

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09958-5 - Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand

S. J. Tambiah

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

INTRODUCTION: THE PARTICULAR
AND THE GENERAL

A Thai village is not an island by itself; it is part of a wider network of social relationships and it is embedded in a civilization.

Following the method of study usually employed by anthropologists, I describe the religious practices and rituals of the people in a small-scale universe studied at first hand. But my objective in writing the book is not simply to give an ethnographic description of the exotic religious customs of a strange village in a remote corner of the world; it is to use the particular to say something general. By this I do not mean that the village in North-east Thailand which I describe is 'representative' of every other village in the country or some such atomistic statistical assertion, but that insofar as this village is embedded in a civilization and has participated in history and has shared cultural elements with other villages, the structural properties and the processes that characterize its present religious system may reveal features which are of general import. What I have in mind is nicely stated by Postan (in his *Inaugural Lecture*, 1939, p. 34) provided we substitute 'anthropological' for 'historical': 'Microscopic problems of historical research can and should be made macrocosmic—capable of reflecting worlds larger than themselves. It is in this reflected flicker of truth, the revelations of the general in the particular, that the contribution of the historical method to social science will be found.'

The procedure by which I identify and describe religion is primarily through ritual. Essentially I devote most of this book to dissecting and then relating four ritual complexes that are enacted in a Thai village. They are: rites performed by Buddhist monks and therefore labelled 'Buddhist'; *sukhwan* ritual, concerned with recalling the escaped spirit essence of persons and performed by village elders; the cult of the guardian spirits or deities of the village which has its own officiants (the *cham* and *tiam*); and rites addressed to malevolent spirits that cause individual illnesses, of which spirit possession is the most dramatic. These four complexes dominate the religious field but do not exhaust it.

The anthropologist faces certain problems of contextualization and delimitation in dealing with these ritual complexes. For example, the Buddhist rites along with the institution of monkhood and the major

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09958-5 - Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand

S. J. Tambiah

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Buddhism and the spirit cults in North-east Thailand*

religious concepts that go with them, which are observed in the village today, have a wider generality in both time and space. There is a history of Buddhism from its origins in India until the present, and there is the spatial existence of Theravada Buddhism (which primarily concerns us here) not only throughout Thailand but also in the neighbouring countries of Ceylon, Burma, Laos and Cambodia. These projections in time and space also apply to much of the other ritual complexes, though not with the same depth in time and spread in space as manifested by Buddhism. What are the implications of this immense backdrop to the anthropologist's stage?

It could be said that the requirements of my exposition are three-dimensional: to present the religion as a synchronic, ordered scheme of collective representations; then on the one side to demonstrate how the system of religious categories is woven into the institutional context and social structure of the contemporary villagers; and on the other to relate the same system to the grand Buddhist literary and historical tradition.

Let me deal with each of these aspects in turn.

It is right and proper for the anthropologist to assert that his first and foremost task is to document the religion as the present-day subjects live it and to understand it in terms of the subjects' own intellectual, moral and affective categories (and thereafter to seek to construct a scheme of interpretation which reveals the principles underlying the ideology and behaviour he has witnessed and recorded).

In order to present a synchronic picture of village religion I have in this book tried to see how the four ritual complexes are differentiated and also linked together in a *single total field*. In respect of each ritual complex—and of all four together—I try to elucidate how religious ideas and constructs are ordered, what the symbolism and message contents of the rites are, how the officiants are distinguished, and so forth. The focus is on the contrastive features of the four cults or complexes as collective representations, and in displaying these features I use four concepts: opposition, complementarity, linkage, and hierarchy.

The framework and conceptual tools for my structural analysis of ritual derive from many anthropologists (chief among whom are Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss, Leach, and Turner) and from other fields of relevance to our subject (such as linguistics and information theory). In two respects I can claim to have gone further than the previous contributions on ritual. First, I have argued that, since much ritual includes the recitation of words, we should perceive ritual as consisting of both 'word and deed'; in any case since in Thai rituals the use of sacred words is an important component, I have tried to interpret their role and the manner in which they are integrated with ritual action.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09958-5 - Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand

S. J. Tambiah

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The particular and the general*

A second deviation from the beaten path consists in the attempt to see myth and ritual as two closely related domains and to examine their dialectical relationship. Since Malinowski's 'charter theory of myth' we have had virtually no ethnographic analysis, let alone a fertile theoretical formulation, of the relation between myth and ritual. Lévi-Strauss has a marginal interest in the problem, but he has progressively become concerned with myth as an autonomous realm of thought.

The relation between a collectivity of rituals seen as a system in its own right (in terms of the arrangement of categories and symbols and officiants) and the social structure and institutional environment of the people who practise the religion is another matter. This has been in the past, and still remains, an anthropological task *par excellence*. It is the kind of special illumination that an anthropologist can provide by virtue of his approach and method of study. In order to see this particular linkage between ritual and society, it might at times be salutary for the anthropologist working in South-east Asia consciously to ignore the connections between his field data and the philosophical, doctrinal, and literary aspects of civilization, so that he can all the better understand the nexus between religious action and social context. This perspective is arrestingly conveyed by Leach's phrase 'practical religion', by which he means not theological philosophy, often greatly preoccupied with the life hereafter, but religion which is 'concerned with the life here and now', religion whose components are meaningful not only because of internal coherence but also 'because of their practical integration with the secular life of the religious congregation' (Leach 1968*b*, pp. 1–3). This mode of elucidation is the second major interest of this book.

The third dimension is the relation between religious belief and ritual action observed in the field and the corpus of Buddhist literature composed from classical times, that is, between the religious events of the present and the grand historical events of Buddhist civilization. The study of religion from this perspective is quasi-anthropological, in the sense of demanding the skills and knowledge of other disciplines (e.g. Indology and History of Religion) in addition to one's own.

Anthropologists have in recent years wrestled with this problem, especially in respect of India. One school, stemming from Redfield and his associates, formulated the question in terms of the relation and the processes of interaction between two levels or entities—between the great tradition of civilization and the little tradition of the village. This formulation and others which have replaced it—such as Higher Sanskritic Hinduism versus Lower Popular Hinduism—have been mistaken in two important respects: first, insufficient regard was paid to the fact that the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09958-5 - Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand

S. J. Tambiah

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Buddhism and the spirit cults in North-east Thailand*

great literary religious tradition is itself varied and has been both cumulative and changing; secondly, it has for some curious reason not been seen that contemporary live religion, even that observed in the village, incorporates a great deal of the literary tradition. *Brahman* priests, Buddhist monks, ritual experts and scribes in some measure deal with literary and oral knowledge transmitted from the past and which they themselves systematically transmit to their successors. And for the common people at large such texts and knowledge have a referential and legitimating function, even if they themselves have no direct access to them.

Thus in this book, wherever I have engaged in relating the present to the past, I have used two concepts to describe the connection: *continuities* and *transformations*. By continuities I mean the *persistence* of certain structures or customs from the past into the present; and by transformations I mean *systematic changes* in forms over time, both in the historical past and between a structure in the past and that currently observed in the village. A simple example is the institution of monkhood: there are certain aspects of it which have been transmitted unbroken from the classical past, and there are others that have shown systematic transformation. Or again, a myth recorded in the village may have its classical literary version (continuity); but the same myth seen in conjunction with a contemporary ritual may show a new relation (transformation) not present in the classical form.

Although one of my aims is to relate wherever helpful the religious forms of the present to the literary and historical past, I should make it clear in order to avoid misunderstanding that such relating is not systematically followed, nor done in the manner of an Indologist, philosopher or historian of religion. I do not examine the *history* of a doctrine for its own sake, or that of a myth or religious institution. This is the province of a specialist of a different kind. My primary reference point is always contemporary village religion. Some aspect of it may be viewed in relation to a classical institutional form and its changes, or may be illuminated by consulting an older literary formulation, or its meaning enlarged by a representation in classical architecture and sculpture. Thus the history of and changes in Buddhist monastic life have interested me because they illuminate monastic life in the village today; and the many facets of the serpent symbol which appears in village myth are better discerned, and an expansion of meaning accomplished, when its appearance in classical architecture is scrutinized. It is only in this manner that I relate the present to the past; the piecemeal nature of the past as it appears in this book springs from the problems dictated by the events studied in the village.

A few words now on the logic of the sequence in which chapters are

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09958-5 - Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand

S. J. Tambiah

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The particular and the general*

presented. After some thought, it occurred to me that the most effective strategy of presentation is to begin with the *duality* of village religion as a contrapuntal theme—its present intactness and its historical roots—and to suggest indirectly how the past lives in the present and the present can at the same time be seen as a transformation of the past. The opening chapters reveal the dialectical play between the present and the past.

Thus Chapter 2 introduces the village of Phraan Muan and its region as it is today, and then in the second half paints a historical backdrop, which tells us something of the grand historical events which must have affected the region in which Phraan Muan exists.

Chapters 3 and 4 inject the contrapuntal theme in a slightly different way, with Chapter 3 outlining the Buddhist cosmology as it has been presented in Buddhist literary works, and Chapter 4 dealing with the major religious categories of thought in village religion. I also introduce the point—which will be illustrated in later chapters—that although the classical cosmology may not be *verbalized* in the village it nevertheless makes its appearance in village *ritual*.

Chapters 5 and 6 are intended to be *historical* introductions to early Buddhist monasticism, and to the classical conception of a monk's way of life and its relation to the way of life of a layman. Chapter 7 provides the comparison and contrast by plunging us directly into the institution of monkhood in contemporary village life. Thereafter the subsequent chapters unfurl the many features of village religion in their variety, intricacy and colourfulness—like a long Japanese scroll.

Although most of the time I deal with one tiny spot in the backwoods of Thailand, I want it to be remembered that this spot and the whole country in which it is located exist in a wider region of South-east Asian societies which share many things in space and time. Therefore wherever a comparative point can be appropriately made to aid understanding I do so by referring to Burma, Ceylon, Cambodia or India. The value of such a wide-ranging view (combined with a meticulous attention to detail) was seen in the late seventeenth century by De la Loubère, who so perceptively wrote about Siam:

But if. . . I do yet enlarge on certain matters beyond the relish of some, I entreat them to consider that general expressions do never afford just ideas; and that this is to proceed no farther than the superficial knowledge of things. 'Tis out of desire of making the Siamese perfectly known, that I give several notices of the other kingdoms of the Indies and of China: for though vigorously taken, all this may appear foreign to my subject, yet to me it seems that the comparison of the things of neighbouring countries with each other, does greatly illustrate them. (De la Loubère 1693, p. 2.)

2

THE STAGE AND ITS SETTING

THE VILLAGE OF MUAN THE HUNTER AND ITS REGION

Baan Phraan Muan means the village of Muan the hunter. There is a myth which has wide circulation in the region where this village is located. It not only gives us some idea of the verbal play in which Thai people take pleasure and excel, but also relates a number of villages distinguished by name into a wider regional complex. The villages in the legend exist; so does the swamp. They lie in a region extending from Udorn to Nongkai on the Thailand–Laos border (see Fig. 2).

This is the story of an ox called Hoo-Saparat. A rich merchant (*seethii*) who lived at the spot which is now the swamp (*byng*), called Chuan, owned a pregnant cow. The rich man asked his servant Siang to take the cow out to graze. The cow disappeared. Siang and others tried to track it and the place where they did this was called the village of *Noon Duu* (which means ‘upland’ and also ‘to look’ (*duu*)). The cow wasn’t found there and its tracks were followed until it was found at the village of *Pakhoo* (*pa* = meet; *khoo* = ox). The ox was then taken to graze at the village of *Naam Suay* (‘beautiful water’). The herders stopped to eat and the cow disappeared again, because it wanted to find a place to calve. Siang then went to see a hunter called Muan to ask whether he had seen the cow. Muan was not able to help. Muan lived in the village that was called Baan Phraan Muan (village of Muan the hunter). The tracks of the cow were discovered again and followed; the cow was eventually found and its legs were securely bound at the village of *Ngua Khong* (*ngua* = ox; *khong* = ‘rope to bind legs’). The cow calved at this place, and Siang took the placenta to wash at the village of *Naam Kun* (*naam* = water/pond; *kun* = not clear/muddy). The cow and calf were taken back to the owner who lived in *Byng Chuan*.

There is another version of the myth which gives the central role to Muan, the founder of our village: it was he who successfully traced the lost cow of the *seethii* and received recognition for it.

The village of Phraan Muan is located in North-east Thailand between Udorn, the administrative capital of the province bearing the same name, and Nongkai, the border town on the Mekong River, which separates Laos from Thailand. It is about seventeen kilometres from Udorn, and has to be reached along a feeder road that branches from the main road linking the two towns.

The village is the last unit in a formal administrative hierarchy. Udorn

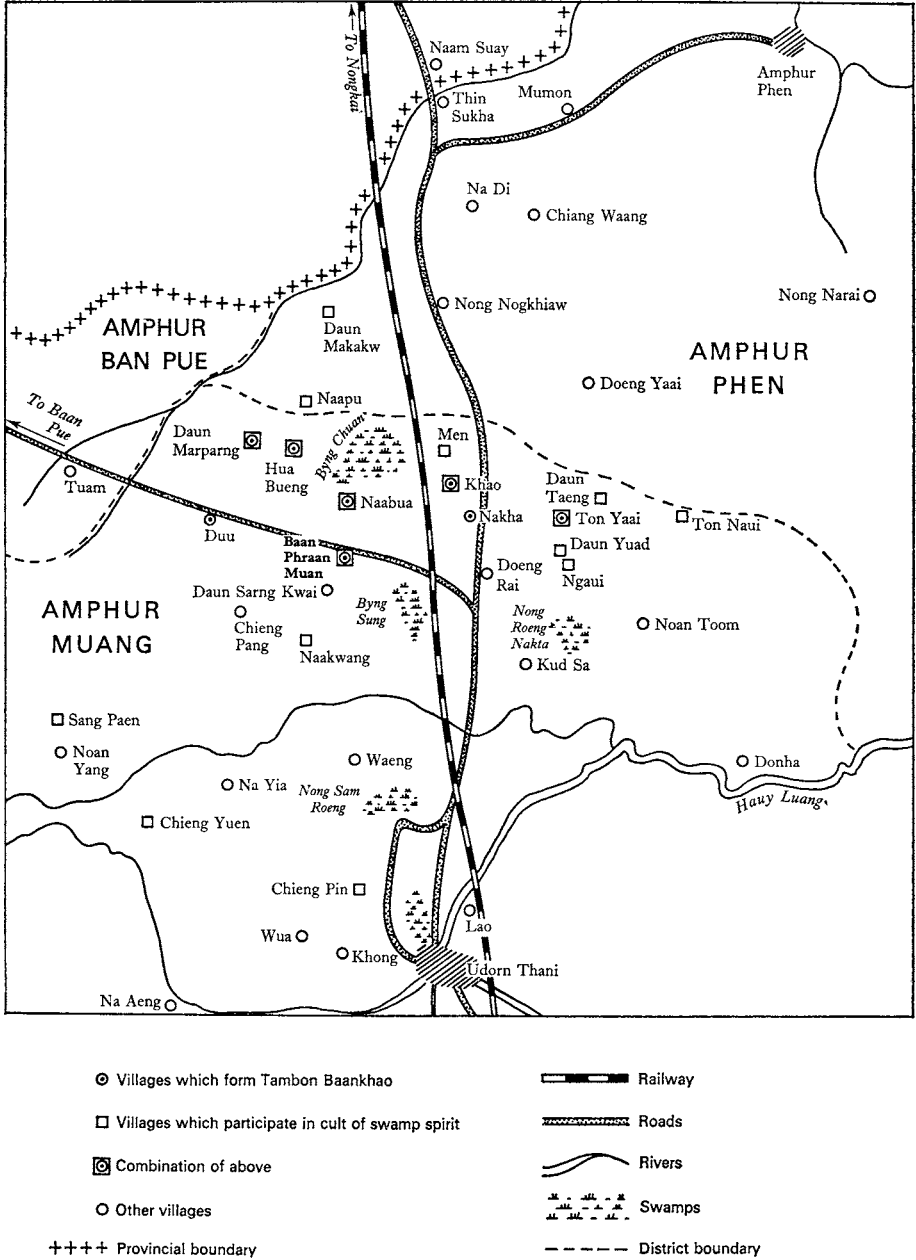


Fig. 2 Baan Phraan Muan and its region

Buddhism and the spirit cults in North-east Thailand

province has eight districts (*amphur*); Phraan Muan village is in Amphur Muang (the district in which the provincial capital of Udon is situated), and is a member of the commune (*tambon*) of Baan Khao, which in 1961/2 had a population of 8,000 persons. This *tambon* in turn is composed of the following eight 'hamlets' or 'villages'—Baan Khao, Baan Phraan Muan, Daun Marparng, Baan Hua Bueng, Baan Nakha, Baan Ton Yaai, Baan Duu and Baan Naabua (see Fig. 2). In other words, Phraan Muan village is one of eight villages which collectively form the commune (*tambon*) of Baan Khao, which in turn is part of the central district of Udon province. The *tambon* has a chief headman (*gamnan*) who is assisted by a headman (*puyaibaan*) from each of the villages (*baan*). Phraan Muan village has an elected *puyaibaan*. Both kinds of headman, who are paid by the government, are the intermediaries between the central administration (whose chief representative at the district level is the *nai amphur*) and the villagers. The administrative hierarchy is only of marginal relevance in this study of village religion, since the administrative divisions from the *tambon* upwards created by the government do not necessarily reflect the villagers' social and economic networks. Thus, Phraan Muan village has close links with some of its *tambon* members but not with others; and it has close links with other neighbouring villages of the region which are, however, not in its *tambon*.

Although quite near Udon town, the villagers of Phraan Muan have had very little contact with it. The town, with a population of about 30,000 in the early sixties, provided a striking contrast to the village, with its administrative offices manned by uniformed officials, modern schools attended by uniformed children, shops owned by thriving Chinese businessmen (and stocked with radios, TV sets, cosmetics and beauty magazines), cinemas, beauty parlours, and nightclubs for American soldiers. The village was depressing at first sight, with its congested houses built on stilts; the better ones had wooden walls and the worse ones bamboo walls. There was in 1961 one small shop in the village and one radio; and most of the adults saw their first film when the field workers showed one to them. During the rains, deep mud obstructed travel, but the eye rejoiced at the sight of sprouting green paddy; during the dry season, dust and heat kept people indoors and the brown parched countryside provided no visual relief.

North-east Thailand, like the other major regions of Thailand, concentrates on agriculture; it is also reckoned to be the poorest part of the country. Both these features require a gloss which says something general about the society we are dealing with and something specific about its north-eastern region.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09958-5 - Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand

S. J. Tambiah

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The stage and its setting*

There is an old tradition in Thailand, which, true or not, conveys a distinctive feature about that country. It is said that each free man had the right to cultivate up to twenty-five *rai* (about six acres) in order to maintain his family. The people of Thailand were in the past, and still remain, a nation of small farmers, the vast majority of whom are engaged in growing one crop—rice.

Rice is the chief crop of Central, North-east, North and South Thailand, the four main regions of the country. There is a dramatic difference in the scale on which it was grown between before 1850, when Siam, as the country was then called, had little contact with the West, and after 1850, when as a result of the Bowring Treaty, there was an explosive expansion in rice-growing ensuing from Siam's participation in world trade, the expansion of which in turn was, partly at least, related to developments in steam transport and the opening of the Suez Canal. There was a tremendous increase in the volume of rice exports, especially between the 1870s and 1930s, and one writer describes the change thus: 'This 25-fold increase—over the probable maximum volume at the time of the Bowring Treaty—which took place while the population roughly doubled itself, represents the major economic change in Thailand since 1855.' (Ingram 1955, pp. 39–40.)

This economic expansion may have stretched the social structure but certainly it did not burst it. In fact, it emphasized even more than before that the Thais had an entrenched preference for rice-growing and for living in village settlements. Furthermore, the economic expansion and prosperity, rather than changing traditional religious orientations and practices, may well have reinforced some of them, notably the belief in the ethical virtue of merit-making and the scale on which it was practised. The economic change was thus accomplished, with a change neither of technology nor of social rules and religious orientations. It was, however, achieved in an uneven fashion within Thailand. Until about 1900 it was the Central Plain of Thailand that showed the greatest expansion in rice cultivation, but from 1905 onwards the outer provinces of the North and North-east showed significant advances, especially with the construction of the railway. By 1935 the North-east was responsible for 20% of the country's total rice exports (Ingram 1955, p. 47).

But although the North-east, like most other parts of Thailand, participated in the process which broadened the peasant's economic horizons, it was—and is still—beset with its own peculiar chronic problems. Its soil is not so fertile as in the North or the Central Plain; whereas the North is greatly helped by irrigation systems, and the Central Plain by a system of canals in a flat terrain, the North-east depends entirely on monsoon

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09958-5 - Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand

S. J. Tambiah

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Buddhism and the spirit cults in North-east Thailand*

rain by and large unaided by the artifices of water-control and irrigation. Thus the North-east, while it distinguished itself by showing a marked increase in the area cultivated in the last few decades, is also the region where yields declined most sharply—a commentary on the marginal nature of the lands brought under cultivation and the inadequacy of water supply. (Yet, by some curious twist of nature in this dry area, there are some three or four swamps and ponds in the vicinity of our village which are remarkable landmarks and exemplifications of the value of water.) The data reported in the *Census of Agriculture* for 1963 (when rearranged according to the Ministry of Agriculture classification of the four major regions) show that the average holding in the North-east is 21.6 *rai*, which compares favourably with 25.9 for the Central Plain, 23.0 for the South and 8.6 for the North. But the yield in the North-east is the lowest: 169.2 kilograms per *rai*, as compared with 216 for the Central Plain, 210 for the South and 302.5 for the North, which enjoys irrigation. (Wijewardene in Silcock (ed.) 1967.)

Phraan Muan village is thus representative of its region in that it is poor. It depends on one rice crop a year, and its yields are controlled by the volume of rainfall it receives. Rain is notoriously unreliable in both timing and amount, and the hazard of crop loss due to drought is endemic. This, combined with poor soils, gives much lower rice yields than in the Bangkok Plain. During the dry season village wells and ponds dry up and villagers have to go some distance to draw muddy, slimy water. It is not to be wondered then that water should occupy villagers, not only in their economic activities but in their rituals and myths as well.

I shall proceed now to give a picture of the social structure of the village in terms of the ecological categories and principles of classification employed by the villagers themselves.

The word *baan* has many ranges of meaning. First of all it means a house; it also represents a compound cluster (*baun baan*); it also means 'hamlet' or 'village' in its widest extension (in the sense of a settlement composed of houses), and for major subdivisions of it (e.g. 'large' or 'small' hamlets).

The settlement pattern of Baan Phraan Muan is clustered, like that of other villages in the region. The nucleus is a dense settlement called *baan yaai* (big hamlet) intersected by narrow lanes. The branch dirt road that leads up to the village, and goes beyond to Tambon Baanpue, separates this settlement from the *wat* (cluster of buildings forming the Buddhist temple). Lined along the road, opened ten years previously, are houses that have overflowed from the main settlement and comprise *baan nau* (small hamlet). This settlement contains primarily young families who could not find space in their parents' compounds in *baan*