

MERIT—MAKING AND RITUAL RECIPROCITY: TAMBIAH'S THEORY EXAMINED

by

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In Thai society, the material needs of monks are supplied by the laity. Villagers believe that by providing for the four basic needs of the monks (*padjai sii*: providing food, robes, lodging and medicines), they will make merit for themselves, thereby achieving good fortune and increased status in this, and future, lives. For social anthropologists, trained to look for underlying structures and codes, and particularly for those trained in the British Structural-Functionalist tradition and in Structuralism, it is difficult to accept at full face value the reason given by local people for their customs. They assume that there must be some deeper, hidden function or structure underlying any action or belief, which any social anthropologist worth his salt should be capable of extrapolating. Thus, Tambiah in his seminal studies *The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai Village* (1968), and *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (1970), attempts to explain Thai merit-making in terms of an underlying mechanism. He (1968:42) is skeptical of those writers who hold that Buddhists **only** make merit in order to achieve a prosperous rebirth:

It seems implausible that millions of villagers wholeheartedly make merit (often at a taxing economic cost) in search of a postponed effect in the next life—a highly uncertain orientation by any human conception.

Tambiah argues that only by viewing merit-making empirically can its importance in village life be understood. Underlying merit-making, he maintains, is a mechanism of reciprocity based on an exchange of values and obligations between the junior generation (*lūk lān*) and the senior generation (*phū thāo*) in a village.

Monks and laymen, he states, stand in a particular relationship of reciprocity based on age differential. The monk, because of his ascetic life, is in touch with the mystical force of the other world which he is able to transmit to the laity, who reciprocate by supporting the monks. But let Tambiah (1968:103) make his own case:

... the monk, by virtue of his asceticism and way of life, is partially aggregated to the world of death and final release. The layman is not, and is emphatically in this world. Through proper ritual procedures the monk as mediator can transfer Buddha's conquest of the dangers inherent in human existence, and transmute it into prosperity and mental states free of pain and charged with merit. But at the same time ethical effort and right intention are required from the laymen; the most conspicuous manifestation of this is making merit by materially supporting the monks and temples.

This exchange between monk and laymen, Tambiah (1970:259) states, is articulated in terms of reciprocity between senior and junior generations in the village:

Seen in terms of their refraction of this social structure, the institution of monkhood and the ritual proceedings in mortuary rites represent the services of the junior generation to the senior generation.

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Youths, he says, are appropriate agents to become monks because they are not yet householders, and, by so doing, they make merit for lay leaders and community members who all equally face imminent death. For the same reasons youths are also called upon to play the leading ritual role in mortuary rites. The older generation (especially women), Tambiah maintains, reciprocate by supporting the monks and performing and officiating at the life-affirming *khwan* rites, which are the prerogative of the aged. In doing this the older generation initiates the young into various statuses, and helps them assume the role of successful householder. The elders transfer their authority and power to their successors in the social system. He concludes (1970:259):

There is a power in old age which the young must rely upon in order to enjoy a prosperous life, just as much as there is a vitality in youth which the old must transmute into *bun* (merit), long life and good rebirth.

But to see reciprocity between generations as being the underlying mechanism of and impetus to merit-making is open to criticism. For the role Tambiah attributes to each of these generations, and the values, obligations and rights relating to these roles, are also held by, and are the prerogatives of, individuals outside the generation he specifies. As such it is logically untenable for Tambiah to relate these roles and values and obligations to the younger and senior generations alone. Thus, to single out reciprocity between generations as the impetus and means of articulating merit-making is invalid.

For example, Tambiah (1968:58) argues that since most men in the northeast enter the monastery for a short period only, during their youth, monkhood and novicehood should be viewed as a *rite de passage*. He quotes statistics to support his theory. He states that of 106 family heads out of 182 households in the village where he carried out his fieldwork, "over half the family heads had served as monks, about a third as novices, and nearly a fifth as both". But his figures do not give 'substance' to his argument as he seems to assume, nor are they very useful, for he does not provide us with statistics which allow us to compare his figures with the number of 'permanent' (life-long) monks who live in the monastery, or with the actual length of time the family heads spent there or at what stage. But, we can deduce that the 20 per cent who had been both monks and novices must have spent at least several years in the monastery. To call such lengths of stay in the monastery '*rite de passage*' is hardly what Van Gennep, the originator of the term, had in mind. If he had applied the term to the 'temporary' monks who enter the monastery for the three-month rainy-season period of *pansā* only, it might have been justified.

Also, although it is true that monks in the north and northeast tend generally to be young, there are nevertheless monks in these areas who have spent many years in the monastery and intend to stay there permanently. To relegate this group to oblivion, as Tambiah does in his theory, is methodologically unsound. The simple fact that the majority of monks in the north and northeast are young does not mean *a priori* that monkhood should be viewed as a *rite de passage*. In any case, in other areas of Thailand, e.g. the southern peninsula and the central plains, *khwan* rites are also found alongside the monkhood in villages and, consequently, any theory which tries to relate *khwan* rites to the monkhood and Buddhist merit-making must also be applicable to these areas. But Tambiah's theory certainly does not hold for Songkhla, the province in southern Thailand where I carried out 21 months of fieldwork in 1970-1972.

Nor, from the literature, does it appear to hold for the central plains either, for the monkhood in those areas does not function as a *rite de passage* for youth alone. In rural Songkhla, for example, most men who enter the monkhood join for *pansā* only, usually when they are about 20 years old, but novices are fairly rare. Most village monasteries instead focus around a handful of permanent monks. In fact, people frequently retire into village monasteries; one of the functions of the local monastery (*wat*) is to act as an old people's home. In this area it is the permanent monks who provide the basic framework and pivot of the village monastery, and who provide the institutional focus to merit-making and Buddhist ritual. It is they, for example, who officiate at merit-making rituals, carry out ordinations, and act as shamans and astrologers. To focus on young monks only and to interpret monkhood as a *rite de passage* for youth in this area would be highly misleading.

Certainly, villagers would not view monkhood as a *rite de passage* for youth. To them the amount of time spent in the monkhood is irrelevant: it is the achieved state of mind that is important. To view the monkhood as a *rite de passage* alone is thus not to do justice to the facts.

But, most importantly, to see reciprocity between generations alone as the underlying mechanism in merit-making is invalid, for although Thai villagers believe that supporting the monks is the most important means of making merit, nevertheless **all actions** are evaluated in terms of *bun* (merit) and *bap* (demerit), even the most trivial. Certainly, in rural Songkhla making merit (*tham bun*) was always cropping up in conversations: to give a meal to a friend was *tham bun*, to perform a small service—all affected one's karmic status. Thus, if Tambiah wants to put forward an alternative hypothesis as to why villagers make merit, other than the villagers' stated desire for salvation, he must postulate a theory that can explain all merit-making acts. To put forward a theory that is applicable to only a small portion of merit-making acts, to institutionalized merit-making acts alone, is obviously inadequate.

Tambiah lays great stress on institutionalized merit-making acts and collective *wat* rituals because he is interested in describing the villagers' "collective representations". He sees the ordination of novices and monks in the northeast as a collective *wat* rite and a collective merit-making act—the young men, by becoming monks, make merit for the village as a whole. While it is true that in the northeast all men who enter the monastery at *pansā* are generally ordained together, it seems from the literature on the central plains, and it is true of Songkhla Province, that monks are ordained individually, or in small groups. Ordinations are not collective village affairs in those areas. Families, friends and immediate neighbours attend. Young men, by becoming monks, make merit for their individual families alone.

Wat rites cannot really be considered collective or communal in Songkhla villages, because usually only a limited number of people attend (generally old women); from the literature this appears to hold for other areas of Thailand as well. Such small-scale attendance can hardly be considered 'collective' or 'communal'.

Also, although northeastern and some northern Thai villages tend to have a stronger sense of identity and to be more communally oriented than in the central plains and southern Thailand, Thai communities in general are noted for lacking a sense of solidarity and collective action (see Embree, 1950). Thus, since merit-making is a phenomenon found throughout

Thailand, any theory which attempts to explain it must be applicable to all areas, and, as such, doubt is thrown on Tambiah's theory since he roots merit-making in a type of collective action found in one area only.

The obverse of Tambiah's argument, namely that the older generation reciprocates by performing *khwan* rites, is open to criticism on similar counts. The *khwan* and *khwan* rites are frequently mentioned in the literature on Thailand as providing a central focus of ritual action at the village level. Each person is believed to have a *khwan*, a kind of soul-substance which rests on the crown of the head. Villagers believe that it may fly away (*bin*); if it does they believe the individual will die. A ceremony (*phithi tham khwan*), usually referred to as a 'soul-tieing ceremony' in the literature, is performed on certain occasions by a lay official, a *mō khwan*, to tie the soul to the individual and to boost the state of the *khwan*.

Tambiah's assumption that ritual leadership in *khwan* rites is the prerogative of the aged is open to question. It is certainly not applicable to all the *mō tham khwan* in the villages where I carried out my fieldwork in Songkhla Province, nor not all the *mō khwan* were aged. Although in 'Muthinung', the village where I spent most of my time, *Nāi Pan*, the most famous and most frequently used *mō*, was 72 years old, a number in nearby villages were between 40 and 50, and *Nāi Pan* himself had become a *mō* when he was in the prime of life some 30 years previously. Generally, the older a *mō khwan* is, the more experience he has, the more he is used by villagers and the more famous he is; each of these factors reinforces the other. Possibly, Tambiah in his theory is taking into account only the most famous and elderly *mō khwan*. But to do so would be to misrepresent the local situation.

Above all, *khwan* rites are not just a means of initiating the young into various statuses, helping them to assume the role of householder, or transferring power to the young as Tambiah appears to assume. *Khwan* rites are held for a wide variety of occasions and events, and they cannot be categorized purely in generational terms. Tambiah (1970), in his monograph *Buddhism and Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand*, spends an entire chapter describing these rites. He (1970:224-229) says *khwan* rites are held on the occasion of marriage, ordination, and pregnancy. They serve as 'threshold' ceremonies, being performed before starting a journey or enterprise. They function as ceremonies of integration being held when a man returns from a journey or on completion of an enterprise. They are held for therapeutic purposes in time of illness. To any reader of that particular chapter it must be apparent that such rites as threshold and integration rites are not restricted to young people only. Nor is marriage, ordination or illness purely the prerogative of the young. It is peculiar that Tambiah does not perceive this himself, since the threshold rites of northeast Thailand are famous throughout Thailand. It is ironic that Tambiah describes in detail in his own monograph the contradiction to one of his main hypotheses.

In short, Tambiah links together disembodied and unrelated elements into an 'emic' (conscious folk model) pattern. However, this emic reciprocity between generations does not include all categories of elements he says are variables: in his definition of monks he includes youthful monks only; in his study of *khwan* rites, only rites related to the younger generation are included. He lifts out of context and singles out some categories of each variable for special attention, but others of the same type he ignores. To see *khwan* rites and

Buddhist ritual and monkhood, **in totality**, as being in a state of reciprocity, does not fit the facts or explain them all. To explain the impetus to make merit in terms of a mechanism of exchange between generations is too simplistic. It forces the facts into too narrow a channel, into an ill-fitting straitjacket. His theory only explains a limited number of merit-making activities, i.e. he sees the impetus to merit-making as rooted in reciprocity between generations. But merit-making is not just a generational phenomenon, as all activities may be seen as either meritorious or sinful. The fallacies in Tambiah's theory reflect the drawback of all such emic analyses, i.e. attempting to subsume widely disparate elements into a pattern which on close scrutiny do not fit the facts.

Correlations between merit-making and social, economic and political variables seem to be minimal in Songkhla Province; one has the impression that this is true of village Thailand as a whole. This may seem surprising to specialists who have cut their teeth on research into societies with clear-cut corporate groups and norms, such as African lineage systems. In such systems, there tends to be a high correlation and interdependence between religious institutions and socio-economic and political institutions. Religious institutions, secular political leadership, and factionalism are often intricately intertwined and interdependent. But the situation in Thailand, both socially and culturally, is very different from societies organized along corporate group lines.

As far as merit-making is concerned, in rural Songkhla Province for example, the only correlation there appears to be with political institutions is that institutionalized public merit-making acts—such as endowing a temple, donating land or large sums of money or furniture (garden seats, televisions or even cars) for the monks to use—confer social prestige. Such acts could be utilized to attain increased social status or political power in the secular sphere, but are rare in rural areas where large amounts of surplus money are not readily available. To see merit-making in rural Songkhla as a significant variable in politics would indeed be to distort both the institution of merit-making and politics. Generally, anyone interested in political advancement locally would invest his money in something more tangible that would produce more concrete and immediate results; namely, in the patron/client (*chaonāi/lūknōng*) system which is pivotal to local social relations—they would spend their money on the recruitment of clients as a means of attaining power.

Even on the purely social level in rural Songkhla, correlations with merit-making are limited. Most institutionalized merit-making is done by old people, and it is doubtful that loneliness (a factor frequently assumed by sociologists of religion to be a major reason for participation in religious activity) is a major motivating factor for old people's merit-making activity. Unlike in our own society, old people remain with their children. They are always surrounded by people with whom they can chat and while away the time, so they are unlikely to feel lonely. The concept thus does not have much meaning at the local level. Moreover, a quick survey carried out in my village of study, which asked old people why they went to the temple, elicited the information that they did not go for companionship but because they wanted to accumulate *bun*, an answer which was conveyed with impressive sincerity. Of course, merit-making activities on occasions such as Wan Phra, Buddhist holy days, held every lunar quarter (the seventh and fourteenth or fifteenth days of the waxing and waning moon), and

major Buddhist festivals, do provide occasions for old people to meet and chat with friends from all parts of their local area whom they may perhaps not meet at other times.

Tambiah is not alone in explaining merit-making in terms of reciprocity. Such Thai specialists as Moerman (1966:158) and Ingersoll (1966:73) have also pointed to reciprocity as underlying merit-making. But at the same time, Mauss (1954) and the Sociology of Exchange school hold that reciprocity underlies all social behaviour! If this is the case, what is the particular significance in the relationship between reciprocity and merit-making in Thailand? Moerman (1966) and Ingersoll (1966) see reciprocity as the function of the Buddhist belief that one reaps what one sows, which brings us back to the reason put forward by Thais themselves for merit-making: namely that individuals make merit in order to attain a prosperous rebirth. For skeptics and the non-religious to see such an idea as being the major impetus to merit-making may be difficult to believe, but nevertheless it is a possible and probable reason. Specialists of a neo-Durkheimian ilk such as Tambiah have not yet provided a more convincing one.

Lastly, Tambiah's assumption that merit-making is often "at a taxing economic cost" exaggerates the financial burden of merit-making on villagers. In rural villages large donations to temples are few and far between. Most village temples have only a handful of permanent monks, so that the cost of their support, when spread among the whole laity, is not very much. If a temple or monks need anything, the laity usually joins together to buy it, most members only making a small donation each. As regards the daily food of the monks, if a monk enters his native village temple or where he has relatives, his family continues to feed him. Generally the monks take only a small token amount of food from each *kalapong* when members of the laity take food to the temple. They leave the majority of the food for the donors to eat for their breakfast, which they usually do afterwards with the rest of the laity outside in the temple grounds.

Though actual ordinations can be expensive, an 'insurance scheme' operates in most villages which helps the ordinand's family to defray the cost. When an ordination is held, small donations, usually of 3 to 5 baht, will be made by friends and relatives; often as many as 100 donations will be received. Each donation is written down in a little book by the ordinand's family, and when the donor's family holds an ordination, the gift will be reciprocated.

The everyday cost of supporting the monkhood in Thailand therefore does not weigh heavily on individual members of the rural laity. To lay emphasis on the financial burden of supporting the monkhood, to see the financial side of merit-making as a significant and determining social factor, and concomitantly to imply—as does Tambiah—that because merit-making is often so expensive there must be some explanation for it other than a spiritual one, is to misrepresent the local situation in rural areas, and—like the rest of Tambiah's argument—it is untenable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks the Social Science Research Council of Great Britain, the London-Cornell Project for Southeast Asia, and the London University Central Research Fund for their financial support and sponsorship which made possible fieldwork in Thailand from April 1970 to August 1971, and again during the summer of the following year. The author also expresses sincere gratitude to Professor Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf of the School of Oriental and African Studies for reading and commenting on this article. The author is also indebted to Mr. David M. Peter in Bangkok for reading the manuscript and offering his comments.

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