

Panel: Magic and Buddhism in Southeast Asia: A Critical Reassessment of the Field

Chair/Convener: Dr. Justin McDaniel (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA)

Panelists:

Craig Reynolds (Australia National University), Suchitra Chongstitvatthana (Chulalongkorn University), Maria Kekki (School of Oriental and African Studies), Baas Terwiel (University of Hamburg), Justin McDaniel (University of Pennsylvania), Jovan Maud (Max Plank Institute), Bénédicte Brac de la Perriere (Centre Asie du Sud-Est (CNRS/EHESS), Paris), Phibul Choompolpaisal, (School of Oriental and African Studies), Kate Crosby (School of Oriental and African Studies), Arthid Sheravanichakul (Chulalongkorn University)

Abstracts:

1. Dr. Baas Jarend Terwiel

Title: MONKS AND MAGIC revisited

Abstract:

A group of monographs published by the Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies will be re-issued in a series of „classics“. Monks and Magic (1975) will be one of them. After dealing with the book's publication history and reprints of certain sections of the text, a short overview of various studies of Thai Buddhism is presented. Then some of the themes of the book are taken up, such as: the persistence of “magical“ Buddhism in the modern world, the difficulties Thai women face with their efforts to establish a viable group of bhikkhunis.

2. Dr. Craig Reynolds

Title: Magic in Banditry and its Policing in Thailand's Midsouth

Abstract:

Herbal baths, concoctions to be ingested, amulets, talismans, charms, tattoos, chants, curses, and spells, to say nothing of prohibitions and taboos, all figure in the daily lives of many Thai people and are generally bundled into the term *saiyasat*, roughly translated as magic. Many of these practices and objects have Buddhist and Brahmanic parallels that I will explore in this discussion not so much to define magic as to sketch a religious world. At the center of this world stands a southern Thai policeman, Khun Phantharakratchadet (1898-2006), who lent his reputation to the founding of the fabulously lucrative Jatukhamramthep amulet cult in the early 2000s. That reputation, aided and abetted by Khun Phan's belief in and use of *saiyasat* practices, was made over his long career from the late 1920s to the mid-1960s when he brought to justice bandits by capturing them, talking them over to the government's side, or killing them. I want to link *saiyasat* beliefs and practices to the high-risk activity in which Khun Phan was involved and tease out the connections these practices might have to ordinary human emotions that usually

escape the historical record such as apprehension, fear, trust, confidence and the desire for an auspicious future.

3. Suchitra CHONGSTITVATANA

Title: Magic in Thai Literary Texts: Emotional Dilemma and the Enhancement of Buddhist Teaching

Abstract:

The paper is an attempt to explore the significance of 'magic' in two Thai classical literary texts, namely *Lilit Phra Lo* and *Sepha Khun Chang Khun Phan*. The 'magic' in these two well known texts could be considered one of the most prominent elements and plays an important role in enhancing the 'message' of the text, both as literary texts and literary reflection of Thai society. Although these two texts are not from 'religious' jatakas like many other classical literary texts, there is no denying that the 'message' and the 'attitude' of the poets of both texts are unquestionably 'Buddhist'. Through the detailed analysis of these texts, it is found that, in fact, 'magic' is employed extensively in the text as a means of conveying the 'emotional dilemma' of the characters and at the same time as an enhancement of Buddhist teaching, especially on the law of karma, the poison of passion and the terror of samsara. In *Lilit Phra Lo*, the exquisite king, Phra Lo whose beauty was so enchanting and a beloved king to his people, was finally killed by his enemies because he denied to relinquish his desire for the two princess who used 'magic' to lure him to their city. Moreover, he used 'magic' as an excuse to let the law of karma leads him to his passionate death. In *Sepha Khun Chang Khun Phan*, the hero, Khun Phan with all the magic he mastered could not save the life of Wanthong, the only woman he really loved. Beside, he accepted her being executed as an unavoidable end of Wanthong his beloved with surprisingly 'serene' wisdom. The attitude and the tone of the narrator in both texts obviously lead us to understand that they are not against 'magic' but rather regard 'magic' as an acceptable form of 'human' defilement and weakness. Yet we could see that this attitude is wisely employed to enhance the Buddhist teaching in the texts and creates an emotional dilemma of the main characters which in turn strengthened the beauty of the texts as a real poetry of subtle purification of the mind.

4. Dr. Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière

Title : From weikzahood to mediumship : how to master the world in contemporary Burma.

Abstract:

In Burma, frontiers between fields of practices conventionally sharply contrasted, such as those devoted to the spirits belonging to the Thirty-seven Lords or those concerning figures more related to Buddhism such as *weikza*, seem to have blurred recently. Particularly, one can assist to the emergence of specialists drawing on both domains to create their own way of practice for new audiences of contemporary cities. In this contribution, I will examine the career of such a specialist, showing how this development comes from dynamics based on the rethorical

opposition between what is considered as truly Buddhist and what is not, an opposition concealing actual interactions between fields of practices.

5. Maria Kekki

Title: Curses, truth and the coming of Maitreya - Lanna inscriptions as objects of power

Abstract:

The Lanna inscriptions (ca. 15th-18th century) have generally been studied only for their textual and factual content, which has often been seen as being restricted to merit making and legal documentation. This paper suggests that the inscriptions also functioned as powerful objects on their own right, attested to by their physical characteristics, by the detailed descriptions of their production and erection, as well as by the curses, which were often added at the end of the inscription in verse form. As powerful and potent objects, the inscriptions furthermore worked as markers of the ontological location of individuals through being tools of *saccakiriya*, or “truth utterance”. In the act of *saccakiriya*, if a declared fact proved to be true, the wish that followed would actualize. The Lanna inscriptions were deeply concerned with the idea of being situated in an epoch of degeneration, where people constantly drifted further away from the Buddha and his teachings. Almost all of them contain a wish to be born at the time of Maitreya, the future Buddha, and in combination with the specific emphasis on recording meritorious deeds with detailed lists of individuals involved, the Lanna inscriptions can be understood as permanent physical reminders of the individuals’ act of *saccakiriya*, and thus of their unfulfilled ontological status. It was because of the potency and significance of the inscriptions as powerful ontological objects, that they had to be protected with ritual, curses and symbols.

6. Phibul Choompolpaisal

Title: Amulets and Political Buddhism in Thailand

Abstract:

Most authors in the field of Thai Buddhism write as if there were *often* two types of Buddhists in the modern history of Siamese Buddhism: “irrational”, “traditional” Buddhists vs. “rational”, “modern” ones. Since the 1970s most western writings have shown a tendency to make connection between the use of amulets and the “irrational”, “traditional” and superstitious forms of Buddhism. As presented in most studies, amulets are seen as emotionally appealing to many “irrational” traditional Buddhists who are mainly concerned with worldly matters. My recent work on modern Siamese political Buddhism has demonstrated that by considering the use of amulets to be “irrational”, most authors have ignored the “rational” modern Buddhists’ complex emotions that are tied to a magical practice. More importantly, such consideration reflects that most authors have yet to be aware of the socio-political functions of amulets, the political leaders’ use of amulets for political ends, and the relationship between modern political Buddhism and the production and promotion of amulets. This paper will explore the religious and socio-political functions of amulets through the case study of the mass production of amulets

during the reigns of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn from the mid nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. I pay particular attention to a study of the mass production of a hundred of *phra rian* (“coin-shaped”) amulets during this period. In this paper, I re-assess the religious and socio-political functions of amulets on two levels. On one level, I demonstrate that not only “irrational” traditional but also “rational” modern Buddhists are emotionally tied to the magical practice of amulets. On another level, I demonstrate that since the politics of Buddhist leaders has shaped the production and promotion of amulets, such politics has defined and re-defined what it is meant to be “rational”, “irrational”, “traditional” and “modern”.

Magic and Buddhism (euroseas 2010)

7. Kate Crosby, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University

Title: Yogavacara and Magic in Theravada Buddhism

Abstract:

This paper examines the issues of labelling practices and knowledge systems as ‘magical’ vis-a-vis ‘scientific’ in relation to the tantric-like *yogavacara* practices of non-reform Theravada. In many 20th-century studies of Theravada we find various binary oppositions that are beginning to be challenged in recent scholarship. Contrasts are drawn between elite *virtuosi* of religion (among monks) and the superstitious masses; between the learning of monks and the assumed inferior understanding of lay people; and between rational/reformed Theravada and irrational/superstitious/traditional Theravada. The contrast between literary erudition, based on the Pali canonical and commentarial traditions, and ‘magic’, somatic practices forms part of the formulation of these binaries. In recent work on Shan Theravada literary traditions, Crosby and Khur-yearn (*Contemporary Buddhism* May 2010) observed that expertise in the highly sophisticated, *lik luong* genre of Shan literature – which draws extensively on Pali canonical, commentarial and *abhidhamma* texts across the centuries – is arrived at through a combination of hard study and somatic empowerments, involving physical internalisation of learning and its protection through tattooing. Progress as a Shan scholar thus entails two aspects of Buddhism described as opposites on the rational-irrational spectrum. In Shan Buddhism the most highly regarded scholars are also often sought out as the most highly regarded ‘magicians’ or traditional healers. They perform traditional empowerments, including tattooing, as well as astrology and healing. Since, thanks to relative independence and isolation as well as active resistance, Shan Buddhism did not fully succumb to the centralising reforms of the 18th-20th centuries that influence our understanding of Sri Lankan, Thai and Burmese Buddhism, we speculated that the marginalisation of traditional somatic practices in more centralised forms of Buddhism parallels the general capitulation of local technologies in such areas as medical and military science in favour of both the perceived and the actually more effective (we might say, ‘powerful’) Western know-how in these areas. The tantric-like practices of non-reform Theravada, which I have elsewhere termed the ‘*yogavacara*’ tradition, is another form of Theravada that appears to treat somatic, cognitive and soteriological knowledge as parts of an integrated process of wisdom and power acquisition. The soteriological and apotropaic forms of Theravada that relate to *yogavacara* entail the internalisation or physical incorporation of Buddha/Dhamma qualities that otherwise appear to be quite orthodox in *abhidhamma* terms. *Yogavacara* continued to receive court sponsorship in the 18th-19th centuries, yet appears to have been marginalised during the 19th

century, partly – I speculate - through this same overarching trend for Western physical culture to be hegemonic. Unattested in the Pali canon, *yogavacara* then became particularly vulnerable during the reforms of Sri Lanka, Thai and, later, Cambodian Buddhism. In this paper I shall explore the extent to which the non-canonical elements of *yogavacara* may be seen as reflecting technologies of directed transformation observed in pre-19th century pan-Asian medical and mathematical models. I shall look at possible parallels in ayurvedic obstetrics and combinatorics. I then suggest that to regard somatic and intellectual/soteriological mastery of knowledge as opposites on the ‘rational’-‘irrational’ axis reflects very specific colonial (or Orientalist) attitudes of the 19th-20th centuries. Indeed for knowledge to be only intellectual and not somatic surely undermines the possibility of a viable soteriology. To what extent have we, in a modern knowledge system, identified pre-existing/competing knowledge-systems as ‘magic’ as part of a power statement ? Does our picture of traditional/reform Theravada make better sense if we rather see the technologies of transformation that constitute Buddhism as developing in tandem with other technologies? Does *yogavacara* reflect scientific developments undreamt of in the canonical period and unrecognised in the modern ? Does this explain its apparent similarities to the types of tantra preserved in Himalayan Buddhism ? Is ‘magic’ a label applied to a science that the observer cannot recognise or acknowledge ?

8. Justin McDaniel

Title: Thai Buddhist Magic and the Creation of the Ideal Monk

Abstract:

Son of a poor Lao girl and a Buddhist king in the eighteenth century, Somdet To became to be seen as a master magician, amulet maker, and exorcist, as well as defender of the Thailand against French, British, Japanese, and Malay Muslim attack. Today his following includes radio stations disc jockeys, prime ministers, royals, taxi drivers, and generals. He is lauded for promoting the values of abundance, security, motherhood, and national heritage over “standard” Theravada values like selflessness and non-attachment. Furthermore, he is praised for being a master of Lao vernacular incantations and local Pali magical formulae instead of a master of the translocal and supposedly more prestigious Pali canon. This paper explores why a monk lauded for his magical powers is one of the most famous monks in Thai history. By looking closely at the life of Somdet To, this paper questions one of the most common binaries in Buddhism is “worldly/non-worldly (or mundane/supramundane).” In its scholarly usage, *lokiya* practices are said to have worldly objectives such as wealth and beauty. *Lokottara* practices are focused on achieving enlightenment. Scholars have all described good monks as concentrating on *lokottara* objectives versus *lokiya* ones. Somdet To, who despite “worldly” practices, is considered an enlightened being and national hero. Pan-Theravada notions of prestige, virtue, and authority, need to be rethought in light of local magical traditions. If we study the lives of local saints, we see that their work creates local histories and values. This study is based on never before translated palm-leaf and mulberry paper manuscript evidence of Somdet To’s own magical formulae in Pali and Thai, over fifteen different local hagiographic texts, and ethnographic participant-observation and photo-auto-elicitation field research among Somdet To’s followers in modern Thailand.

Magic and morality of a southern Thai Buddhist saint

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Abstract

In Thailand the pervasive intertwining of “magical” practices with institutional Theravada Buddhism is often interpreted by orthodox Buddhists as the product of ignorance and contributing to religious hybridisation and degeneration. Moreover, magical practices are said to draw Buddhism into the supposedly amoral domains of political struggle and market commoditisation, thereby further endangering the purity and integrity of the religion.

This paper seeks to question these assumptions by focusing on southern Thailand’s most prominent Buddhist saint, Luang Phor Thuat. As a semi-mythical saint said to have lived centuries ago, this monk is primarily known in the present by means of various “avatars”: through the visions of monks and spirit mediums, and through the miraculous acts associated with amulets made in his likeness. His presence in contemporary Thailand is therefore replete with magical elements. Not surprisingly, Luang Phor Thuat’s power is often associated with state power, especially the military, and commercial enterprises. However, far from being an amoral figure, Luang Phor Thuat represents a figure of care and moral guardianship, especially for southerners, and as such engenders deep emotion in those who have faith in him.

This paper provides an ethnographically based depiction of Luang Phor Thuat’s present importance in Southern Thailand, and in particular the manner in which he embodies both the prestige of Buddhist institutions and gives vitality to a broader range of magical practices. Instead of seeing magical practices, such as the production of amulets or tattoos said to be invested with Luang Phor Thuat’s sacred power, as derivative of the prestige of the Buddhism, I want to show the manner in which such magic is constitutive of his status as a Buddhist saint, and thereby contributes to the status of the institution of Buddhism in southern Thailand.

10.

From a Jātaka Character to an Amulet: the Cult of Jujaka Worship in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the cult of Jujaka worship in modern Thai Society. Jujaka is the antagonist in the Vessantara Jātaka or Mahāchāt (the Great Birth) which is regarded as the most important jātaka in Thai Buddhist tradition, asserting the discourse of the Perfection of Generosity (Dānapāramī) to people. Jujaka plays a very significant role as an ‘evil’ recipient who asks the Bodhisattva Vessantara to give his beloved children. Jujaka seems to be the most ‘lively’ character of the Vessantara Jātaka. His evil character is apparently emphasized in every version of Thai vernacular Vessantara Jātaka texts. However, in the Mahāchāt ceremony or The Mahāchāt, Jujaka becomes more like a ‘joker’ as his evil role is represented with a sense of humour. The role of Jujaka as a joker is rather clear in the modern Mahāchāt performance, or so-called ‘Mahāchāt Song Khruang’. Jujaka has been associated with wealth for a long time. It is believed that the benefit of giving offerings to the Jujaka Chapter or ‘Kan Chūchok’ is wealth and prosperity because Jujaka is the greatest beggar; he becomes rich only by begging and eventually can ask for the greatest gift, children, from the Bodhisattva Vessantara. The role of Jujaka as a rich and great beggar inspires many monks who are skilful in magic to invent Jujaka amulets and Jujaka spells for those who wish for wealth. In 2010, the cult of Jujaka worship is even more popular as it is mixed with the Chinese belief of ‘Pee Chong’ – that the year of Tiger (2010) has a negative influence on those who are born in the years of Monkey, of Snake, of Pig, and of Tiger themselves. Those who are born in these four particular years are encouraged to worship Jujaka to avoid difficulties and ensure their wealth. The cult of Jujaka worship, therefore, demonstrates the creativity of Thai monks who transform the greatest antagonist in jātaka into the god of wealth; the integration of Thai Buddhist and Chinese beliefs; the shift of the Buddhist ideology asserted in the Vessantara Jātaka from ‘giving’ to ‘begging’; and the feeling of insecurity of Thai people in the modern world of Capitalism and Consumerism.