically other-worldly.²⁸ In reality it refers to the goal that is "Lokuttara", i.e., not-of-this-world. This ascetic goal with its emphasis upon textual Buddhism is followed by only a limited number of the dedicated monks and possibly by a few sophisticated laymen. Majority of the mass of clergy in Thailand pursue a number of substitute goals other than Nirvana as brought out in Table 3.2 in which benefiting from provision for education seems to be at the top by percentage distribution.

Further, the religious goal-orientations pursued by the mass of ordinary people hardly conform to textual Buddhism. Most Thais as mass society, according to Kirsch, do not aspire an abstract religious goal, such as Nirvana. They aspire to a more approximate version of the ultimate goal, namely, a sojourn in paradise (Sawan) and/or an enhanced status now and in some future life. However, this should not be viewed as

simple inversion of the other-worldly thrust of Buddhist thought.²⁹

Table 3.2 : Distribution of Rural and Urban Responses Showing Purposes for which Thais take to Monkhood (based on empirical study in Thailand 1975)

	Rural		Urban			
	Group I		Group II		Group III	
	(Namong-Wangchai)		(Khonkaen)		(Bangkok)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Education cum Social Service	40	52.63	48	65.79	56	71.00
Just to conform to traditional commitments	15	19.73	8	10.95	10	12.50
Merit-accumulation	11	14.47	10	13.69	6	7.50
Nirvana	8	10.54	5	6.84	5	5.25
Don't know	2	2.63	2	2.73	3	3.75
Total	76	100	73	100	80	100

For Thai villagers a better life in this existence and the next means riches, power, prestige, perfect health, beauty and very little physical labour. It is in expectation of such a life that merit is amassed. Because if sin outbalances

merit in one's karmic scale, then a life of poverty and hardship will necessarily follow.³⁰ Thus Thais are encouraged to participate in several important festivals and ceremonies, both countrywide and localized, which are believed to be productive of religious merit, such as the Festival of Tet Mahachat (Great Life Sermon on the story of the penultimate stage in the life of Buddha before Buddhhood), New Year Festival, Kathin Festival (Robe-presentation to monks), the Loy Krathong Annual Festival, popular in the Central and urban sectors, Bun Bangfai, popular in the Northeast.

Thus the Buddhist Bhikkhu as well as the Buddhist householder continually seek the secondary compensation of a prosperous rebirth by doing good and avoiding evil through participation in the sacred ceremonial. Tambun or ordinarily merit-making is primary concern of householders and ordinary monks (usually village Bhikkhus) whereas meditating or Bhavana is ideally the concern of hermit monks and lay devotees. In the merit-making rituals householders give alms to monks while in return monks study scriptures and give sermons. In addition, village monks and to certain extent the hermits perform funeral rites and provide other ritual services for the laity. The reward for such participation is accumulation of merit leading to a better rebirth (Sugatiya). The Bhavana or meditating on the other hand is the preoccupation of only the religious virtuosi who are more concerned about striving for salvation

than about earning a happy rebirth.³¹ This observation made by Michael Ames with reference to the Sri Lankan situation is equally applicable to the Thai situation with some modification.

Merit-making activities in Thailand are eminently social. The role of anonymous giver is not a popular one. Merit-making is ostentatiously public, suggesting that these rituals serve more than narrowly religious functions.³² The merit-making rituals performed on various occasions, both personal and public, have been described in detail by Wells³³ and Tambiah.³⁴ Herein the "Tot Kathin" Festival may be taken by way of illustration.

The Tot Kathin is the annual robe-presentation to monks who have observed a three-month period of Buddhist Retreat (Pansa). It is considered as one of the most meritorious acts. The presentation consists of three sets of requisite new robes (Trai Chevara), certain cash money and other gifts of durable goods, like furniture, crockery, altar tables, etc. All these offerings made at ceremony are supposed to go ^{to} a wat community as a whole. However, in practice the sets of new robes go to the individual monk and most of the money and other gifts go to the wat community as whole (Khong Songh or Khong Wat).

The Kathin presentation is annually organized both in rural and urban areas, after the end of Buddhist Lent or Retreat (Auk Pansa) during the middle of the eleventh of lunar

month and the middle of the following month, i.e., approximately the months of October and November. The Kathin presentations may be sponsored by the king of the country or his representatives, or voluntary associations, kin members, friends, government offices, coworkers, individuals etc. according to the status of the monasteries.

The term, "Tot Kathin", literally means "to lay down a wooden frame on which to cut cloth," the kathina in ancient time being a frame on which cloth could be stretched for cutting or sewing. Such device was an aid to unskilled Bhikkhus who made their cloth in patches, to be sewed together, to make their outer and inner robes. But now the monks do not have to make their robes themselves, since the laymen save them the trouble. Although they do not use the kathina as an aid to cutting these days, the work still retains the name, which is also applied to the whole ceremony.³⁵ The custom of holding the kathin ceremony dates back to the time of the Buddha and is described in the Mahavagga. In Thailand it has been observed at least since the Sukhodayan period, for there exists a stone tablet of King Ramkamhaeng (C. 1293) describing a kathin procession. Through the history of Thailand royal processions for the kathin ceremony have been accompanied by military parades, and naval reviews.³⁶

The country has 25,659 wats ^{out} of which 162 are of royal status (Wat Luang) and the rest are of nonroyal status (Wat Rat)

or publicly supported.³⁷ The king presents the token kathin at a few royal monasteries in Bangkok-Dhomburi Metropolis as well as countryside and authorizes others to do so at the rest of monasteries of royal status in Bangkok-Dhomburi and the countryside. At times he does so at a wat of non-royal status. Any household can make a request to represent the king (through the Department of Religious Affairs) by making kathin presentation to any of the royal monasteries. The request is rarely refused. By and large only private individuals of wealth and high-ranking officials or heads of both civil and military departments make such requests. One very colourful kathin presentation is known as "kathin Nam" (Kathin with watery procession) in which the king himself makes the presentation to Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn) on the bank of the Chao Phya river just opposite to the Grand Palace.

The merit ritual - kathin brings the two broader orders : the rulers and the ruled, into a face-to-face contact. This is a social matrix through which the culture of the ruling elites is communicated to the masses and vice versa. It is the frequency and regularity of these occasions which give them such great value. It also serves to maintain national integration or organic solidarity in Durkheimian sense of the term.

Kathin Rat, ceremony of common folks is observed on a wider scale in wats of nonroyal status throughout the kingdom. Either laymen or monks wishing to "tot" kathin at any wat of their choice have to intimate the wat in advance. A choice is made by and large on the basis of the acquaintance and/or

kinship with one of the monks resident in a wat. Such Kathin ceremony may take place at the wat of the same locality or as sponsors (Chao Phap) or somewhere else as observed by Jane Bunnag, viz., Khun Siri Imchai in Ayudhya (the central Thailand organized a group to make a kathin presentation to the wat in Chiang Mai (the North Thailand).³⁸ If it takes place in a village, it becomes a fair shared by the whole community of the village. As it happens, the residents of the urbanized sectors especially the Greater Bangkok-Dhonburi city move out either individually or collectively to make kathin presentations at the local wats of their hometowns or native villages. Such Kathin presentations are initiated or led by a native monk or exmonk, who has moved in to stay in the urban areas for education or employment, with the substantial help from the urbanites who are people of wealth and power or of noble families.

By virtue of the Kathin festival, at least once a year, urban culture makes its ceremonial entry into remote villages and hilly areas and gets in touch with the mass of peasantry and vice versa. At the actual ceremony, the rural and urban people differing in cultural upbringing are found sitting, chatting, moving and sharing food with one another. In addition, the entertainments of folk shows, such as "Fon Leb" (Finger Dance) in the North, "Mau Lam Mu" (Folk Opera) in the Northeast and "Nang Talung" (Shadow Show) in the South, to mention only a

few are enjoyed by the Kathin participants. Side by side there are modern film-shows also. As a result, the aforesaid folk shows make their ways in the urban sectors, especially in the Greater City of Bangkok-Dhonburi on different occasions of ceremonies or festivals sporadically. This, of course, is not the whole story. The latent function of the Kathin or merit rituals is to enrich or upgrade the regional culture which reinforces the integrative ties among the people of different parts in the country. Apart from the Kathin the merit-making rituals include Tet Mahachat, pilgrimages, temple fairs, and large-scale celebrations commemorating the Birth, the Enlightenment and the Death of the Buddha (Visakha Puja) and Buddhist Retreat Entry Day (Asalaha Puja), to cite only a few, most regularly and universally celebrated festivals.³⁹

The major religious specialists in Thai religion is the monk (Phra). However, novices (Nen), nuns (Mae Chee) and lay master of ceremonies (Pho Kru) also play some role. The Buddhist specialists can be distinguished by age, sex, and the number religious precepts they adhere to. The most important roles are restricted to men and full ordination as a monk is limited to those over twenty years old and those who possess a number of general qualifications (e.g., free from leprosy).⁴⁰ The specialists are organized in the form of bureaucracy known as Gana Songh (Buddhist Order) separate from, but in many respects parallel to that of the Thai government in

the secular order. In Thai society Sasanachakra (Buddhist Order) and Anachakra (Secular Order) are intricately inter-related. The former provides the latter with stability, continuity, coherence and what Robert Redfield has termed, "world view",⁴¹ which serves as a cultural gyroscope, providing a stable set of definitions of the world and the individual in times of change.⁴²

Participations of laity in Buddhism differs according to the sex and stage in the life cycle. The degree of involvement of women with Buddhism is relatively constant until, with advancing age, it may increase. Men's involvement is more variable, though it may also be more intense at particular points. While a monk, a man's involvement with Buddhism is virtually total. But in lay life it is typically more sporadic and less intense until, with advancing age, men (like women) may retire from secular activities and increase their Buddhist involvement.⁴³

Brahmanist Religious Elements : Folk Brahmanism

The term, "Brahmanism" is used here as it is understood and called in Thailand. It implies what is generally known as "Hinduism". The two terms "Brahmanism" and "Hinduism" are used interchangeably throughout the present study. The discussion that follows will focus on Folk Brahmanism which is a much modified

and even distorted form of Brahmanism with a view to meeting religious requirements of the masses and filling up the vacuum left out by both Buddhism and animism. Whereas Folk Brahmanism is practised by the mass of the Thai peasantry, Court Brahmanism, originating from the Indian tradition, but considerably modified, was and is to certain extent followed by the ruling elites. There is little that is common between these two variants.

Folk Brahmanism is more widely defused throughout Thai society. It is pervasive if not universal, in Thai religious complexes at both rural and urban sectors. It is not clear when and by what means the religious form of Folk Brahmanism was incorporated into the Thai religious pattern. It is highly probable that Brahmanism was evidently incorporated into Thai religion through the Khmers with whom the Thais of Siam came into contact during the period of early settlement in the heart of Southeast Asia under Ayudhya Kingdom. Following the Thai conquest of Khmer Kingdom at Ankor in the fourteenth century, Brahmanism or preferably "Court Brahmanism", followed by the Khmer power elite got introduced at the Ayudhyan Court through adoption of the Khmer administrative model for Siamese state administration. The Court Brahmanism was difused from the elite to the masses after its institutionalisation at the court level and got considerably modified or twisted into Folk Brahmanism, jointly functioning along with popular Buddhism.

Practices based on Folk Brahmanism are viewed more as technology or science than as religion in the strict sense. Some practitioners of Folk Brahman specialists claim that their techniques are derived from the "Brahman religion" (Sasana Pham). However they identify themselves as Buddhists, not as adherents of Brahmanism. Indeed, they are often men locally known for Buddhist expertise or piety.⁴⁴ Folk Brahmanism is mostly directed to handle this-worldly problems, such as good health, prosperity, luck in some undertaking, or a happy and auspicious marriage. Folk Brahmanist practices most often take place in conjunction with Buddhist ceremonies at various points in the life cycle and the cycle of seasons. Despite the apparent incongruity between the this-worldly focus of Folk Brahman practice and the other-worldly focus of Buddhism, these foci are not in opposition, but closely intertwined.

The Folk Brahmanism does not form a coherent and integrated system of ideas and beliefs, nor is it logically integrated into distinctive world-view of its own. It is an integral subsidiary compartment of Buddhism. The Brahmanistic practice also shares the Buddhist world-view that there is determinate level of reality (e.g., the karmically conditioned) existing beneath the flux of the phenomenal world. This level of reality is not only determinate but it can also be known at least in part. Indeed, the ideal task of the Buddhist monk is to seek insight into this level of reality, which a Folk Brahman "seer" or "diviner" (Mau Du) can also use his skills

and ritual paraphernalia to tap this determinate level and provide clients with advice about possible courses of action.⁴⁵

In Thailand as in other Theravada Buddhist countries as Sri Lanka and Burma, Folk Brahmanism and Buddhism coexist and are purposefully reconciled.⁴⁶ In most, if not all, of Folk Brahman ceremonies, the Buddha and the pantheon of gods (Devata) are ritually invoked to witness the ceremonies and bless the attendants and so are they in the Buddhist ceremonies. Both are reciprocally and interdependently performed. Table 3.3 characterizes the recognition of these two reciprocally interrelated religious elements by 439 informants. The Brahmanistic ritual formulae are more or less drawn from the Buddhist scripture in the manner of corrupted forms. By and large the Folk Brahman practitioners happen to be those that have spent years in monastic life.

Table 3.3 : Rural and Urban Distribution of Male and Female Responses on Coexistence of Merit-making rituals in Buddhism and Brahmanism (based on empirical study in Thailand, 1975)

	Rural (N= 190) (Nampong-Wangchai)			Urban (N= 229) (Khonkaen Municipality)		
	M %	F %	Total %	M %	F %	Total %
1. It is better and correct to worship only Lord Buddha or Triple Gem in the wat and/or at home	30.00	16.31	46.31	20.96	6.98	27.94
2. It is better and correct to worship only Spirit cults at home and/or at shrines	0.52	0	0.52	0.87	0.43	1.30
3. Both ways are equally good and correct	30.52	21.05	51.57	41.48	29.25	70.73
4. Poor response	1.05	0.52	1.57	0	0	0
Total	62.09	37.88	100	63.31	36.66	100

M = Male F = Female

Central to Folk Brahmanism are the notions of Khwan (soul-elements or life-souls) and the Folk cosmology which is a popularized form of the Buddhist world-view. A number of deities or gods that are adapted from Buddhist cosmology are invoked by the Folk Brahman practitioners in their cult rituals. In the light of the popular beliefs in general, the Thais recognize that a human being consists of physical body (Kaya) and other two life-entities of what are called "Khwan" (soul-elements) and Vinyan (Life-essence). Both are spiritual essences of individual human beings in two different contexts. Vinyan is the life-essence something similar to the belief in permanent soul or Atman in Hindu but is in no way one and the same. The Vinyan is understood to reside in the body. It leaves the body only with death. From this point of view death is described as an escape of the Vinyan but the Vinyan is believed to persist and face the vicissitudes of rebirth after death until it obtains salvation. On this point the observation made by Tambiah is quite accurate : At death the Khwan leaves the body for good, followed by the Vinyan. The Vinyan leaves the body only with death. In fact death is described as the escape of the Vinyan from the body. After death people are not concerned with Khwan, only with the fate of the Vinyan and its subsequent transformations.⁴⁷

On the other hand, the Khwan is the life-soul entity which is believed to reside in the body... Each individual is thought

to have a number of Khwan, some thirty-two separate essences associated and identified with different parts of the body - e.g., Khwan of the eyes (Khwan ta) Khwan of the mouth (Khwan pak) etc. - though not all thirty-two are necessarily named. The weak or disorganized Khwan is vulnerable to attack by malevolent spirits (Phi) to be discussed in the following section on animism. The Khwan can leave the body temporarily, thereby causing illness, but it can be recalled; and mental and physical health thereby restored.⁴⁸

The Khwan disintegration upon its leaving the body is manifested in a variety of symptoms, such as listlessness, straying of attention etc. To restore the disintegrated Khwan to the body and to reintegrate them the khwan restoration results in the creation of "Sukhwan" (Khwan-calling) rituals of the various forms performed by the Folk Brahman specialists. At the khwan ceremonies, the Buddha and pantheon of gods or deities as Indra to name only one most referred deity, are called upon to bless and protect the Khwan and to witness the ceremonies.

The Khwan rituals are performed on different occasions, such as rites of passage (marriage - Sukhwan Phua Mia, Ordination - Sukhwan Nag) and Sukhwan rite for those suffering from prolonged illness, to mention only a few most effective ones.⁴⁹ The Buddhist monks are not allowed to perform the Sukhwan rituals of this kind which are from a doctrinal sense considered as

secular and spiritually less satisfying. In fact some monks are engaged in performing some of the Brahman ceremonies with certain reservations. More monks are well-versed in astrology and popular Brahman rituals. They are consulted in many respects about auspicious time and procedures with regard to the rituals. To fill up this vacuum in Buddhism the lay religious officiants known by collective term as "Paahm" (derived from the Indian word - Brahman), and by the specific terms, such as Mau Sadogro (good luck doctors), Mua Sukhwan (soul-tying doctors), Mua Du (seer or astrologer) and the like, come out to take up the roles to perform such rituals. In general they are the ex-monks who had studied the arts of rituals on popular Brahmanism during their monastic life or thereafter. The rituals are usually performed on the basis of auspicious days, places, and procedures set by either lay practitioners themselves or expert monks, according to the various techniques of astrological manipulations which are definitely more or less based on Indian astrology.

The Folk Brahman practitioners known as "Mau Sukhwan" are, to cite an example, seen performing the Sukhwan ritual (the soul-tying ritual). The ritual is more or less considered as a kind of religious therapy. This ceremony is a way of coping with the tendency of "soul elements" or Khwan to be disintegrated. Disintegrated Khwan may be manifested by a variety of symptoms (listlessness, straying of attention etc.). Such condition is thought to be especially dangerous because it makes the

affected individual particularly vulnerable to attack by spirits (Phi). The soul-tying ceremony is not restricted to individuals manifesting symptoms of Khwan disorganization; it is often performed as a kind of preventive therapy - routinely practised on occasions, such as prior to a young man's ordination as a monk, before taking a trip or entering the army, and is a basic part of Thai weddings. Some Mau Sukhwan thought to be effective, especially adept and efficacious in performing the Sukhwan ritual are called when circumstances warrant a real expert; but the general technique of soul-tying is widely known and virtually any one may perform it. In its most elaborate forms the ceremony begins with the practitioners making special acknowledgement of Buddhist symbols (e.g., the Triple Gem) and of the teacher from whom the practitioner learnt his special technique. The various gods (Devata) are invoked individually and collectively and invited to witness and assist in the ceremony. A special pyramidal structure (Bai Si) is provided for the gods to rest during the ceremony. The soul-tying doctor, then calls on the various Khwan to return to the individual's body and take their proper place there. Finally the Khwan are symbolically tied to the individual's body with bits of white cotton string (Dai Manggala) tied to his wrist. Spectators at the ceremony may also be invited to tie strings on their wrists as well. A meal composed of items thought to be especially lucky, may then be consumed by all present.⁵⁰ Besides, a chapter of monks, before or after, but

practically before the ritual performance, may be invited to "suadmon" (to chant Buddhist sacred sutras) and perform the required religious rituals for auspicious things or blessings to the same and finally end up their performance with some offerings.

The Folk Brahman practitioner does not dissociate from a secular or ordinary society as does the monk, instead, he does lead an ordinary life, providing services to the only clients who are in need of his services and seek him out. As regards the social participation in Folk Brahmanism, it does not appeal to all the masses, nor it is organized into the integrative and autonomous entity as does Buddhism. It works its way to meet the religious requirements of the clients when needed. The clients do seek its service when they are facing life-crises, such as illness and transition in stages of life. The participation of the clients in Folk Brahmanism is intermittent or temporary and no longer continues after the service and resumes when again needed.

Most of the people look at Folk Brahmanism with positive attitude because it does not go against great tradition (Buddhism) ideologically and functionally. Ideologically Folk Brahmanist world-view and practices are considerably based on the conceptions and ideas drawn from Buddhism especially a determinate level of karmically conditioned reality. A number of interrelated rituals referred to as above can be undoubtedly related to Buddhist values and beliefs. Finally the Folk

Brahman element in Thai religion acts as an intermediary between the particularities of everyday life and relatively limited guidance formal Buddhism provides for the lay Buddhists. Brahman rituals not only affirm the fundamental truth of Buddhist world-view, they also provide witness to the basic morality of the Buddhist layman, despite his involvement in the ordinary world. If Buddhism serves as an integrative factor for all of Thai society, Folk Brahmanism facilitates this function by maintaining and reinforcing the layman's commitments to a Buddhist-defined moral community and social order. Hence the Folk Brahman component of Thai religion serves to articulate individuals and local segments of Thai society with the larger society-wide Buddhist value system.⁵¹

Magico-animism : A Primitive Form of Thai Religion

This is the last category in the series proposed to be discussed in the section of the Thai religious complexes. The religious elements of magico-animism are primal and simple form of Thai religion or primitive one in Bellah's sense of the term.⁵² Animism refers to "beliefs in spirits, ghosts, dead ancestors or gods".⁵³ In Thai situation such beliefs and practices are particularly associated with the so-called "Phi" (spirits) who are generally believed to possess supernatural power over human beings. In this category are included supernatural agents ranging

from those who are a permanently existing category of supernaturalists to those who are transformations of dead human beings. The most notable examples of this kind are as follows in order of increasing significance : the Guardian Spirits of the House, commonly known as "Phra Bhum" or "Chao Thai",⁵⁴ the Guardian Spirits of the Village, known as, "Put",^{55a} the Guardian Spirits of the Cities known as, "Lak Muang" and the Guardian Spirits of the Country, generally known as "Chao Pho Lak Muang" but specifically known as, "Phra Siam Devadhiraj" (Shine of the Pillar of the Lord of the Country). The last one is located in Bangkok but universally recognized by the people across the country. Closely allied to these are the innumerable Phi, such as Phi Fa (sky spirits), Phi Na (agricultural spirits) and those in forests, mountains, trees etc. with endless list. In short, every natural feature is thought to have its spirit, drad or goblin. They are unseen but act effectively. The place which is haunted by spirits is generally called "Sal Chao" (a spirit abode of a house-shaped structure). The Sal Chao or spirit of house is found placed on the verandah of a house or house garden and even in the precincts of monasteries. This is the primitive form of religious beliefs in spirits which form the larger classes of Phi demanding respect and propitiation from the Thais especially the mass of Thai peasantry.

The concept of "Phi" is obviously linked with a man's ethical status, karma, bun, bab, life and death. Phi are

believed to be the after-death phenomena. It is generally held that at death Vinyan of everybody persists in different forms of existence. A vinyan is bound to go to heavens, taking a form of Devada if the person has lived a meritorious life. If otherwise, his vinyan is condemned to hells or takes a form of Phi or Pet (spirits or ghosts) opposite to Devada wandering here and there in this world. They are spirits of different nature, ranging from a benevolent, prestigious and responsible power understood as, "Guardian Spirits", such as Chao Pho Lak Muang, Phi Puta Phi Na etc., to a malevolent of notoriety and caprice, classified as "Malevolent Spirits", such as Phi Fa, Phi Ha, Phi Paub, etc. In general many are thought to be malevolent agents and a few to be the reverse. The malevolent spirits are ready to attack a man of weak and disorganized Khwan. It is strongly believed that they either need something to eat from a man or merit to be dedicated to them so that they can be elevated up to a better status, as has already been indicated in the section on merit-transfer (Tambun Udit).

The benevolent spirits are believed to help a man and ensure him prosperity and good health. To say this is to suggest that it includes protective amulets and charms to ward off sword or bullet wounds. There are dozens of different kinds - taboo marks, written formulae, knotted strings, tiny images of Buddha, precious stones, dried seeds, needles in the body and others too numerous to mention.^{55b} It is not to suggest that the

tiny images of Buddha and highly spiritualized monks are downgraded or equated to the status of benevolent Phi or guardian spirits, but it does suggest that they are sacralized by meditating monks' chanting sacred words into protective beneficent magic power protecting ensuring a believer good luck, prosperity and good health. In contrast to these there are defensive and dangerous amulets being used to harm an enemy or weaken the willpower of an opponent. The Thais including the well-educated and the sophisticated, are found wearing or keeping tiny images of Buddha and of monks or other amulets, medallions, and knotted strings believed to possess protective beneficent magic power. They strongly believe that they will be saved and protected by the supernatural power of such sacralized amulets. The beliefs and practices of this kind have been dressed in Buddhist and Brahmanist garb. The ritual acts, such as the well-known as Ceremony of Consecrating Water (Phidhi Tam Nammon), the Buddha's Image-Invocation Rituals (Plook Sek Phra) and so forth can be related to magico-animism in many ways. The Thai peasants are much more oriented to and involved in magico-animistic complex of beliefs and practices rather than those about ascetic salvation religion (Nirvana).

In a word, Phi are the after-death phenomena of the persisting Vinyan of the ancestors/kinsmen and/or those of highly established charisma known as "spirit cults" to use

Tambiah's phrase. It is not clear when the beliefs and practices based on magico-animism were incorporated into Thai religion. It seems probable that the common varieties of Phi have survived from the period long before the introduction of Buddhism and Hinduism into the country and may have been part of the original stock of the early Thai other ethnic people of Southeast Asia.⁵⁶

As noted in the section on cosmology, animism was treated as an integral part of Buddhist cosmology and has been partially incorporated into Buddhism. However, monks by and large do not perform spirit cult rituals, with the only exception of spirit-exorcism (Lai Phi). Spirits are considered inferior to Buddhism and that they bow to those in the robes. Thus qualified monks are often encouraged to engage in dealing with them.

Spirit cult beliefs and practices are related only to a limited segment of life experience. Like Folk Brahmanism animism is concerned with mundane problems. Many animistic practices relate to personal health, others to prosperity. One aspect concerns the cult of village guardian spirits (Phi Puta). propitiating them is believed to ensure prosperity and good health of the village. Spirits are generally thought to be a surely lot, ^ajealous of human beings and really to attack those who have inadvertently or otherwise offended them, or those who are especially susceptible to such attack, e.g., those with weak or disorganized Khwan. Animistic practitioners like spirit

doctors (Mau Phi) attempt to cure those afflicted by spirits by contacting the spirits, placating them to remove the illness. The spirits inhabit a level of reality that only intermittently intersects phenomenal reality. Their actions are thought to be capricious and unpredictable. The spirits are said to dominate the rituals or ritual specialists. The spirit practitioners like Mau Phi provide a medium or a bridge to spirit world. They do not control it. The well-known practitioners are "Mua Song" (Diviner or diagnostician)", "Cham" (Spirit Intermediary), "Tiam" (Medium) and "Mua Tham" (Exorcist of Spirits), to name only a few well-acquainted.⁵⁷

As already mentioned, the monks don't by and large participate and/or perform any spirit-cult rituals. The monks never chant for Chao Pho but they are called upon to chant sacred formulae against the malevolent spirits and when human beings die, i.e., to conduct funeral rites, which is one of the major ritual functions of the monks. Buddhist religious action is phased in terms of the ideology of bun (merit). When one offers gifts to the monks or the temple (wat), one receives merit. But when one propitiates or placates Chao Pho or Tapuban, villagers explicitly consider the transaction as a bargain, an offering made to remove an affliction caused by the Phi because of some offence committed against it (Pid Phi).⁵⁸ However, the monks are often encouraged to take part and/or to perform with certain reservations the phi-exorcist rituals to drive out or

remove the malevolent phi from those that are afflicted by such spirits.

Spirit doctors or Mau Phi mostly tend to be women in contrast to Buddhist and Folk Brahmanist specialists who are males. Again in contrast to the achieved and universalistic features of both Buddhist and Brahmanist roles, elements involved in becoming a spirit doctor are ascriptive and particularistic. For example, it is believed that becoming a spirit doctor is not voluntary, as it is with monks, seers and Khwan doctors. A spirit "chooses a woman to be its medium and coerces her to accept this role by threat of illness or even death. A spirit brings all necessary skills to the spirit doctor, so no learning is involved on her part. Animist rituals centre around symptoms of illness, such as listlessness, loss of appetite etc. inflicted by the Phi. To cure such symptoms spirit doctor is called upon. Her main task is to communicate with the agrieved spirit causing the illness to discover what has attended it and what sacrifices will make amends. By and large whisky-drinking and dancing are a means of spirit propitiation. The spirit doctor may drink whisky and dance in an erratic and ungraceful way, accompanied by music. While dancing she calls spirits, particularly her familiar spirit (Yaw), until a trance-like state is induced. She is, then, able to communicate with the spirit world and, after some haggling,

strike a bargain for the cure of the patient. Being a spirit doctor is a part-time speciality, providing services to clients when needed. Except for spirit doctors popular involvement with animist elements is intermittent and generally of low intensity, whereby financial support is not continuous. Women, children and those with weak Khwan are likely to be the subjects of the spirit's attention; and the period around childbirth is believed to be specially dangerous for both mother and child. The impoverished are more likely to be involved in animist activities than the well-to-do; and the less accessible and remote regions of the country are likely to have a higher incidence of animist elements. In general where Buddhist and/or Folk Brahman involvement and activities are high, animist involvement and activity is likely to be low. However, in the case of the mass ordination ceremony associated with Bun Bangfai (Skyrocket Festival) which is in turn held to extend respect to beneficent or guardian spirits (Phi Puta) locally pervading in the Northeast Thailand, the animist involvement and activity tends to be somewhat intense and high. In contrast to the society-wide focus of Buddhism and the region-wide application of Folk Brahmanism, animism tends to be highly localized. Malevolent spirits and spirits doctors continue to operate within narrowly localities of religions. Table 3.4 compares and contrasts the involvement, syncretism and compartmentalization between the Great tradition of Buddhism and the Little tradition of animism. Many features of animism,

such as, use of whisky, dance and trance-like state stand in symbolic opposition to Buddhist ascetism, self-control and predictability. The superiority of Buddhism over animism is taken as axiomatic by Thais. Monks are held to be immune from spirit attacks; and Buddhist symbols, chants, holy water and inscriptions may be used to overcome the threats of spirits and to exorcise them. However, Buddhist cosmology itself affirms the existence of spirit order and thus the phenomenal reality of spirits is not questioned except possibly by the most sophisticated.⁵⁹

Table 3.4 : Two Fundamentally Varying Religious Orientations amongst Thai Buddhists, 1976.

	Syncretist	Compartmentalized
Basic approaches towards the Buddhist doctrine	Buddhist concepts and beliefs are incorporated in animistic world-view	Buddha's teachings are considered superior to beliefs and rituals that are animistic
Type of person usually adhering to this view	lower-income earner, such as farmer, fisherman, servant, unskilled worker	high-income earner, such as upper ranking government official, church dignity, member of the wealthy leisure class.
Usual residence	rural areas, poor quarters in towns and cities	cities and to a considerable extent also the smaller towns
Formal education	none beyond a few years of elementary schooling	secondary education or higher.

Source : B.J.Terwiel, "A Model for the Study of Thai Buddhism" in The Journal of Asian Studies Vol. XXXV, No. 3 (May 1976), p.403.

Phi Puta, the most recognized Phi,⁶⁰ may be briefly discussed by an illustration from a place called Ban Nampong where one did some empirical work in this connection. People there annually celebrate "Liang Phi Puta" (the Rites of Feeding a Village Guardian Spirit) associated with "Bun Bangfai" or the "Skyrocket Festival"⁶¹ during the months of May and June, which incidently coincides with the village mass ordination ceremony. It is said that other villages in the vicinity do hold the same rite which may or may not be linked with either Bun Bangfai and/or the ordination ceremony or both. The ceremony witnessed by me at Ban Nampong took place on May 26, 1975, exactly after the fullmoon day of "Vishakha Puja Day" during which the ordination ceremony had been officiated at the village wat by its abbot, Phra Gru Sukon, the ranking monk of a district level officer. Throughout the night folk shows also went on. On the following day of May 27, 1975 the real Phi Puta - feeding rite (Liang Phi) took place. The rite was entirely initiated and organized by the village laity under leadership of animist officiant called "Cham", acting as intermediary of the guardian spirits (his name : Pho Yai Sa); assisted by the village headman (his name: Nai Sai) and indirectly advised by Phra Gru Sukon, the abbot of this area. In the case of Phi Puta, the animist specialist or practitioner (Cham) tends to be a male. The actual rite was performed on the compounds of the village guardian spirit house (Sal Puta) located on the

outskirts of the village on the bank of the Nampong river.
No monk was present at the ritual function.

On the morning of the actual day, offerings consisting of either properly boiled chicken or pork and bottles of whisky along with candles and incense-sticks were brought into the compound of the ritual site, by most of the villagers representing each household in the village. Fourteen Bangfai or homemade rockets prepared by the village and other nearby villages that were invited for the ceremony, with full cooperation of the wat people were also seen brought in. All the Bangfai were to be fired so as to pay Phi Puta as a respect and then request for a good rain. All these were arranged in the proper order of the worshipping in front of the manlike carved and gilded pillar of wood, draped in red cloth, standing in the spirit house. The pillar is said to be the home of the Guardian Spirit of the village. Around it are grouped phallic emblems, images of lesser Phi and paper votive offerings in piles. Phi Puta is said to be a founder and guardian of the village.

All things considered, the offerings were then made to him and the other spirits by the Cham.. More men and only a few women drank sacralized whisky and danced merrily but ungracefully around the spirit's residence. Phi Puta was ritually invoked by the Cham, who in turn got into a trance-

state of spirit-identification and was able to respond to a number of questions asked by the attendants, especially the village headman. The questions were mainly the welfare and prosperity of the village, agricultural crops, quarrells among the villages, rainfall, and so on. Some questions were entertained and some others were not. Phi Puta was requested to grant the attendants a good rain, to confer prosperity and to protect land, crops and cattle of the village. The offerings left over were considered as ritually consecrated and then distributed to those present. Eventually, all the rockets were offered to Phi Puta as a sign of paying respect to him. Two rockets are of some importance : one called "Bang Thawai" (rocket for paying respect) and other "Bang Siang" (wishing rocket), both intended for Phi Puta, the village guardian spirit. The rest were described as the ritual license. It is generally believed that at the launching ritual, if the rocket flies high and straight, the omens are auspicious and it is the reverse if otherwise.

After the preliminary phase of the ceremony the rockets were heading for the launching site with a high ladder-like structure near the fields where the villagers - laymen of both sexes, and monks, young and old, gathered to witness the rocket-shooting. Technically, the rockets were checked and prepared for shooting by the expert monks as well as laymen. Again Phi Puta was invoked by the Cham who offered him a rocket-firing of Bang Siang rocket and requested him to grant

a good rain and prosperity to the village, addressing him thus : If there is to be prosperity, health and rain, let the rocket rise high, if otherwise, let the rocket fail. Then the rockets of Bang Siang and Bang Thawai were fired, their trajectory was declared to be auspicious and followed by a firing of other rockets. Some went well and some failed. Whenever they failed, the people disappointed and the unsuccessful launchers were subject to mud-throwing. There were cries of joy and admiration when the rockets rose high and far.

In addition, throughout the festival there was very much of gaiety in the village with songs and dance, drinking and a great deal of sexual byplay with obscene songs and crude sexual pantomimes and many others.

After the rocket-firing the dancers and singers returned to the village guardian spirit's residence and proceeded to the village wat for final celebration. Thereafter they headed for the interior of the village, dancing and singing ungracefully but merrily, funnily and amusingly from house to house, asking for whisky (homemade) and money. They would, then, buy chickens, boil or cook them and with whisky have their own feast. And at the closure of the day ended this gay and bawdy festival.⁶²

By virtue of this festival some sociological observations can be made. The festival is a rain-making one performed to

propitiate the rain god or gods and assure abundant rainfall for a successful planting and a fruitful harvest. It marks a season of agricultural activities. In an undeveloped agricultural society like a Thai village, the villagers remain unskilful and poor farmers and have no easy access to modern technology. They considerably depend upon the uncertain natural rain because modern irrigation has not met their requirements yet. A good or bad rain is believed to be caused by rain gods or guardian spirits as are believed by the villagers of Nampong in particular and in Northeast Thailand in general. Thus the festival is performed so as to warn and encourage the villagers to start promptly their farming with full confidence. They are under psychological spell or overreligiousness that their farm, cattles and other property are watched over and protected by the guardian spirits. Psychologically, they are stabilized and thus work effectively with a vivacious determination or a high spirit of animism. This is the latent or unintended function applicable to the Thai religion of peasants.

From a social standpoint, the festival facilitates organic solidarity of the village. As the festival is associated coincidentally with the village massive ordination, it becomes a concern of the village community as a whole. The preparations for the festival are partially undertaken within the wat grounds. The preparations for the ordination and the sky-rockets go hand in hand. Pounding the gunpower may be treated as chore

of the young girls and boys in the village. At night the girls are found laughing and joking to the rhythm of the wooden pounder. At the night before the actual festival the young girls go to the wat to make betel package and roll cigarettes which are considered as a means of offerings. The village youths get opportunity for "the paying of court" and general banter, albeit under the watchful eyes of the monks and elder women. Thus during the preparation stages as well as the actual festival the villagers of both sexes, young and old, will have an opportunity to get together with friends and acquaintances and others possibly from nearby villages for fun, banter and exchange of gossip. More importantly during the actual performance of the village guardian spirit rite the individual quarrels among the villagers can be successfully settled upon the threats of the Guardian Spirit (Phi Puta) through the spirit-identified Cham (spirit intermediary) and the manoeuvring help of the village headman. In addition, the villagers feel a sense of relaxed mood. The Bangfai festival sanctions such actions as sexual byplay with obscene songs, crude sexual pantomimes and other improper actions which for the most part are suppressed and carefully controlled during the rest of the year. These improper actions are sanctioned, in fact, expected and forgiven with an amused look. The festival does provide the villagers with a sense of pleasure, enjoyment; and happy and relaxed mood once a year.

To recapitulate, animism refers to the beliefs and practices about beings, spirits, ghosts and dead ancestors, thereby in Thai situation implying those closely associated with "Phi" (spirits) with inclusion of magic. They demand respect and propitiation from mostly Thai peasants. This is the primitive form of Thai religion. Its goal-orientation is directed towards ~~the~~ this-worldly problems with emphasis upon good luck, prosperity and good health in this world. Its specialists tend to be women and its social participation and social focus are intermittent and highly localized. The impoverished are more likely to be involved in animist activities than the well-to-do; and the less educated and the less accessible regions are likely to have a higher incidence of animist elements than the higher-educated and more accessible areas. Where Buddhist and/or Folk Brahmanist elements and activities are high, there animist elements and activities are likely to be low. The latter is not up against the former two.

In a word, the Thai religious system is a syncretism of Buddhism, Brahmanism and magico-animism. The religious components as above discussed are here looked at as a syncretism rather than compartmentalization because they become so intertwined and intermingled that it is very difficult to draw an absolute distinction between them, as to

where Buddhism ends and a religion of other different types begins and vice versa. They are complementary to each other. More to the point is Buddhism which is from the ethnocentric point of view considered superior to the beliefs and practices that are Brahmanistic and magico-animistic. However, it has never completely displaced or replaced the latter two but dominated and dethroned them into the status subordinate to its own. Interestingly, it remains open to the entire society and stands in support of universalistic-achievement.

Notes and References

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10. Kirsch, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System" op. cit., pp. 244-245. See also Dhani Nivat op. cit.
11. For an interesting exposition in this regard see Max Weber, The Sociology of Religion trans. by Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston : the Beacon Press, 1963), especially Ch. IX pp. 138-150. For an elaboration on this point see G. Obeyesekere, "Theodicy, Sin and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism" in E.R.Leach, ed., Dialectic in Practical Religion (Cambridge : The University Press, 1968), pp. 7-26.
12. Karma is here viewed from the standpoint of the textual sense : Cetanaham bhikkhave kamman vadahi - O. Bhikkhu, it is volition (cetana) that I call karma. Anguttara Nikaya (Colombo : Pali Text Society, 1929), p. 590. Volition is mental construction, mental activity. It functions as to direct the mind in the sphere of good, bad or mental activities.
13. Charles, F. Keyes, "The Power of Merit," Visakha Puja B.E.2516" (Bangkok : The Buddhist Association of Thailand, 1973), p.95.

14. Obeyesekere, op. cit., p. 15.
15. Keyes, op. cit., pp. 96-97.
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17. Melford E. Spiro, Buddhism and Society : A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes (New York : Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 124-128, re quoting Keyes, op. cit., p. 97.
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op. cit., pp. 139-165.
58. Tambiah, op. cit., p. 264.
59. Kirsch, op. cit., pp. 258-260.
60. For a detailed exposition about guardian spirits (Phi) as Chao
Pho Lak Muang (the Lord of the Country) and other guardian
spirits of the cities see Wales's Siamese State Ceremonies
op. cit., p. 300-307; and for other Phi of inferior status
see Tambiah's Buddhism and Spirit Cults, op. cit., pp. 263-284.
61. "Bun Bangfai" is the festival ceremony of region-based in
Northeast Thailand and modern Laos and is directly
associated with the powerful guardian spirits. It is
performed to pay them a respect and request them to
confer prosperity, good health and to send a good rain.
(Tambiah, Buddhism and Spirit Cults, op. cit., pp. 286-
294; and Klausner, op. cit., pp. 11-26.
62. Cf. Tambiah, Buddhism and Spirit Cults, op. cit., pp. 285-294;
and Klausner, op. cit., pp. 14-19.
