

Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand by S. J. Tambiah, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970, xii+388 pp.

He who reads about Buddhist doctrine and is impressed with its highly rationalistic orientation must be puzzled with the statistics which show that this intellectual religion is held to by 93.4 per cent of the Thai populace today, as well as a majority of the Burmese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Singhalese people. As is widely known, it has long died out in its birthplace, India, because of its elitism. Why, then, has it been able to survive, or rather prosper, among the Southeast Asian peasants who should not be much more sophisticated than Indian villagers? No satisfactory answer has ever been given by traditional Buddhologists, who, in spite of their celebrated achievements in Pali studies, pay little attention to the live form of the religion in the contemporary Theravada countries. Dr. Tambiah should be counted among the first to attempt and succeed, among other things, in elucidating the structure of the longevity of Buddhist monasticism.

The monograph under review is the partial outcome of three years of field research in Thai villages undertaken by the Cambridge social anthropologist in the Central Plain, in the North, and in the North-east during his service as a UNESCO expert in Thailand from 1960 through 1963. Based upon the materials collected firsthand at Baan Phraan Muan in the north-eastern province of Udorn Thani, he presents here a beautiful exposition of Buddhism as a "practical religion" which is "a cult for the living, not a theology for the dead and dying" (Leach, 1968).

Instead of prefacing the whole discussion with rudiments of Buddhist doctrine in a conventional fashion, the author uniquely begins with a presentation of a "cosmology" which defines primary village concepts. Out of six different forms of existence through which all human beings may at one time or other pass, only in human existence is here provided an opportunity for betterment of one's *karma* through the act of "*tham bun*" or merit-making. Religious activities of village Buddhists, therefore, center on merit-making. According to an extremely interesting table entitled "ranking of religious acts by seventy-nine family heads" (p. 147), "financing the building or repairing of temple-buildings," "becoming a monk oneself or having a son become a monk," and "giving gifts to monks at various occasions" are regarded as the most plausible acts of "*tham bun*," whereas such a Buddhist way of life as "strict observance of the five precepts" is ranked lowest by the villagers. Let us note here that these highly recommended methods of merit-making are all oriented toward the sustenance of the reclusive Sangha organization. Here we see a situation in which the villagers' pursuit of happiness in a future rebirth as well as in this life is aptly matched with the need on the part of the Buddhist monasteries to continue to exist without losing their supermundane character.

The author's approach to religion is through ritual. He first dissects four ritual complexes from the religious "hotchpotch" of villagers, namely, the rites performed by Buddhist monks; the *sukhwan* ritual; the cult of the guardian spirits, and the rites of malevolent spirits. Then he tries to depict a synchronic structuralist picture of popular religion through an analysis of the distinctive and contrastive features of these ritual complexes. Over three decades ago, a Thai specialist wrote rather impressionistically that many Thai Buddhists patronized the Brahman ceremonies on the one hand, and tried to protect themselves from the spirits by approved methods on the other, "without any sense of inconsistency" (Landon, 1939). No further elaboration was attempted,

however. Dr. Tambiah shows us now in scientific terms how these incompatible belief systems exist side by side, being closely linked together in a single total field. In Chapter 19 which highlights the monograph, the author ambitiously essays a synchronic outline of the total religious field in a diagrammatic mode of representation.

One point might be noted in connection with his exposition of monkhood as being a rite of passage. In the village of Phraan Muan, it is observed that monkhood does not normally imply professionalism or lifelong vocation and the continuity of monastic tradition is maintained by a small core of professionals or semi-professionals who remain in robes or some years. This is confirmed by the fact that 106 out of 182 household heads have experienced ascetic life in their youth. Here the author finds the reciprocal relations between the parental generation of elders (*phun thaw*) who support young monks, and their successors (*lunglaan*) who, out of filial piety, enter the Sangha to confer merit on their parents. This argument is undoubtedly relevant "at the village level" in the north-east. But when we turn to the national level, we see, especially in the more urbanized Central Plain, the existence of aged monks who wear yellow robes in order to obtain spiritual tranquility at the close of their secular lives. (Ishii & Tsubouchi, 1970) There the relation between monk and layman should become less simple or clear-cut than in the case treated here.

The book carries a stimulating discussion of the problem confronting every anthropologist who deals with the higher religions: the relation of grand literary religion to village religion. Criticizing the idea of two levels in religion—the higher Literary and the lower Popular—and the attempt to uncover their links as "static" and "profoundly a-historical," Dr. Tambiah proposes a new type of distinction, namely, "historical religion" and "contemporary religion." By the former he means "not only the range of religious texts written in the past, but also the changes in the institutional form of Buddhism over the ages." (p. 374) The latter simply means "the religion as it is practised today and should include those texts written in the past that are integral parts of the on-going religion." (p. 374) He must, first of all, be praised for treating these two not as exclusive levels as was mistakenly done by former anthropologists. He then proceeds to give us a new perspective in linking these two religions: "continuities" and "transformation." An example of the latter is the process by which the "personal salvation quest without obligations to society" of early Buddhism has changed into "one in which the laity have been allowed to cultivate the Sangha as a 'field of merit'," with "world renunciation and world affirmation conjoining in institutionalized Buddhism." (p. 375)

The book contains several other refreshing viewpoints of the author. The reader will be highly stimulated by his penetrating analysis of the role of the sacred words (p. 195ff.) and of myth and rite (p. 304ff.). This is not only a most welcoming addition to Thai studies but another valuable example of methodology in the study of "practical" religions. (Yoneo Ishii)

The Editor,
The Developing Economies

July 5, 1971

I should like to acknowledge the debt I owe to Mr. T. Byres and Dr. K. R. Walker of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, for some of the material and method of analysis used in my article 'Mobilisation of the Agricultural Surplus in China for Rapid Economic Development, 1952-57,' which appeared in March 1970. This was obtained from their course on the comparative development of India and China which I attended as part of the M.S. of London University. I must apologise for failure to give due acknowledgement at the time of publication.

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