

THE CONCEPTS OF POWER AND MORAL GOODNESS IN THE CONTEMPORARY THAI WORLDVIEW

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Worldviews are descriptive theories that serve to explain how life on earth is organized and how it relates to some broad, general principles. Most often they are of a highly symbolic nature and embodied in religion; sometimes they are speculative and embodied in metaphysics; sometimes they are political and embodied in a political ideology; and certain modern worldviews are even supposed to be scientific. Whatever the case may be, they are theories of how life in its actuality can be comprehended, and are as such models of society. They are the products of the reflection of man on his condition, projected symbolically as the truth. Their basis lies in experience, so worldviews can only be understood in relation to the historical societies that produced them.

Worldviews, as the symbolic recognition of how life in its actuality is organized, are most often embodied in religious belief and recommendations, prescribing how life should be lived. In this sense they are models for society that inform its ethos or its preferred behavioural atmosphere and style. For instance, a worldview may elucidate a certain concept of power and instruct about its qualities. This recognition of the nature and the qualities of power evokes a ritual style of dealing with supernatural power and a behavioural style of dealing with it when people are confronted with powerful persons in everyday life. These styles are similar because they both refer to the same conceptual reality, namely one view of power, whether social or supernatural. Because of this, the study of a worldview as a symbolic reflection of and a guide for life makes much sense. While the reality of the symbolic representations of spirits and *theewadaa* (or *devata*: gods) may be considered as primitive superstitions by the sophisticated urbanite, the understanding of the peasant about the qualities of power, morality, merit and sin may yet be very faithful reflections of the concrete workings, qualities, and location of power and morality in the experience of everyday life.

Worldviews are the repositories of concepts and perceptions that inform both ritual-religious and everyday behaviour, each being the mirror image of the other. This article will concentrate on the meaning of power and moral goodness as I have

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Transliteration of Thai words herein generally follows the system of Mary Haas.

of all since he is directly in charge of the protection of those who live in its immediate surroundings. A *phraphuum* is certainly not satisfied with respect paid to the *sya myang* or the *phiibaan*, and wants to be respected in its own right. Because of its immediacy, its subjects had better respect its wishes.

These guardian spirits are basically local rulers, and outside of their respective territories they have no business; there one needs to deal with other local potentates. Moreover, their power is very much localized in their respective shrines, or ritual centres. To supplicate or to tap their power, one needs to go there; with increasing distance from their shrines, their power dissipates, and they have no influence outside the borders of their realm other than perhaps 'by recommendation'. Sometimes the protective blessing of these *theep 'aarak* or *phii 'aarak* (guardian spirits) is sought for safety during a journey against the vow to give something upon a safe return; similarly, some university students may seek success in examinations at the shrine of the *phraphuum* of the university compound. In principle, however, their power and influence is local and has to do with the guardianship of the place. There is little use in seeking their protection or blessing when one is outside their sphere of influence.

In other words, it is not very practical or politic for a traveller to remain devoted to the guardian spirit of his village when he is away. As soon as he steps outside his village boundaries he has entered into the realm of another local ruler that he had better respect and worship. Another technique of dealing with unknown or threatening power is located in magically charged amulets, tattoos, and spells, or protective Buddhist texts (*khaathaa*). By this latter strategy our traveller surrounds himself with ambulant protective power that is localized in amulets and powerful words.

Another class of rulers regulates and has power over specific activities. While those that care for the general peacefulness and protection of their realms are localized by definition, these other powers may see to the growth of rice and the falling of rain, may grant wishes, reveal lottery numbers, and cure certain diseases. However widespread the activities of these powers may be, they should be addressed at the right time and place if their protective power is to be activated. There is little use in seeking the protection or the curative blessing of the miraculous *cedi (cetiya)* of Phrathaad Dōḡi Sutheep in Chiang Mai without going there, and one does not insure good luck by praying to Thaaw Mahaa Phrom (the four-faced Brahma) at the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok while one is up-country. One had better go to its shrine to propitiate that powerful spirit of good luck if one wants to feel any assurance. All these powers, be they guardian spirits or rulers of certain realms of activity, are basically localized and their protection should be sought at their particular shrines¹.

1. Some Thai, especially those who travel abroad, hold the view that they can invoke the protective blessing of powerful *saksit* images, such as the 'Emerald Buddha', when they are far away. They may ask for safety, or success in an examination, and if their wish is granted will redeem the vow upon return to Thailand, preferably at the place of worship of the *sing saksit* concerned.

However *saksit* power is incorporated, in order to invoke its benevolent attention and to activate its protection the worshipper has to initiate the action by paying respect and making a small offering. The worshipper then offers his terms of contract: if the *saksit* power will fulfill his wishes, he will come back and offer a feast, a pig's head, flowers, or a *likay* performance. Most of these powers have known tastes and dislikes: the Buddha image Phra Chinaraad in Phitsanulok likes pig's heads, Phra Keow Morakot (the 'Emerald Buddha') loves flowers, the spirit of the *lak myang* (City Pillar) in Bangkok is fond of *lakhon chaatril* performances, and the four-faced Brahma at the Erawan Hotel appreciates flower garlands and a donation to the Erawan hospital foundation; female spirits (*caw mae*) have a marked taste for phalli.

The order of the invocation is always the same: one first pays respect and makes a small offer of burning incense to attract attention, then one makes a vow, and finally, redeems the vow after being granted one's wishes. According to Phya Anuman, "if a *theewadaa* does not want to give what it has been asked for, but the ceremonial way in which it has been supplicated was correct, then it must without reservation fulfill that wish" (2515:309). The contract between a supplicant and a good protective spirit or *theewadaa*, or all other things that are classified as *sing saksit*, is mechanical, for a specific purpose, and of relatively short duration. Moreover, such contracts are never fully reliable.

The powers have to react to a correct ceremony, and those ceremonies are well known. When a correct rain-making ceremony has been given, rain should follow. If rain does not fall, the ceremony may be repeated and carefully checked in order to verify its ritual correctness. If rain is still not forthcoming, or whatever wish not fulfilled, then it may be supposed that other, more powerful causes are thwarting the contract. Perhaps the power addressed has been insulted by other behaviour and cannot respond, or other powers may thwart the scheme, whether of a supernatural or a plain, natural character.

Basically, the *saksit* powers react to presentation, such as right ceremony, proper words, appropriate movements and formulae. The contracts are mechanical and people know how to perform their side of the contract. In the manipulative contracts, power is never seen as being located in man himself, but in his knowledge of the correct form that makes *saksit* power respond. These *saksit* powers may therefore be considered to be domesticated: people have clear ideas how to handle them, are intimate with their behaviour, and in this sense they are reliable and predictable. The same predictability is expected of the human counterparts of the contract. When the blessing of a *saksit* power has been sought against a promise, that power may become very irritated and dangerous if the vow is not redeemed in the correct manner and according to the terms of contract. In such cases protective power turns vengeful and will punish negligent behaviour.

Insult to *saksit* power is by no means sinful (*baab*), but merely stupid. One does not activate the moral force of *karma* by not living up to a businesslike contract, but in the manner of a civil lawsuit the problem will be settled between parties. In relation to these *saksit* powers, we could observe that to stick to the terms of contract will be beneficial, while the stupidity of not doing so will result in revenge, disaster, shame and loss of face. *Saksit* powers are highly sensitive about their power, rank, and prestige, easily insulted, yet also easy to satisfy by the show of respect, an offer, or a bribe.

Summarizing, we find that the concept of *saksit* power has the following characteristics. The human life situation is surrounded, encompassed as it were, by a realm of nature and supernature in which power is vested. Humans need that power for protection, for blessing, for safety and auspiciousness, and for success in their personal and communal pursuits. In places such as localities, shrines, and amulets power is concentrated. By knowing the way, such as the use of rituals, ceremonies, or incantations, these powers can be made to work for the needs of the human supplicants. Consequently, these powers may be considered to be domesticated. Interestingly, these powers are thought to react to outward manipulation and the show of respect, irrespective of intentions. Contracts with *saksit* powers are defined by their purpose, have a relatively short time perspective, and need to be periodically renewed. *Saksit* powers are potentially benevolent and protective, but can be dangerous, jealous and vengeful if they do not receive their due.

Another characteristic of diffuse or concentrated *saksit* power is that it does not appear to derive from a centre or an ultimate source of legitimation. It derives from the fact that there is power, and in its concentrated forms it is just there with a sort of natural right of being there, to exercise its rule, and to demand offerings and respect. These powers represent the tenuous order outside the home or community; they are jealous of other powers, and never fully reliable; they are highhanded minor or major potentates that need to be respected and bribed to be good. In spite of these characteristics, humans feel the need to depend on them and seek their favour for their activities in the outside world. To do so, they need to initiate the action.

Basically, *saksit* power is amoral, because it does not ask for intentions and protects the good and the wicked alike. It is unprincipled and reacts to mechanical manipulation and the outward show of respect. It is not concerned with right or wrong, or with the development of moral goodness. Contracts with *saksit* power are guided by their own businesslike logic, and there is no higher moral principle that guides these. Moreover, these contracts are never fully reliable. If insulted, *saksit* power may turn dangerous and seek revenge, but its revenge is escapable if its subject places himself under the protection of other, more powerful *saksit* agents, takes refuge in the monkhood, or simply moves out of their sphere of influence. Therefore, to take advantage of *saksit* power, for instance, by not redeeming a vow, is not perceived to be sinful or to activate the moral law of *karma*. In such cases one merely exposes oneself to revenge, which is stupid and may cause loss of face.

(b) *Nondomesticated power*

Next to the *saksit* powers that are potentially benevolent, we find the inauspicious, wicked and evil powers that represent the realm of chaos and immorality. These are the nondomesticated and often 'roaming' powers that are the carriers of bad luck. These bad spirits, as they are generically known, escape from the scheme of the predictable and are essentially malevolent. They tend to act rather than to wait until properly and ceremonially addressed. As opposed to the predictable domesticated powers, they rather resemble the power of a criminal or a troublemaker. Before they can be incapacitated and mastered they usually will have done some harm, having caused illness, death, loss, or just terror and fright. They can only be dealt with through strong magic, such as the powerful *khaathaa* of the Buddhist monk or the spirit doctor. This latter specializes in first localizing the spirit, and then domesticating it in a pot, or chasing it away by generating strong counterforces. These bad spirits can also be dealt with by politely subduing them and asking them to go away in return for an offer (ransom). When all means fail, people had better lie low while being careful not to give further offense in the hope that the carrier of inauspiciousness will roam on.

Some of these bad spirits are thought to be vaguely localized in cemeteries or forests, and are a nuisance and a danger to the traveller who is away from home and beyond the protection of his guardian spirit or of a *theewadaa*. To deal with such a dangerous situation the traveller may surround himself with the ambulant *saksit* power of his amulets, tattoos, and protective formulae. Most often these amulets and words are of Buddhist inspiration, such as small Buddha amulets (*phra khryang*), medals of magically famous monks of the *luang phqq* category (*rian phra*), and Pali texts. Other protective amulets may derive their power from a relic of one's parents or a representation of a former king. Protective tattoos are most often of mixed Brahmanic and Buddhist origin. Whatever the manifestations, however, the protective power is not located in a person, but in an outside agent that he has appropriated. For protection, invulnerability, or prosperity one depends at least as much on these outside *saksit* agents as on one's own skills and weapons, one's merit or plain good luck.

The most effective means to deal with evil, immorality, and chaos are located in the powerful white magical symbols that derive from the realm of moral goodness (see section on *khuna*, below). On the one hand protection against evil may be sought through propitiation of the *sing saksit* as they are manifested in potentially protective and benevolent spirits and *theewadaa*, and on the other by making *sing saksit* out of the symbols of moral goodness. Magically gifted monks, especially of the *luang phqq* category, but also laymen who have the reputation of being *nak bun* or *phuu mil bun* (very meritorious persons) by virtue of their accumulated merit, may produce powerful amulets, tattoos, or teach powerful formulae that protect against evil and misfortune. Similarly, relics of one's parents and small Buddha images that have been charged with protective power should not fail to protect against evil. Generally, Buddhist symbols are thought to be the most effective weapons, and if a spirit doctor

fails in his struggle against a representative of evil, the Buddhist monk is thought to be the ultimate means to get rid of that representative of chaos.

In a similar sense a village community may insure auspiciousness and feel itself protected by the power of merit that is generated and accumulated in its village temple. The discipline of the monks, their chanting and preaching, the occasion that they offer to make merit, the magical power vested in its Buddha image: all serve to increase the feeling of protection, continuity, and the insurance of auspiciousness in a world where one knows oneself to be surrounded by potentially harmful power. In contrast to the more temporary character of the purely animistic seats of power with which the bonds need to be renewed periodically and whose protection is rather *ad hoc*, the power that is vested in merit and Buddhist symbols extends over longer time and is continuously reinforced by having monks and Buddhist ritual².

The power of Buddhism is most clearly demonstrated on the occasion of the confrontation with chaos *par excellence*, i.e. death. Whereas there are plenty of animistic and Brahmanic expressions in Thai death ritual (*phithii 'awamongkhon*), the core manifestations to restore order and to insure the well-being of the deceased are clearly of Buddhist derivation.

Thai animism, as a religious system, is essentially a system that deals with power, whether of the amoral *saksit* or the immoral evil variety. That power surrounding the experience of everyday life should be dealt with according to its own laws which do not raise moral questions of good and evil. The wicked man may be protected by the same means as the good. Whether the religious complexes that deal with power are classified as animistic, Brahmanic, "civic religion" (Reynolds 1977), or Buddhist, is immaterial to the argument, because they are all informed by the same animistic mentality that seeks ways and means to accommodate with the existence of power as divorced from goodness and morality. The supernatural powers do not question intentions, but react to the show of respect, to ritual prescriptions and ceremonial form. They can be hoodwinked by pretensions, a nickname or a mask; they do not distinguish between the genuine and the imitation.

The emphasis on the manipulation of form in the contracts with power makes it very understandable that attitudes of devotion, piousness, and deeply internalized emotion are generally, though not necessarily, absent in relation to power. There is no use for these attitudes because relationships are mechanical and thus superficial. The best attitudes that one can expect are reverent awe and fear (*kreengklu*). Dealings with power are only motivated to serve one's personal or communal interests. Yet, to have the feeling of being protected may stimulate feelings of loyalty and gratefulness. On the other hand, feelings of suffering from evil power also occur, and the small,

2. For the animistic interpretation of village or popular Buddhism, see the convincing and well-argued works of Terwiel (1975, 1977).

powerless man who can magically trick power into favourable response may be much admired.

Power is there to supplicate and to appropriate. In this scheme man becomes, in proportion to his ability to harness power, a power among powers. The dealings are businesslike, favour for favour, and revenge for insult. Power is not subject to moral restraints, because moral restraints are no part of it. Power is there to grasp and to use, and the person who does not avail himself of the opportunity once presented is merely stupid.

In conclusion, in the Thai worldview man is thought to be surrounded by various powers. These powers relate to each other in a rather chaotic fashion, having neither a centre, a hierarchy, a point of legitimation, nor a purposeful perspective or a reference to moral law. By his magical means, however, man is able to create a short time order in that tenuous and whimsical space. His means are essentially located in the manipulation of ritual form and serve his intentions to enjoy success and safety.

Khuna

(a) Moral goodness

In the Thai worldview power is complemented by moral goodness (*khun ngaam khwaamdii*). The realm of moral goodness is not opposed to the realm of power, but the two are complementary to each other. Both are needed in life, both belong to everyday experience, yet their characteristics are contradictory. Whereas power has a multitude of supernatural projections, goodness is essentially symbolized in earthly natural manifestations. Whereas power represents tenuous amoral order and immoral chaos, goodness represents moral reliability and stability. Whereas power is powerful, moral goodness is powerless, its symbols being homely and female, and squarely located in this world.

The prime symbol of moral goodness is the *phrakhun*, or pure *bunkhun* that the mother has to her children. She cannot be but good; she cannot do but give and care; she is always benevolent and forgiving; she feeds, loves, and gives without expectation of return; she gives without asking and does not punish. She sacrifices herself for her dependants who rely on her for stability and continuity in life. She is a moral refuge, a haven of safety, and the source of the moral identity of her offspring. At mother's side one is safe (*plodd-phaj*) and knows that one will be forgiven (*'aphaj'*)³.

In a similar vein the earth on which we depend for our living, the rice that feeds us, the water that sustains life, and the guardian angel that protects the young child are all represented as female, such as Mae Thoranii, Mae Phoosop, Mae Nam, and Mae Syy, and all these life sustaining manifestations are thought to have extraordinary goodness (*phrakhun*) towards their dependants. This goodness creates a moral debt that should be acknowledged; it is the source from which moral obligation arises.

3. Without overstressing language, it is of interest to note that all Thai words for 'safe' are given in the negative of 'beyond danger' (*ploddphaj*, *phonantaraaj*, *roqd*), and that even the word for forgiveness is *'a-phaj'*, meaning 'out of danger'.

In the same group of symbols of moral goodness we find the symbol of the teacher who shares in the same qualities. The life sustaining gift of the teacher ('guru') is the knowledge and the wisdom that his pupils need to lead a moral life. Also the teacher is thought to be a source of *mettaa karunaa*, of sympathy and moral guidance who sacrifices himself for the well-being of his pupils, thus creating a moral debt because of his *phrakhun*.

We have seen that also the symbols of *saksit* power may have *khun* (goodness; usefulness) for those who place themselves under their protection, and that also this *khun* results in obligation. Yet, to enjoy their protection a person has to initiate the action, and if that person does not repay the benefits received, he exposes himself to the revenge of the insulted *saksit* power. *Saksit* powers care for themselves.

The symbols of moral goodness, however, have moral *khun*, that is, pure *bunkhun* toward their charges; these latter do not need to ask, but receive. Not to acknowledge their *bunkhun* is sinful. The recipients of *bunkhun* do not need to fear revenge from the symbols of goodness, because they will not and cannot avenge themselves. They are contrary to the symbols of power that can take care of themselves. *Nerakhun*, that is, ungratefulness and not to acknowledge the moral goodness that one has received, is sin (*baab*) against the reliable order of morality and will automatically be punished by the principle of moral justice, that is, karma. Psychologically such behaviour is the source of guilt feelings.

The feelings that should guide the relationship with all those who have moral *bunkhun* to us, its beneficiaries, are trust, warmth, love, protection, dependence, gratefulness, reverence and identity. These deep *bunkhun* relationships are further expressed in the periodic rituals of honouring parents, elders and teachers as the keystones of the reliable moral order. They are also expressed in agricultural thanksgiving ritual.

The complementary opposition between the essentially worldly and female symbols of moral goodness and the symbols of amoral power, between powerlessness and powerfulness is further demonstrated by the ideas that guide the division of roles in everyday life. Females are supposed to stay away from the manifestations of *saksit* power: they should not touch a Buddha image or a monk, they should stay away from the potent *cedi*, and are not supposed to own powerful amulets, to have sacred tattoos, nor to know powerful *khaathaa*. Females are thought to pollute and neutralize the power of *sing saksit*, and female symbols are dangerous to the potency of men⁴. The male teacher does not, of course, share in these expectations, but if he is respected for his moral wisdom people would certainly be amazed to find him equipped with lots of amulets, tattoos, and other protectives symbols: he is supposed to be protected by his

4. In 'village Thailand' this thinking is still demonstrated by the taboos that guide the washing and the drying of clothing. Preferably, feminine clothing should not touch or be on the same line with male clothing. Moreover, feminine clothing should never be hung to dry above the head of a male. Similarly, a female overstepping a male is thought to be highly inauspicious for the male concerned, and an insult of his power.

moral wisdom, unless of course he is a teacher of magic, that is, a specialist dealing with *saksit* supernature⁵.

(b) *The goodness of Buddhism*

The goodness of Buddhism represents the order of pure virtue that lies beyond the human order of *kilesa* (passion and prejudice) and rebirth (*samsara*), as revealed by the Dhamma of the Buddha. These latter represent the realm of truth and the highest *khun*, such as explicated in the qualities of the personal Buddha, that is the goodness of pure virtue (*borisutthikhun*), the goodness of the highest compassion (*mahaa-karunaathikhun*), and the goodness of wisdom (*panjaakhun*). The Buddha represents the highest refuge (*sarana*) and the hope for liberation from the fetters of samsaric existence; the Noble Eightfold Path leads there. This Buddhist Path is essentially a way of morality and wisdom that is indifferent to whatever is *saksit*. Its message is focused beyond the human order, not domesticated as it were, and its way needs to be cultivated in the individual.

Buddhism is not a supernatural representation of goodness—although the Buddha as a person may be seen as such—but a path that cultivates goodness and morality as instruments that lead to wisdom, equanimity and ultimate liberation. The gift of Buddhism is like the gift of the mother or the teacher, a gift of goodness that does not ask for return, and as such it is symbolic and exemplary for the symbols of goodness in this world. Yet Buddhism does not promise forgiveness and mercy, but places the burden of moral behaviour squarely on the shoulders of each and every individual who remains subject to the impersonal law of karma. Salvation is not a gift but a task, and the Buddhist Path merely a way to help in that task. No wonder that in everyday life the more tangible symbols of mother and teacher remain the very centres of the hope for goodness, because they unburden the individual, and that the common understanding of Buddhism remains animistic in the sense that merit-making is generally understood as a mechanism to ensure safety and auspiciousness, institutionalized Buddhism becoming a powerhouse for individual and communal protection. Some people, though, are interested in the morality and wisdom of the Buddhist Path, and especially in old age many may practise seriously; these people are no longer interested in the *decha* dimension of existence. To most Thai, however, merit is a way to be safe in a world that is overlaid with power; and their use and understanding of Buddhism can best be characterized as Buddhist animism.

Mediation between *decha* and *khuna*

In the contemporary Thai worldview we find little supernatural elaboration of the connection between the complementary realms of power and moral goodness. The Thai cosmos misses a centre that supersedes the contradictions of power and goodness, and recognizes that in life one has to deal with both, each on its own terms. The mediation between the two realms lies very much in the role of the 'good leader', who

5. It is true, though, that there are sorceresses who deal with or represent evil power, that there are some 'nuns' (*mae chit*), who are technically in the sexually neutral *samanaphae:d* category, who practise healing, and that most spirit mediums, irrespective of whether they mediate between *saksit* or evil powers and humans, are female.

should know his way around in both the realms of goodness and power. In the contemporary literature the ambiguity of this role is often expressed in the person of the male teacher who must symbolize goodness, reliability and masculinity. This ambiguity is also clear in the role expectations surrounding the father, the good headman, the good *phuu jaa*, the reliable patron and ultimately the king. All these latter persons should combine *phrakhun* and *phradeed*, they should be good and powerful, but their representation does not culminate in a central cosmological representation that subsumes the existential contradiction of the expectations that guide their roles. They are neither the symbol of the one nor the other, but mediators.

This perception of mediation is most clearly expressed in the Sukhothai role of the king as a father *vis-à-vis* the people, or in modern times as a *thammaraja*. When the king under the influence of the 'Khmerization' of Ayutthayan times came to be perceived as a *devaraja*, Lord of Life, he became clearly identified with the realm of *saksit* power; nowadays the moral characteristics of kingship are again strongly emphasized and expressed in what Reynolds has felicitously called "civic religion" in which a nation celebrates itself, as expressed in the three symbols of Thai nationhood: nation, religion, and king. The centre of this civic religion, though, is in the here-and-now, a combination of power and goodness that is not expressed in a cosmic or supernatural principle. The centre of the Thai cosmos, if any, is clearly in this world.

Ritually, this civic religion is most clearly elaborated in Brahmanic state ceremonial that insures the continuity and prosperity of the nation, coordinating it as it were with the cosmic forces of auspiciousness and the blessing of the *theewadaa*. Its operation is, like animism, highly mechanical and incorporates all symbols of auspiciousness, whether Brahmanic, Buddhist, or animistic in origin. The mentality that informs it is essentially animistic, having safety within the order of *saksit* and chaotic forces as its object.

At the level of the small community the moral unity of the group is still expressed in the fading worship of the ancestor spirits (*phii puujaataajaaj*) that still exercise a mild social control in parts of the Thai countryside. They are the guardians of tradition as a moral way of life, and become upset over infraction of the rules of social harmony, such as illicit sexual relationships. Nowadays they constitute a minor class of guardians that can be satisfied by simple ritual and the information that 'all is well'. Their role in protecting the moral relationships that should exist between all those who are tied by the bonds of communality is still expressed in marriage and some other life-cycle ritual.

Other original ritual expressions that still persist since the times that the Thai were full-fledged animists are the *khwan* ('life essence') ceremonies to insure the incorporation into the community of outsiders, of those who have been outside and in contact with danger, and of those who are transitional in their life cycle, for instance at marriage or ordination into the monkhood. It is no wonder that these original ritual expressions to ensure continuity and auspiciousness have found Brahmanic elaboration.

The various categories within the Thai worldview may be arranged schematically as given on the following page.

Brief scheme of the noncentred Thai worldview (Ego's perception)

	<u>Khuna (moral goodness)</u>		Mediation	<u>Decha (power)</u>	
Order	Beyond human order	Order of goodness	Order of community	Tenuous order	Chaos
Symbol	The Buddha (Dhamma; Sangha)	The mother (parents; teacher)	The 'good leader' (<i>thammaraaja</i> ; 'father')	<i>Saksit</i> powers (spirits; <i>theewadaa</i>)	Bad spirits (death)
Quality	Pure virtue Pure compassion Wisdom Certainty	Moral goodness (pure <i>bunkhun</i>) Reliability Forgiveness Stability	<i>Phrakhuna</i> + <i>phradecha</i> Safety Mutuality Stability to be defended	Ambiguous: potentially protective, benevolent yet jealous; amoral Instability	Entirely dangerous, whimsical, threatening Immoral Capriciousness
Time perspective	Cycle of rebirth	Continuity	Life-long	Short time	Immediate
Religious complex	Doctrinal Buddhism Eight-fold Path	To honour parents, elders and teachers Cult of Mae Phoosob	Brahmanical ritual; ancestor cult; <i>khwan</i> ceremonies "Civic religion"	Animistic ritual (includ- ing popular Buddhism)	Magic (mobilizing <i>saksit</i> power) <i>Awamongkhon</i> (death) ritual
Aim	Salvation; better rebirth	Moral continuity; identity; fertility	Auspiciousness; continu- ity and safety; peace	To insure protection and good fortune	To ward off danger
Means	To make merit as a moral pursuit	To acknowledge <i>khun</i> ; to be grateful; to return favours Agricultural ritual	To be a dependable and reliable group member; to respect tradition	To show respect; to vow and redeem the vow To make merit as a pro- tective pursuit	Protective amulets, <i>khaa- thaa</i> , etc. Powerful magic To make merit for the deceased
Infraction	Sin; activates karmic retribution; feelings of guilt	Stupidity; Social sanctions; loss	activates revenge /	Activates danger	
Direction	Ultimate refuge	Ego receives first	EGO	Ego has to give/respect first	Ego is extorted

Domesticated area of existence

II. CONSIDERATIONS

With lesser or greater elegance a vast number of interpretations of religion in Theravada Buddhist societies has been proposed over the last 20 years. In his books about the interpretation of Thai religious practices in the countryside of central Thailand, Terwiel has come to the conclusion that Thai popular Buddhism is primarily a kind of Buddhistic animism that seeks to accommodate with power and its *saksit* expressions (1975, 1977). Thai religion is indeed informed by a basic animistic perception of the world that is expressed in its noncentred worldview, lacking a supernatural centre of synthesis, in the tribal or civic character of religious expression and its preoccupation with power and auspiciousness, and in the fact that power is not subject to morality but follows its own amoral law. These perceptions are also compatible with doctrinal Buddhism that promotes a moral way of life and that somehow turns its back to the accommodation with power. By taking the animistic mentality as his guide, Terwiel has been able to demonstrate convincingly the integrity of villagers' religious practice without the need to go into complicated structural arguments, such as Tambiah has (1970), or to come to difficult-to-digest solutions such as Spiro has, who maintains that the Burmese live with two opposed religious systems (1967: 247-80).

Terwiel's emphasis on power is onesided, however (Mulder 1977). All religion deals with power, that is true, but also with continuity, identity, and morality, and these latter elements have only received scant elaboration in his studies. While I do not differ in opinion with Terwiel's interpretation of Buddhistic animism, the problem of the diversity of religious expression as a valid sociological problem of Theravada societies still remains.

In his study of Ceylonese religion, Evers formulates the problem as follows: "How is it possible to maintain a social system over a long period of time in which the majority of the population is culturally and religiously **undifferentiated** while at the same time contrasting religious value systems and their concomitant social organizations are perpetuated? How is it possible to have separate socio-religious structures [Theravada Buddhism, worship of the gods, and allegiance to the divine king—NM], identifying and dramatizing separate values, without splitting and differentiating the members of society in their allegiance to either system?" (1972: 99).

Evers, and Tambiah, have 'proved' that all this is possible by making elegant and complicated structural-functional arguments that I do not find very convincing. In a reaction to his earlier work, Evers proposes that the solution of his problem should be found in the context of the social and economic history of Sri Lanka, as expressed in the economics and politics of the land tenure and service tenure system (1977: 185). To solve the problem of separate religious expressions and structures, however, I think that it is more fruitful to locate the problem in basic human experience, of which history, economics, and politics are a part only.

Basic human experience

Human experience is characterized by basic dualities that can be formulated in complementarities, oppositions, or contradictions, but that all belong to the totality of that experience. There are always we *versus* they, insiders *versus* outsiders, enemies *versus* friends, second persons whom we trust and third persons who are strange and distant, male and female, good and evil, happiness and suffering, power and powerlessness, order and chaos, safety and danger, *et cetera ad libitum*, and within our experience we recognize and classify accordingly. Naturally, all worldviews, whether of religious inspiration or not, need to come to grips with these basic dualities and give them symbolic expression.

Some worldviews are strongly centred and postulate one god, or divine volition, as the ultimate reduction of causes. Other worldviews recognize the basic conflict between light and dark, good and evil, and are dualistic. Others again do not allocate centres, but recognize a universal principle in which the contradictions of existence can be explained. More simple, animistic worldviews do not attempt to reduce the complexity of human experience to universal causes, but simply divide the world between insiders and outsiders, the insiders and their ancestors being the natural centre of the universe.

The Thai worldview combines the sophisticated elegance of a universal principle with the primordial directness of an animistic worldview; somehow Theravada Buddhism and the pre-Buddhist animistic heritage have corroborated and concluded a perfect marriage. The Buddhist message does not endow this universe with a centre to cling to, but characterizes this-worldly and this-cosmic existence as impermanence, suffering, and nonself, guided by the impersonal this-cosmic principle of karma. For the contemporary Thai the comfortable prospect of an ancestor heaven has been replaced by a long cycle of rebirths and the knowledge that to do good improves one's karmic position and that to do evil worsens it. The tribal centre of insiders is somewhat undermined by the introduction of these universal Buddhist principles, but for the rest Buddhist thinking about this life and this universe have no conflict with original animistic representations, since both are highly accurate reflections of the experience of everyday life.

The contemporary Thai worldview does not attempt to synthesize the contradictory, opposed, or complementary experiences of everyday existence, but leaves them as they are: contradictory, opposed, and complementary as they come to us in everyday life, existing side by side. In order yet to solve the problems of existence in an acceptably optimistic perspective, moral 'inside' *versus* powerful 'outside' classifications have remained quite strong, but are not all-pervasive, with the most basic classification rather being 'to be safe' *versus* 'to be in potential danger'. Since everybody needs to experience both in life, these two categories do not so much oppose each other as constitute contradictory, complementary experiences that make for the integration of life.

Ultimately life is conditioned by the law of karma, and the only way to overcome this samsaric existence of birth-death-rebirth is to overcome karmic conditioning by the cultivation of morality and wisdom, so leading out of and escaping from this impermanent and illusory existence into a realm that is not of this universe and about which we have no knowledge. There is no centre to this universe other than the person, and there is no cosmic equilibrium of contradictory principles beyond a personal balance of karma. This Buddhist thinking comes very close to explaining existential experience in a convincing perspective, and because it shares this quality with the very existential explanations of animism, which it does not contradict, the two can exist side by side, explaining the same reality by similar logic; this at least seems to be the case in Theravada societies.

One of the basic characteristics that Thai animism shares with Theravada Buddhism is the recognition of impermanence, or instability and insecurity, at least in the outside world. The animist recognizes that his life situation is surrounded by all kinds of powers that are whimsical and unreliable. As a system, animism is the accommodation with these powers in order to create a temporary order out of the threatening chaos of whimsical powers that surround the immediate and stable experience of home and community. To the animist, goodness and reliability are manifested on the inside realm of experience, within his group. The inside means safety, the outside potential danger, but by conjuring the threatening powers outside he may obtain great prizes and rewards in the world away from home. He does this by ritual and presentation, and by imposing his magic on the world outside. He does not conceive of a clear centre of stability in the outside world, but finds his stable centre clearly in his group, tribe, or community that respects its traditions as the moral way of life. His soteriology is only vaguely developed and projected into a vague ancestor heaven where all insiders will go, and that is very much a representation of life on earth. It is a little more comfortable Walhalla than the present situation, and having no pretensions of universality, he does not care about the outsiders who have their own ways to eternal bliss. To the contemporary Thai this belief is perfectly compatible with the Buddhist expectation of a next life where one hopes that things will be better.

To the animist, the centre of the world is his group, and that centre means continuity, stability, and safety. His order is close to home, the outside being chaotic and *ad hoc*, and he only bothers to subject parts of that outside to temporary order as need arises. Inside and outside remain separated, and his notions of order and disorder and the means to deal with these remain separated, too. This being a fundamental aspect of the human experience, it can be no wonder that this recognition has been elaborated into separate, institutionalized religious complexes that can coexist side by side. It is nothing other than the institutionalized expression of the complexity of experience. The point to wonder about is why other religious thinking has been seeking to overcome the basic dualities of existence by suppositions of a single god or

the principle of cosmic equilibrium. As far as life in this universe is concerned, both Buddhism and animism have developed worldviews that are much closer to and therefore more realistic *vis-à-vis* everyday experience.

In the Thai animistic mentality, original animistic expression, magic, and popular Buddhism deal essentially with the tenuous order of *saksit* and the chaotic realm of evil powers, and these religious expressions should be understood as one complex. Brahmanic expressions, including state ritual, civic religion, and *khwan* ceremonies are essentially concerned with the continuity of the group, auspiciousness within danger; they are directed toward mediation between the moral inside and the amoral outside. These latter expressions serve to insure and to maintain auspiciousness rather than the direct manipulation of power and are, apart from periodic rituals, best expressed in astrological calculation.

The cult of the order of goodness finds little direct religious expression, but is tangibly expressed in the mother-centred ideology that teaches dependency on parents, elders and teachers, or tradition, the obligations of the younger generation to recognize the *bunkhun* of the older generation, and is most strongly reinforced by the comprehension of karma, sin and guilt. It is also expressed in the rituals directed to Mae Phoosob and Mae Thoranii.

The quest for salvation is expressed in the serious following of the Buddhist Path, and is generally a preoccupation of old age; this quest turns its back to the vicissitudes of everyday life. While symbolically functional to and reinforcing the stability of the group, the Buddhist quest for merit in old age should not be compared with the popular merit-making practices for safety and protection. In these latter merit-making is expressed by giving in the hope of a rather immediate return, whereas in old age it is a quest to realize the hope for a better rebirth and liberation, the way being less to give and thereby buy oneself protection than to hold a firm belief in the relevance of the practice of morality as a refuge leading to ultimate rewards.

This recognition of various realms of experience is institutionally expressed in a similar variety of religious complexes. This recognition of a multifarious cosmos is closer to life's reality than is the reduction of everything to one integrated conception that should explain the often incompatible experiences of reality. Because of the postulate of karma this is easily accomplished, and the Thai have no difficulty in calling themselves or it all 'Buddhist', because Buddhism recognizes and explains Dhamma as the broad stream that encompasses life in all its variety⁶.

6. For a discussion of the behavioural consequences of the Thai recognition of the structure of reality, see my "Interpreting Thai behaviour: Reflections on presentation and power" (*Thai Journal of Development Administration* 17/4, 614-48 [1977]) and "Interpreting Thai behaviour: Reflections on trust, relaxation, and self" (*Journal of Social Sciences*, Chulalongkorn University, 15/1, 73-91 [1978]).

Timeliness of Thai religious representations

In the above I have argued the deep sense of realism that underlies Thai religion and its structural elaborations: they are a direct reflection of everyday experience and do not attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable contradictions that characterize life. The Thai do not ask why power often is unjust, unreliable, or whimsical because they know that power has no moral qualities. They also know that the ways in which it affects their lives are ultimately subject to karma, and more directly dependent on their ways of accommodating, manipulating, or seeking it. People who acquire power may become minor *theewadaa* or even bad spirits, and the behaviour directed to them is very much along the same lines as the behaviour directed to its supernatural projections. The expectations attached to contracts with power are fairly stable and, for better or worse, predictable. Such contracts are of a personal nature, be it with spiritual personalities or concrete worldly masters. Formerly, the little man needed a patron's protection and was even legally compelled to have one; if the patron did not live up to custom and expectations, the little man was free to change his allegiance and to seek another protector (Rabibhadana 1969).

In the olden days, the order and experience of society closely matched with the animistic concept of *saksit* power. All worldly power was thought to emanate from the king, but divided among princes and nobles who each held a share of that power. That power was of one kind, namely political, and the available quantity of it was rather constant. A powerful man held a bigger or lesser share of it, which he could enlarge by usurping from another, or which he could lose to somebody else. If a prince decided to press his claims for independence in a certain territory, the king simply lost a share of the total quantity of power; when the king subdued this rebel he reacquired it, but somehow the total quantity was limited and constant. The way in which all this was expressed in the organization of *sakdinaa* and legitimized in the *traiphuumi-phraruang* cosmology is well known.

Under the impact of modernization and its consequential social change the *traiphuum* worldview crumbled rapidly (Reynolds 1976). Another way to put it is to observe that the quantity of available power became larger and its sources diversified. Whatever its justifications in terms of merit, karma, and personal bonds between patrons and clients, the new emerging reality could not but enhance the traditional animistic concepts of amoral and immoral power. Now, in the later part of the twentieth century, the experience of power is rapidly moving outside of the realm of domesticated, amoral *saksit* power with which one could accommodate on the basis of personal contracts, and moving toward the more impersonal, unpredictable side of power that is selfseeking *per se*, such as the power of political advantage, the power of money, and the blind forces of technological expansion, materialism, and capital accumulation. The basically animistic concept of power, such as it is comprehended in the Thai worldview, can only be strengthened by these changes toward 'modernity'.

To lose one's land, to be without, was not a normal situation in the old order of experience, but at present it has become quite normal. The purchasing power of the baht erodes every day. The expectation that advanced education will lead to a respectable and sure position is contradicted by the experience of unemployment. The world of modernity is a world of increasingly rapid change filled with selfseeking, impersonal power and the experience of powerlessness for most. No wonder that the old animistic perceptions of power are strongly revitalized, not only in Thailand but worldwide, in the losing battle between the temple and the bank. In the process the amoral power of money is often felt to be immoral and non-domesticated, because it is impersonal and difficult to control; this power of money has now begun to overshadow the more personal and addressable power of politics and administration. Patron-client relationships tend to become businesslike only, and the experience of power impersonal.

As a reaction we see a strong revival of animistic expression. According to the research of Peltier, the number of magically gifted *luang pho* monks, who are famous for their protective amulets, has spectacularly increased over the past 15 to 20 years (1976). The trouble at borders and internal insurgency have increased the quantity of danger and thus the demand for amulets. *Pluk phra* ceremonial, which was relatively rare a few decades ago, is now conducted at two or three-year intervals at the major temples⁷. Certain shrines, such as the Brahma at the Erawan Hotel, enjoy a steadily increasing popularity in this time of modernity that erodes the expectations of stability. Also, among those people who do not give religious expression to their notion of power, the old perception of power as an amoral or immoral force is strengthened in Thailand's evolution from a traditional to a post-traditional society⁸. The concept of power has not changed and is strengthened by the experience of disorder and insecurity, or, in other words, Thai animistic perceptions are strengthened and validated by the experience of modernity and are very timely indeed (cf. Evers 1972:107, Mulder 1978:106, Terwiel 1977:114-5).

The experience of whimsical power that plays havoc with the older, more personal order of life, also has its consequences for the perception and experience of the order of reliability and moral goodness. To strengthen oneself against an expanding sphere of power we noted already a resurgence of animistic expression; we may also note an enhanced perception of vulnerability of moral community, increasing suspicion against outsiders, and attempts to strengthen the bonds among the members of those particularistic groups that define themselves as in-groups, be it family and relatives, classmates or cliques (*khana*, *phakphuak*); more recently we see the emergence of interest groups and trade unions. The inner strength of these groups is their bargaining power against the amoral and immoral power of the outside.

7. *Pluk phra*: to charge new amulets and Buddha images with protective *sak* power.

8. On the concept of 'post-traditional society', see *Daedalus* 52 (Winter 1973), and Mulder 1978:75-6.

The experience of contemporary life corresponds to the idea of amoral power in Thai culture that serves as a model of society; but is that idea still a desirable model for society? Do the realities of impersonal power still legitimize its use? Many Thai doubt this, and some solutions to this existential problem have been formulated over the past 50 years.

The oldest solution is the quest for the legitimation of power by constitutionalism and democracy, which can be interpreted as the hope of spreading and sharing power and of placing it under the moral control of the members of the national community. However, 45 years of discussion and experimentation have hardly made any inroad in the realities of political and economic power, and contributed little to the realization of effective control; one reason is because this very ideal of a moral system surrounding and controlling power is totally against experience and the persistent concept of power. At best one may see the attempts to establish democracy as attempts to mediate between the moral and the powerful areas of existence.

Another solution is the idea of nation as family and moral community, in which inequality and differences of status are overcome by imposing the communal village ideology on the nation as a whole, reflecting the idea that the 'inside' is just and represents a moral way of life that needs to be defended against the threats from the outside. This concept is rather popular and is, for instance, embodied in the Village Scout (*luuk sya chaaw baan*) movement and other organized expressions of nationalism. There is the danger they will overreach themselves as long as internal structural oppositions and contradictions remain unsolved.

A third solution is located in propagating the Buddhist Path as a solution for all worldly problems, the idea being that, if the Thai say that they are Buddhists, they had better be true Buddhists and organize their personal lives and society accordingly. This perspective is, of course, highly utopian and very much in contradiction with the meaningful structure of domesticated Thai existence. Moral goodness has its laws, and so has power, and each needs to be lived and dealt with on its own terms.

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