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Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah

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49

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AND THE CULT OF AMULETS

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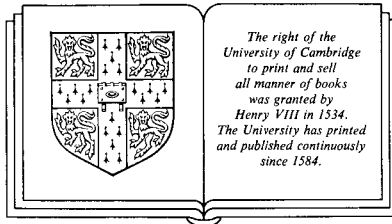
The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets

A STUDY IN CHARISMA, HAGIOGRAPHY, SECTARIANISM,
AND MILLENNIAL BUDDHISM



STANLEY JEYARAJA TAMBIAH

*Professor of Anthropology
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The wealth kings get from society
Is a transitory thing.
But the ascetics of the forest
Yield us an imperishable tithe from their austerities.

Śakuntalā

It is where the talk is of marrying, or of giving in marriage, that reference is made to such things as that. For whoever, Ambattha, are in bondage to the notions of birth or of lineage, or to the pride of social position, or of connection by marriage, they are far from the best wisdom of righteousness. It is only by having got rid of all such bondage that one can realize for himself that supreme perfection in wisdom and conduct.

Ambattha Sutta

Then the Blessed One spake, and said: ‘‘Know, Vāsettha, that (from time to time) a Tathāgata is born into the world, a fully Enlightened One, blessed and worthy, abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy, with knowledge of the world, unsurpassed as a guide to erring mortals, a teacher of gods and men, a Blessed Buddha. He, by himself, thoroughly understands, and sees, as it were, face to face this universe – the world below with all its spirits and, the worlds above, of Māra and Brāhma – and all creatures, Samanas and Brāhmans, gods and men, and he then makes his knowledge known to others. The truth doth he proclaim both in its letter and in its spirit, lovely in its origin, lovely in its progress, lovely in its continuation: the higher life doth he make known in all its purity and in all its perfectness.’’

Tevijja Sutta

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Acknowledgments

The bulk of the material on which this book is based was collected during field research conducted in Thailand in 1978–9. The book also contains information collected on previous field trips, principally in 1971 and 1974.

First and foremost, I must thank the National Science Foundation of the United States for giving me for the period 1978–81 a generous grant to carry out a research project entitled “Concepts and Manifestations of Power, Authority, and Causation in Urban Thailand.” The objectives of this research were: to investigate Thai cultural conceptions concerning “power,” “authority,” “merit,” “charisma,” and “causation”; to locate the persons who are credited with these capacities and propensities (such as monks, politicians, administrators, businessmen, physicians, healers, mediums, and athletes) and to find out how they are alleged to have acquired them; and finally to extract the underlying pattern of ideas in traditional fields of “knowledge” and “practice” in such areas as medicine, meditation, ritual healing, astrology, and statecraft and to assess how they fit in contemporary Thailand with modern (Western) ideas and practices.

A rich harvest of information, including written materials, was obtained. Although the present book makes use of only a portion of it, it has at the same time engaged me in textual studies and library research in the United States after my return from Thailand. I hope in future years to report on other aspects of the researches that have so far not been committed to writing.

I am greatly indebted to my wife, Mary Wynne, who helped me in both field and library research, and to my field assistants in Thailand, Thanin Vijayangkura, Somchai Shinatrakool, and Kosol Meekun. Thanin in particular was my indispensable and constant companion in Bangkok on our visits to monasteries, slums, bazaars, government offices, schools of traditional medicine, cult centers and shrines, meditation hermitages, and the consulting rooms of astrologers.

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Acknowledgments

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The Thai people regularly perform a rite called *waj khrū* (paying respect to one's teacher). On this occasion, I should like to acknowledge all that I owe to my first teacher in Sri Lanka, Professor Bryce Ryan, who subsequently also taught me at Cornell University. In the early fifties Professor Ryan introduced the disciplines of sociology and anthropology to the University of Ceylon and taught me (and several others) in a "deracinated" condition that the study of one's own people and traditions in the villages of Asia is a most absorbing voyage of discovery. I dedicate this book to him as my teacher, friend, and sponsor.

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In this book, Pali and Sanskrit terms are romanized according to the generally accepted system. Thai terms are romanized according to a system based on the “general system” published by the Siam Society in its *Journal* of July 1935 (Vol. 28, pt. 1). The main modifications are: the use of *au* for *o* (except for *qi*, which is written *oi*, and in certain place names, such as Nakhon for Nakhāun); the use of *ue* for *u*; and the use of the macron to indicate long vowels. Due to the exigencies of typesetting, long vowels written as digraphs have two macrons as follows: *āū*, *ūē*, *āē*, and *ōē*. Efforts have been made to keep spelling as consistent as possible, but the spelling of place and personal names does not always conform to this system due to the vagaries of the printed sources used. The spelling of personal names, of course, follows the individual’s preference wherever known.