

LOOSE STRUCTURE : FACT OR FANCY ?

Thai Society Re-examined*

by

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Since the first publication of J.F. Embree's pioneering article 'Thailand : a loosely structured social system' (*American Anthropologist* 1950 : 52 pp. 181-193) up to the present time it has generally been assumed that Thai society is indeed 'loosely structured', although the precise implications of this term have still to be worked out. The most recent collection of essays on this topic, 'Loosely Structured Social Systems: Thailand in Comparative Perspective' (ed. Hans-Dieter Evers, Yale University Southeast Asia Studies 1969) serves, amongst other things, to compound the confusions which have arisen, and shows Embree's heirs grappling with three major difficulties in their intellectual heritage. The first of these concerns the problem as to the precise meaning of the term 'loosely-structured'; does this refer to the psychological traits of individual Thais, to the apparent ease with which they change their social roles, to their alleged antipathy to co-operative action with other members of their society, or are all of these merely symptoms of a more deeply rooted structural looseness?

In the second place it remains to be decided as to whether or not this concept is to be used as a tool of analysis or description, and if the latter, is it to be applied to Thai society as a whole, or only in part ?

The third and knottier problem and one which is wisely left untouched by many students of Thai society, concerns the basis for this loose-structuring, given that one can accept this epithet.

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A fourth and final difficulty of rather a different order lies in the academic insularity of the anthropologists working with Thai society; an insularity which limits their use of comparative ethnographic materials to a minimum, and keeps them in relative ignorance of current anthropological trends and developments, with the result that they rarely make use of the conceptual tools most appropriate to the situation, and continue to maintain, implicitly or otherwise, that the Thai situation is unique.

Let us first examine the question as to the mobility between roles in Thai society. In Thailand, as in most other small-scale and predominantly pre-industrial societies,¹ social roles are fairly simple in terms of the qualifications needed by individual actors, which is to say that 'the actual number of functionally specific tasks and roles are (sic) few, and any number of individuals can perform them' (Phillips 1965 : 81). According to a large body of classical anthropological theory, mostly based on African sources, these conditions are usually associated with role recruitment according to 'contingent' qualities, and hence, a fairly static situation,² (Nadel 1951 : 152) but in Thailand this simplicity of roles is, as seems on second thoughts more reasonable, associated with considerable ease of movement between them.

Study of the relationship existing between monastic and lay communities in Ayutthaya, Central Thailand has provided clear evidence of one kind of social mobility. According to popular belief all Thai men, at some time in their lives should enter the monastery (*wat*) for even a brief period of time, for several days, or a few weeks, and assume the most prestigious and meritorious role society has to offer, namely that of the Buddhist monk. The ideal is that a man

1) An approximate 84% of the Thai population is engaged in agriculture. Although the country has, in the past hundred years become one of the world's major rice exporters there have been few qualitative changes in the Thai economy. Ingram (1955 : 209) reports that changes have been 'in volume rather than in kind. New methods have not been used, new products have not been developed. No product of any importance (besides rubber) is exported today which was not exported in 1850.'

2) 'It is probably true to say that simpler societies lean towards compulsory, and complex societies towards voluntary recruitment, which lends to the former their more static nature, and to the latter their greater mobility.' (Nadel 1951 : 152)

should pursue the 'way of the monk' with a view to improving his spiritual condition through the study and practise of the *Dhamma* or Word of the Buddha. His primary interest, in theory at any rate, is in eradicating defilements within himself, and pastoral services for the lay community should be only marginal to his role.³ But, the monkhood does not necessarily provide a permanent vocation, and it is explicitly recognised in the canonical writings that it is better to be a good layman than an indifferent monk. A *bhikkhu* (Buddhist monk—lit. mendicant) who can no longer live up to the standards of asceticism required encounters no obstacle in returning to lay life as he takes no binding vows of any kind on ordination. It is also mentioned repeatedly in the Scriptures that the capacity for their comprehension varies very much between individuals (cf. Mendelson 1965 : 217)⁴ and there is thus no disgrace in declaring that one has come to the limits of one's capabilities, and intends to return to lay life. The disgrace lies in remaining in the *Sangha* whilst retaining too lively an interest in the 'way of the world'. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that this particular role movement can be justified with reference to the Theravadin teachings, it would seem that in some other Theravada Buddhist societies, notably in Ceylon, and to a lesser extent in Burma, movement between the *Sangha* and the lay community is less easily accomplished, for a variety of reasons, and it is more difficult, having once assumed the yellow robe, to cast it aside.⁵

3) In theory, the services he performs for the laity are secondary in importance in that they are irrelevant to the primary aim of extinction of worldly attachments. (See Dutt 1957 : 93)

4) Mendelson writes that Buddhists place great emphasis on the existence of 'different levels of awareness of the doctrine, characteristic of the people who approach it at different times, and in different places' (Mendelson 1965 : 207)

5) See the article entitled 'Kinship and Property Rights in a Buddhist Monastery in Central Ceylon' (Amer. Anthropol. 1967 : 703-710) and R.S. Coplestone's 'Buddhism Primitive and Present in Magadha and in Ceylon' London-New York; Longmans Green 1892.

These works show that the organisation of the *Sangha* in Ceylon is rather different from that of its Thai counterpart. It would seem that the Thai *Sangha* gives less scope to individual monks in the sense that it does not provide them with opportunities to achieve positions of political and economic power and independence, similar to those enjoyed by some Singhalese *bhikkhus*. It does on the other hand provide him with an education which fits him for service in the government bureaucracy, and there is a great deal of movement out of the state-controlled *Sangha* and into the civil service. These and other factors may help to explain why on the whole there is more mobility into and out of the monkhood in Thailand than in Ceylon.

See Nash (1965 : 143) for details of the Burmese situation.

A feature of the Thai *Sangha*, which is perhaps less generally recognized, is that it provides an important channel for social advancement, as men who remain in the Order for a number of years and make good use of the educational facilities freely available to monks, can achieve a significant improvement in social position when they return to lay life. In his article 'The Buddhist Monkhood as an Avenue of Social Mobility in Traditional Thai Society' the historian D.K. Wyatt writes that 'in old Thai society . . . there is some evidence to indicate that sometimes sons of provincial farmers entered government service in the capital. In many such cases such men moved into government positions through the system of religious education.' It thus seems that the *Sangha* by providing free education—in both lay and ecclesiastical subjects—for its members, simultaneously provides a stepping stone by means of which individuals from isolated rural areas, and the lower ranks of urban society, can move into a most prestigious sphere of employment, the civil service. From the observer's point of view, it would appear that some men manipulate the system quite consciously, and it can be no mere coincidence that many senior officials in government ministries were once monks who completed the most advanced courses of ecclesiastical education, and thus acquired not only a considerable knowledge of Pali and Sanskrit, but also some proficiency in ordinary subjects such as history and mathematics, and in at least one European language. But the individual actor can easily justify such 'manipulation' in that, as was remarked above, it is better for a man to return to lay life than to stay in the *Sangha* after the robe has become 'too hot'.⁶

There is some evidence to suggest that the Thai army has become a second and very important avenue of social mobility, since the successful military coup of 1932, at which time a constitutional monarchy was established, and the initiative in political affairs passed out of the hands of the royalty and aristocracy, and into those of the

6) It is said of the man who wishes to leave the Order that his robe has become too hot (*pha ron*). There is some stigma attached to repeated ordination as it is thought to indicate a lazy or vacillating character. It is not uncommon however to have been ordained twice; approximately 30% of the monks I interviewed had been ordained two times.

small group of army leaders who had successfully opposed the old régime (cf. Wilson 1962 : 164-94). It seems, moreover, that as Lucien Hanks suggests, it has at all times been possible for the individual Thai with ambition, and a certain degree of natural ability, to better himself, by skilful manipulation of his links with people higher up the social scale; '... the coherence of Thai society rests largely on the value of becoming a client of someone who has greater resources than one alone possesses . . . the crowning moment of happiness lies in the knowledge of dependable benefits distributed in turn to faithful inferiors' (Hanks 1962 : 1249)?.

It must be stressed, however, that the possibility for upward mobility does not necessarily imply a widespread desire to achieve it. Leach's dictum that 'a conscious or unconscious wish to gain power is a very general motive in human affairs' (Leach 1964 p. 10) does not seem to make much sense in the Thai situation. This lack of incentive can perhaps be ascribed to the politico-economic conditions to be discussed below. Many observers have remarked that the Thais exhibit 'a high degree of self-acceptance', or, less flatteringly, that their 'self-approval borders on narcissism'.

It follows from the foregoing that the actual rate of mobility, as opposed to the potential for such movement, may not be spectacularly high. Although such a rate is extremely difficult to assess, work by Evers (Evers 1969 p. 124) and others suggests that in statistical terms mobility in Thai society may be less remarkable than has been supposed.

Another aspect of the relatively simple and unspecialized nature of roles, which is also characteristic of other societies at a similar stage of socio-economic development, is manifest in the ease with which individuals move vertically between different occupational spheres; a trained barrister can be found teaching English in a boys'

7) Observers have often commented on the Thai taste for conspicuous consumption. Ingram writes that 'People prefer to keep their savings in the form of gold or cash, and they have not made much use of banks, postal savings or co-operatives for this purpose. Nor are they willing to invest in the stock of a corporation which they do not understand or trust' (Ingram 1955 : 218).

secondary school, and he may move from there to be curator of a museum, and so on. Education and training, as one might expect in this situation, are neither highly specialized nor vocational. Given a certain degree of intellectual competence and practical experience, it is relatively easy to move into a different occupational sphere.⁸

The absence of role specialization along sexual lines can also be attributed to certain features of the socio-economic environment, which both require and permit that men and women should display a high degree of mobility, of inter-changeability between roles; strict sexual segregation of roles, in rural areas at least, would be an unthinkable luxury. The basic unit of production is the household usually consisting of a core family of husband, wife and children, plus assorted relatives of these individuals. As the household aims to be self-sufficient in terms of labour, and food, women take a hand in the field and the men of the household perform domestic chores. In an urban setting, however, the elementary family is of necessity more isolated. Normally the husband's work takes him away from home for a substantial part of every day, and in such circumstances it is more difficult for a woman to take an active role outside the home.

Associated with a high rate of mobility between roles in Thai society, is a considerable emphasis upon their relative status. In the article already cited Mosel observes that 'while Thai roles are in general diffuse and ambiguous, there is one feature which is extremely clear-cut: the statuses associated with roles can almost always be distinguished in terms of higher or lower In a sense we might say that in Thai society there are two highly generalized roles: superior and subordinate. Given any two statuses or clusters of social characteristics the average Thai can easily and consistently make paired comparison judgements' (Mosel 1965:5). Thus in any

8) Mobility is not, of course, absolute. Formal educational qualifications are becoming increasingly important, although opportunities for acquiring them are still very unequal. Which is to say that it is still easier for individuals from higher income families to obtain a good education, although there are a few government scholarships, and it is not unusual for a wealthy individual to pay for the schooling of children belonging to his servants or his clients, or his poorer relations.

social encounter each individual involved reaches a decision as to the linguistic and behavioural usages appropriate, after a rapid summing up of a number of crucial variables, which is to say that each must take into account not only his protagonist's sex, and relative age, but also his income, occupation, place of residence, and so on. The relative status of individual actors in a given situation is not always as clearly defined as Mosel implies, and where there is ambiguity it is always better to err on the side of deference. For example, a monk of 35 who has spent 15 years in the Order will usually give formal precedence to a man of 60 who has recently retired into the monastery, and is thus clearly inferior to the former in terms of priority of ordination. In this situation the younger *bhikkhu* shows his respect by seating himself at a lower level, by making a lower obeisance on meeting the other, and by using more respectful terms of address in conversation, although he is on the other hand unlikely to consult the older man on any matter pertaining to disciplinary affairs, as the latter is unlikely to be the better informed.

The relationship between superior and subordinate varies very little, either in content or in outward form, whatever the sphere of activity may be. The senior partner should be 'benevolent calmly self-assured, authoritative (rather than authoritarian) whilst the subordinate is respectful, attentive, helpful but not necessarily obedient (although face-to-face disobedience would be unthinkable)' (Mose: 1965:5). Each individual has, in fact, very similar kinds of relationships with his patron, his teacher, a senior kinsmen and a Buddhist monk, all of whom occupy a position of superiority with respect to him. Each of these relationships is of a very generalized patron/client type, and each tends to have a material component, which is to say that the inferior party receives not only advice and sponsorship, but also more tangible benefits in the form of financial support, either regular or only occasional. A senior civil service official might well be asked to help with the expenses of life-crisis rituals organised by one of his juniors in the department, as well as being expected to contribute to the costs of educating the children of the latter, and to support applications for visas and permits, and for positions in the national

bureaucracy. But in his turn he is entitled to expect his subordinate to accord him the outward signs of deference and respect, and to give more tangible evidence of these attitudes by running personal errands for him, and acting as his general factotum out of office hours.⁹

In the monk/layman relationship the former is the latter's patron in that he is of superior status, and has access to spiritual benefits, which can be conferred in the form of merit (*bun*) upon the unordained. But in this instance the material aid, in the form of food, robes, money and other monkly requisites, pass in an upwards direction from the layman to the *bhikkhu*, whose renunciation of the secular world renders him dependent upon the laity for material support.

Another distinctive feature of role-playing in Thai society is that very great emphasis is placed upon 'the etiquette of one's station' (Hanks 1967: 1256), which is to say upon the formal rather than upon the substantive characteristics of any particular role.¹⁰ It is for example, very striking to see the way in which young boys ordained as novices (junior members of the *Sangha*) – even though they may intend to remain in the Order for a very short time – assume immediately and without self-consciousness the mien and deportment appropriate to their new status as one of the spiritual élite, and, moreover accept with equanimity the respect accorded to them by parents, other relatives and friends, and indeed by lay men and women of any age or status with whom they come into contact.¹¹ Little

9) A similar relationship obtains between a senior monk and the monks, novices and monastery boys who are under his particular care and guidance.

10) In his autobiography 'Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor' D.J. Enright remarks that in Thailand 'It is very important to be nice. It is also very important to be neat. Indeed the two are barely distinguishable. They should be within the capacity of a properly educated person. (The three fundamental principles of Teaching Method, so I was told, are: the teacher should not possess any visible defect, the teacher should be neatly dressed and groomed, the teacher should not rub out the chalk on the blackboard with his or her fingers.)' (Enright 1969: 78)

11) Laymen use a special vocabulary when speaking to monks, and further show their respect (and consciousness of their own inferiority) by seating themselves at a lower level, by walking a few paces behind, by eating only after the monks have taken their meal etc.

else may be demanded of a Thai *bhikkhu* other than that he is orthodox in appearance and behaviour. Many of the most eminent monks in the communities studied owed their reputations more to the fact that they approximated very closely to the monkly stereotype of calmness and passivity, than to any more specific talents such as skill in teaching or preaching, or to a profound understanding of the *Dhamma*.

The 'ritualization' of roles¹² (Gluckman 1961: 86) in Thai society can, I believe, be explained with reference to the fact already noted that they are relatively unspecialized, and hence fairly easily assumed and cast aside. The emphasis which is placed upon etiquette and other diacritical role attributes is consonant with the ease of role shift in Thai society, (and not specifically designed to make such movement easier, as has been suggested by Mosel (Mosel 1965: 10), Hanks (Hanks 1962: 1252) and others.¹³) In such a fluid situation it is probable that there is a need to define much more sharply which role an individual is playing at any one time, particularly in view of the importance attached to status differentials. This situation may well result in the individual actor's developing, to an unusual degree, the facility for distinguishing between himself, and the social roles which he chooses to assume, simultaneously or successively. One monk informant, for example, explained his knowledge of certain magical (*saiyasat*) techniques, generally regarded as being 'Brahmin', by saying that this was an aspect of himself as an

12) This stylization of roles in Thai society is not—as it is in some other societies—associated with the fact that role relationships are 'multiplex' or many-stranded, making it necessary to distinguish at any one time which facet of the role is being enacted.

13) Mosel attributes this detachment to the influence of the Buddhist ethos, and in particular to the value placed on *uppekkha* or 'the withholding of the act whereby something is perceived as part of the Self' (Mosel 1965:7). My informants however, laid more emphasis on the positive aspects of copying and imitating diacritical role attributes and none mentioned the concept of *uppekkha*. I would agree with Wilson when he says that 'the significance of any relationship between this cosmic outlook, and social behaviour is neither easily measured nor demonstrated' (Wilson 1962: 46).

individual, and something quite separate from his role as a monk.¹⁴ He was, of course concerned to justify certain items of behaviour which he suspected to be somewhat unorthodox, in Buddhist terms, but this does not detract from the sociological sophistication of his argument.

In a few instances, however, the interest in diacritical differentiation seems to result from a desire for elaboration for its own sake. In some rural areas for example, the prefix *thit* is placed before the names of men who have at some time been ordained even though their period of service in the *wat* need have no repercussions on their subsequent behaviour and social position.¹⁵ Interestingly enough this practice was not followed in Ayutthaya, the provincial town where I lived, and where there were many other criteria of differentiation, occupation, ethnic affiliation, previous place of residence and so on, according to which individuals might be categorized.

Another distinctive feature of the Thai social system is that permanent groups appear to be virtually absent. In his seminal article Embree states quite categorically that the Thais 'do not like to work in organisations' as they are too individualistic in temperament. The responsibility for this alleged antipathy towards co-operative action is generally laid at the door of Theravada Buddhism. Phillips

14) Saiyasat (magical practitioners) specialize in healing and/or in telling horoscopes. Although most saiyasat are bhikkhus as these activities are traditionally associated with the monkly role, comparatively few monks are saiyasat. It was observable however, that more credence was given to saiyasat who were also monks, even though the techniques they used were generally regarded as 'Hindu' or 'Brahministic' rather than Buddhist.

The Buddha did not forbid these activities to his followers but declared them to be irrelevant to their central concern, namely, the quest for Salvation. Monks can justify their taking part in such activities by saying that they are merely providing a service for the laity who, unlike members of the Sangha, have not reached that stage of spiritual maturity where they can manage without the emotional and psychological comfort which magic affords.

15) 'Thit' or 'did' is an 'abbreviated form of the Pali word familiar in Anglo-Indian as 'pandit', which means scholar or a wise man' (Anuman 1961 : 69).

for example, considers that 'a major source of the villagers' loose relationships is the Buddhist emphasis on primacy of individual action and responsibility' (Phillips 1967 : 363-4). The question as to whether the Buddhist ethos can be said to promote loose relationships — in any sense of this term — will be discussed below. But, in the first place an attempt must be made to shed some light on the question as to why permanent groups are lacking in Thai society by looking at material from another area where long-term groups do exist, although the basic social structure is not altogether dissimilar.

For these purposes Leach's study of the Singhalese village 'Pul Eliya' provides perhaps the clearest analysis of the factors which prompt individuals in such a society to enter into co-operation.¹⁶ (It should be remembered that most of the generalisations concerning the nature of the Thai social system are based on fieldwork carried out in rural areas, where the vast majority of the Thai population is to be found.) The Singhalese have a bilateral kinship system, similar to that of the Thais, and in Pul Eliya, as Leach has shown, kin ties, real or putative, assume a great deal of importance as the basis for the formation of permanent groups. Marriages are arranged, kinship ties invented or allowed to lapse according to the property interests of the individuals concerned. In the village the vital resources of land and water are in short supply; kinship provides the basis for the formation of groups to protect individual interests in these scarce property holdings and to ensure day-to-day co-operation.

The same factors are however not operative in village Thailand, where neither technological specialization nor economic need make group formation necessary to ensure present co-operation or to protect the interests of the next generation. Thailand's natural resources are very plentiful. It has been estimated that only 10% or 11% of the total area is cultivated (Ingram 1955 : 55), even though more land has been taken into cultivation over the past 100 years, in

16) See 'Pul Eliya—A Village in Ceylon' by E.R. Leach; (C.U.P. 1961) The situation in Ceylon is of course made more complex by the existence of caste and other features of social organisation absent from Thailand.

response to the increasing world market demand for rice. But, even now, the typical peasant cultivator aims primarily to produce sufficient rice to support his family, and only when their needs are satisfied does he sell his surplus. 'The tendency . . . is for the household to live on its own rice supplemented by fish and vegetables gathered from the lush countryside. Any other goods such as cloth, meat, tools, animals and luxuries, are bought with cash from the proceeds of the sale of surplus rice' (Wilson 1962 : 40).¹⁷ The Thais are well aware of their own good fortune, and the phrase *nai nam mi pla nai na mi khao* (There's fish in the water, there's rice in the fields) expresses quite succinctly their recognition of the country's natural abundance, as well as the justifiable confidence that it is possible to survive there without having to work too hard.¹⁸ There is as yet no overall pressure on land, since Thailand's area is about the same as that of France, though her population is now approximately three-quarters that of France. However, with a population increasing at the rate of over 3% per annum it may be merely a matter of time before a situation similar to that described by Leach for rural Ceylon becomes operative. Similarly, as the economy develops, it is clear that specialist occupational groupings will assume greater importance, although at the present time such associations are of only minor significance.

Evidence in support of Leach's general thesis that "kinship systems have no 'reality' at all except in relation to land and property" (Leach 1961 : 305) is provided by the fact that high-ranking Thai families tend to be much more cohesive than those of ordinary villagers. Members of the aristocracy show a much greater interest in kinship and pedigree; marriages are arranged with a view to consol-

17) This may well not apply to poorer areas in the North East Region of Thailand where there is greater pressure on land. (cf. Wijeyewardene 1957 : 79)

18) This expression is derived from an inscription authorized by the Thai monarch Ram Kham Haeng (c. 1292) (See G. Coedes, London 1966). It has since been incorporated into a popular song, and is quite often heard in common speech.

idating property holdings, and maintaining rank.¹⁹ The high incidence of intermarriage between this small number of families at the top of the social scale reflects and reinforces the internal cohesiveness of this privileged minority; the hereditary principle is an important mechanism for the allocation of scarce resources, houses and valuables, titles and larger areas of land, usually in the capital.

The effects of the general abundance of material resources are manifest in certain features of monastic organisation. In provincial areas Buddhist *bhikkhus* move very freely between monasteries, and only the abbot who, as an office-holder, has a stake in a particular *wat* feels more inclined to stay in one place.²⁰ This general freedom of movement is permissible largely by reason of the fact that wherever a monk resides he receives an adequate amount of money, food and so on from the householders in the vicinity. There is, by and large, no need to restrict entry into certain monastic communities as they are not differentiated with respect to their access to economic and other resources. In Ayutthaya the monasteries did not attempt to make their estates into 'going concerns' and relied on direct contributions from the lay community for their support. In many cases fields belonging to monasteries were unused, or alternatively rented out for a nominal sum.

In certain areas of Bangkok however, there have been some significant changes in this traditional pattern of balanced supply and demand, changes which can be attributed to a number of factors. In the first place, in the capital there is a much denser concentration of monks, many of whom are drawn there by the educational facilities offered by ecclesiastical schools and universities in the capital; but, on the other hand, there is evidence of a general decline in lay support

19) According to the principle of declining descent, after five generations, a family out of the line of royal succession returns to commoner status, though rank may be maintained by making advantageous marriages. See Mary Haas 'The Declining Descent Rule for Rank in Thailand: A Correction' (Amer. Anthropol. 1951).

20) An abbot naturally loses his status if he moves to another *wat*, except in those cases where his move is entailed by promotion to a higher office attached to a more important monastery.

for the *Sangha*, as many residents of Bangkok are non-Buddhist, and non-Thai, and also because many metropolitan Thais are less interested in spending money in support of the monkhood than are their fellow countrymen; in their case, conspicuous consumption is more likely to take the form of the acquisition of Western luxury goods for themselves and their home or a Western education for their children, than of lavish merit-making ceremonies.

In this situation many monasteries are forced to rationalize their economic behaviour in order to make money from their estates as they can no longer depend on direct lay contributions: in booming Bangkok where land prices are rising rapidly, this is a relatively simple operation. But, in such circumstances, there is some evidence to suggest that the individual monastic community is becoming more closed and cohesive, and that it is more difficult for a new-comer to gain access because of the pressure on the limited resources available. In many areas the individual monk can no longer obtain sufficient food from his daily alms-round because of characteristics peculiar to the lay community in Bangkok, which were mentioned above. Consequently, a *bhikkhu* may enter into a formal contract with a single lay sponsor (*uppathak*) who provides him with a regular allowance for food, books, travel, and other personal needs.²¹

With respect to the formation of groups with political functions in Thailand, it should be noted that until relatively recently such behaviour has largely been restricted to those royal and aristocratic families who traditionally took the initiative in managing the country's affairs.²² As I have already stated, there is a much greater awareness of family solidarity amongst this privileged élite; one informant told

21) In the traditional situation those householders who wish to make merit give rice to any monk who passes by the house on his morning round, without discrimination.

22) After the coup d'état of 1932 political power passed out of the hands of the royalty and aristocracy and into those of the small group of military leaders who had successfully opposed the old regime. Nevertheless these old Thai families still form a privileged elite, with background and lifestyle in common. The Monarch—though shorn of any real authority—provides a major focus for nationalist sentiments.

me that his ancestry could be traced back to the Ayutthaya era (1350-1767) although only during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the family came into real political power, were genealogies specifically recorded, with the express purpose of excluding false claimants and very distant kin from the right to highly valued titles and position.

It is generally agreed that most people in Thailand, which is to say the vast rural majority, are not 'involved in politics' which is regarded 'as properly the affair of politicians, or, more broadly, of the ruling class' (Wilson 1962: 57-8). It should be added that the political élite have traditionally preferred urban to rural society, and have in consequence always resided in the capital, near to the seat of power.²³ There is not, and never has been, a rural landlord class, and the majority of peasant cultivators own the land they cultivate.²⁴ Furthermore, the fact that Thailand has escaped colonization may have inhibited the development of strong political awareness, which might have resulted in the formation of groups with political functions.

Although it seems clear that permanent groups are not an important feature of Thai society, it is, nevertheless, inevitable that short-term co-operative associations should be formed from time to time. In an article entitled 'Some Aspects of Rural Life in Thailand' Wijeyewardene states that 'Thai society is perhaps most satisfactorily characterized as pragmatic, with organisation directed towards specific and limited ends' and concludes by saying that 'organizations arise to fulfill specific tasks, but there is no tradition of on-going associations which may be called upon to fulfill any task which might arise' (Wijeyewardene 1967: 83). Organizations of this kind are indeed familiar from many anthropological studies of village Thailand; the mechanism for reciprocal exchange of labour between individual farming households, known as *ao raeng* (to take one's strength) is perhaps the one most frequently described (cf. Kaufman 1960: 30).

23) See Wijeyewardene (1967: 80) for a concise summary of the traditional political situation.

24) 85% of cultivated land is operated by the owner (Ingram 1955: 208) though the figure now may well be lower.

In many instances, religious observances and activities necessitate the formation of a co-operative unit wider than the individual family or household. The merit-making ceremonies which mark crucial points in the individual life-cycle, ordination, cremation, house-blessing and so on customarily involve the expenditure of considerable money and time. It is believed to be better to hold no ceremony at all than to hold one on a meagre scale. Consequently, life-crisis rituals may be postponed for a considerable period of time, until the host has saved up enough money to provide an adequate display. Those friends and relatives with whom he is on intimate terms, as well as his colleagues, patrons and business associates, are expected to express their continuing interest and respect by making some contribution towards the costs. It is understood that the favour will be returned in due course provided that the relationship between the parties concerned remains unchanged.²⁵

The monks invited to officiate at any such ceremony are also related to the host in a variety of ways. Some may be friends or relatives who have become monks, whilst others who attend may have become acquainted with their host when he himself was a member of the *Sangha*. Several *bhikkhus* should be invited from that monastery which the sponsor of the ceremony regards as his local, and one or more eminent monks may be invited on the basis of their reputations as preachers or *saiyasat*,²⁶ rather than by reason of any previous link with the host. Monks who are co-resident with any of the above are frequently asked along to make up the requisite number for the ritual performance.

25) Reciprocity does not obtain between individuals of unequal status. For a client to contribute a large amount of money to a merit-making ceremony sponsored by his patron would be considered an absurd gesture and one implying a degree of intimacy and equality which did not exist. The subordinate party is however expected to attend and to assist in serving the food etc. Conversely, a patron is expected to make a cash contribution to ceremonies sponsored by his clients, although he may send the money with a third party, or may attend the ceremony only briefly.

26) Saiyasat—see above Footnote 16,

Thus the individuals, both monk and lay, who assemble on any such occasion, can, in sociological terms, be seen as forming an 'action-set' in that they are all related directly or indirectly to the host, 'although a wide variety of bases for linkage are involved' (Mayer 1966:108). Such a grouping comes into being for a specific occasion and is unlikely to be reproduced at any future date²⁷.

In the light of the preceding paragraphs it is clearly necessary to examine critically the contentions made by a number of anthropologists that the practice of Theravada Buddhism lies at the root of the problem of loose-structuring. My material would suggest that Buddhism as it is implemented on the ground, as distinct from doctrinal Buddhism, serves to promote social co-operation and that 'the Buddhist emphasis on primacy of individual action and individual responsibility' cannot be said to constitute 'a major source of loose relationships' (Phillips 1967:363-4).

Ideally the aim of all Buddhists is to achieve *Nirvana* (lit. Freedom from Desire) by renouncing mundane interests, and the volitional actions (*kamma*) to which such attachments inevitably lead. The rare individual who, by following the teachings and example of the Buddha, reaches this goal will not be reborn into the suffering world. Suffering, as defined by the Buddha, arises from the fact that everything is changing and impermanent; that all is *dukkha*. All objects, material and immaterial are liable to decay and transformation, hence, attachment to them can only bring distress to those so linked. Even the entity which we call the Self is believed to have no permanent existence, being merely a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces. Indeed, the craving for the material world, for its ideas, opinions, and sensual delights, is based on the mistaken idea of the Self which, in turn, derives from man's ignorance of the transient (i.e. *dukkha*) quality of worldly things.

According to orthodox Theravada doctrine, only a monk, a man who has renounced secular life, can have any hope of reaching

27) Similar groupings come into being on the occasion of other religious ceremonies, notably at the end of the Lenten Season when parties of laymen take offerings of money, robes and material goods to the monastery of their choice. (See Jane Bunnag 1970 p. 88)

Nirvana; the layman or householder who remains firmly rooted in the material world, can entertain no such aspirations. In practice however, few Thai monks consider *Nirvana* to be a relevant goal; those who believe it to be attainable in modern times consider that only after billions of years of tireless effort can they or their contemporaries achieve this state. But, the majority of *bhikkhus* rationalize their limited spiritual horizons by saying that although the Buddha and a few of his early followers had become Enlightened, this facility is no longer available.

In actuality, both Buddhist monk and Buddhist layman seek the same religious goal, which is to say, 'the secondary compensation of a prosperous rebirth' (Tambiah 1968:41). Acknowledging, then, that he cannot renounce volitional action (*kamma*) the Buddhist attempts to perform good *kamma* which brings merit, and to avoid actions which result in an access of demerit to his spiritual store. The effects of either type of activity may be felt immediately or after a longer interval of time. Indeed the *kammic* force persists even after death, when the balance of merit and demerit on the actor's spiritual account determines his subsequent status; he may return to the world in any animal or human form, or on the other hand his return may be delayed if he is forced to spend an intervening period in Hell, in expiation for previous misdeeds, or if, alternatively, he is rewarded for meritorious action by being allowed some recreation in one of the many Heavens of sensuous pleasure.²⁸

For the monk, the essential merit-making activity is the study and practice of the *Dhamma* (Word of the Buddha), although most of the *bhikkhus* I knew spent a greater proportion of their time and energy in performing ceremonies for laymen, an activity which though, strictly speaking, of secondary importance, also increases the merit balance of the monk.

For the Buddhist layman, providing material support for members of the Buddhist *Sangha* constitutes the most meritorious

28) The fact that *kammic* reaction may be immediate or delayed may make it easier for the Thais as Buddhists to accept and to explain the very fluid nature of their society, but I would not posit a direct causal link between ideology and social behaviour.

action. But any act of giving brings merit and a person can improve his spiritual status by acknowledging in some tangible form that society requires him to assist his relatives and friends when the need arises. Merit-making ceremonies performed at critical points in the individual life-cycle provide the individual with a major opportunity to reaffirm his social ties with those involved, by sharing the burden of expenses. Thus, the ideology of merit provides the rationale for those actions which the anthropologist sees as tending to maintain and strengthen existing social ties.²⁹

Failure to recognise that there might be a hiatus between religious ideals and their practical implementation has led the enthusiasts of Embree's original theory to conclude that the followers of Theravada Buddhism do indeed abandon their social ties and obligations;³⁰ whereas in fact, as I have shown above, the emphasis is not upon giving up, but upon giving for a specific return: the phrase *tham di dai di* (Do good, and receive good) is given a very literal interpretation.³¹

Several students of Thai society have attributed the absence of permanent groups and the high rate of mobility between roles to the particular personality dispositions of the average Thai. These writers claim that the individualistic non-conforming Thai character, moulded by the tenets of Theravada Buddhism, make it both practically impossible and psychologically unnecessary for individual actors to enter into social co-operation on a long-term basis. This claim compounds a double fallacy. In the first instance the practice of Theravada Buddhism requires a certain degree of co-operation, and most individuals are involved in a number of reciprocal exchanges of

29) The phrase *tham bun* (to make merit) is generally used to mean 'to give material support' although generosity in other forms and many other activities also bring merit.

30) The fact that 'the whole complex cosmology relating to the accumulation of merit and demerit is phrased in terms of the individual's lonely journey through cycles of interminable existences, working out his own moral destiny (Phillips 1967 : 363) has little relevance on a behavioural level.

31) See 'The Dhammapada v. 116-122 (Transl. by Narada Thera; John Murray, London 1954).

money and of practical assistance, for which merit-making ceremonies provide the occasion, and the ideology of merit the rationale; however there is in Thai society little pressure upon individuals to form permanent groups, because there is no permanent need, arising from economic or political considerations, to do so.³²

In the second place I would suggest that Embree, Phillips and others are mistaken in describing the Thais as 'individualistic' as it seemed to me that individualism was not a particularly important ingredient in the Thai character, nor highly valued by them. The deference given to seniority of age, the assumption that if you have lived longer then you automatically know better (an attitude which is closely related to the relatively undifferentiated and until recently, unchanging, economic situation) does not suggest that the Thais are a nation of radicals. There is in fact very little value attached to innovation or originality; even at the university level teaching is largely by rote; discussion is not encouraged nor demanded, and the pupil accepts the word of his teacher. Indeed, the Thais recognize and approve of their own ability to *lien baep* (to imitate or copy), a talent which enables them to adapt themselves very easily, at least as far as outward forms are concerned, to alien cultural influences from the West, or increasingly from Japan.³³

I would suggest, in conclusion, that in some respects the Thai social system presents us with a situation which is the reverse of that with which we are familiar from most of the classic anthropological

32) Nadel's cogent criticisms of the Culture and Personality approach are also relevant here (See Nadel 1951 : 407).

33) In Thailand, for centuries past, artistic impulses have largely been spent in the production of Buddha images, and the decoration of monastery walls with frescoes depicting episodes from Hindu epics, from the birth-stories of the Buddha etc. As far as the Buddha images are concerned, although there has naturally been stylistic evolution, the emphasis has been upon reproducing iconographic details correctly, or in some cases upon copying other images believed to be particularly powerful or auspicious, rather than upon originality. Indeed the authorship of works of Buddhist art is very rarely recorded.

sources.³⁴ It is for instance usual to emphasize that strong local or kin-group ties are an ever, present threat to the coherence of the wider social unit. A number of institutions and practices (exogamy, the incest taboo, age-sets, ritual observances and so on) are believed to counteract these fissive tendencies by promoting the formation of cross-cutting links and creating a relationship of interdependence between the parts which make up the whole (cf. Gluckman 1961:44-47). In Thailand, by contrast, there are very few corporate groups, or permanent co-operative groupings of any kind, which at the level of individual behaviour means that actors move quite easily between roles, both within and between spheres of activity, and freely relinquish ties which they no longer consider to be of any importance. This fluid situation is largely the outcome of the political and economic situation outlined above, and is found in association with, and perhaps permitted by, an exceptionally strong sense of identification, on the part of people at all levels of society, to the wider unit, which is to say, to the Thai state and its symbols; the most important of these being the Monarchy, and the Buddhist Sangha.

34) Eg. 'The Nuer'—E.E. Evans-Pritchard (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1940) or 'The Dynamics of Clanship Amongst the Tallensi' M. Fortes (London, O.U.P. for the International African Institute 1945)

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