



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

Researchers struggle in their attempts to explain and interpret the complex integration of Buddhist, animistic and Brahminic elements found in the religious beliefs and practices of the Thai people. Many hold the view of M.A. Wright and Phya Anuman Rajadhon who maintain that through the course of history these beliefs systems have become so intermingled that any attempt to isolate a particular view for examination exclusive of the others, would be futile. (Wright 1968) (Rajadhon 1968) These scholars find it impossible to draw any conclusive lines explaining where Buddhism ends and the religion of a different type begins. Others such as C. Velder and J. Bunnag assert that clear distinctions between Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements can be distinctly drawn. (Velder 1963) (Bunnag 1973). They see these Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements as complimentary religious systems that fulfill distinctive functions in society.

B.J. Terwiel suggests two fundamentally different approaches to Thai Buddhism can be found even within the

religious system itself. (Terwiel 1976) His study indicates that among lower income earners with little schooling there tends to be a syncretic approach where all Buddhist concepts and beliefs are incorporated within an animistic worldview. Higher income earners, however, typically with a more advanced level of education, were able to distinguish and separate the teachings of Buddha from the animist elements practiced. They considered the Buddhist elements superior to the beliefs and practice of animism. Another study done in 1984 by Philip Hughes, concluded that older, less educated Thais tended to adhere more closely to strict Buddhist practice whereas the younger, more educated urban Thai turned much more frequently to the realm of the spirits. (Hughes 1984)

Thai Buddhism has never been a static system of beliefs. This perhaps helps to explain the extremely strong and lengthy period of influence Buddhism has had throughout Thai history. Religious practices and beliefs constantly adapted to fit the particular needs of each society and period of time through the years.

At no time, however, has the face of Thai Buddhism changed as rapidly as during the past two decades. The rapid process of modernization that has occurred in Thailand during this time has served to further complicate the already complex dynamic blend of Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements.

In 1950 Thailand's per capita income was less than \$100. The country was classified as an "underdeveloped" and "poor" nation. By 1986, however, the per capita income grew to over \$800 causing the World Bank to classify Thailand as a "middle-income" nation. (Muscat 1990) During 1986 and 1987 Thailand's economy grew over 18%, the strongest growth rate in such a short time of any country in the history of the world. (Pakapaswiwat 1992). Now, a middle class with strong materialistic ambitions has emerged, made up of educated professionals, small business owners and civil servants.

Thailand's march toward industrialization has also caused a significant migration from the villages to the city. The lure of economic opportunity and a heavy demand for labor resulted in an exodus from the rural rice fields to factories in Bangkok.\* These new arrivals to the city brought with them the various religious beliefs and practices of their own particular areas and adapted them to fit the urban scene.

These changes brought on by modernization have resulted in a religious environment vastly different than what was found in Bangkok merely a few decades ago. While change is not new to Thai Buddhism, the rapid

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\* Thienchay Kiranandana & Suanee Surasiengsunk outline the impact such migration has had on the city of Bangkok in their book Economic Consequences of Urbanization in Thailand 1987 - 2001.

nature in which change is currently taking place has been the source of concern by national leaders.

Some scholars argue that the course of modernization, accompanied by urbanization, social mobility, secular education and industrialization, will ultimately lead to a weakening of religion, magic and superstition.\* While this appears to be an accurate observation if referring to the role of traditional Buddhism in Thailand, it is not true concerning the place of supernatural expression and beliefs in contemporary Thai Buddhism.

Thai social scholar, Sulak Sivaraksa voiced his observations on the changes that have taken place in traditional Buddhism as a result of the rapid modernization in Thailand the past few decades:

The present Siam is no longer what it was. It has become earthly Thailand. When I was young, Bangkok was a conglomeration of villages, now it has become a big city. Slums have begun to spread in the last 30 years. Buddhism seems to have lost its way and its strength. It does not know how to deal with the emerging complex industrial society. (Sivaraksa 1990)

Religious leaders have been actively organizing reform movements to counteract Buddhism's weakening role

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\* For example, W.W. Rostow attempts to prove that in the transitional stage of development modernization results in a reduction to the role of religion in a society. W.W. Rostow, Politics and the Stages of Growth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

in society.\* These movements aim to renew the role of Buddhism by making it more relevant and practical for everyday life.

Interestingly, however, while modernization has brought about a weakening of traditional Buddhism in Thailand it seems to have enhanced the role of the supernatural. Currently there is a high level interest given to the magico-animistic elements of Thai Buddhism. This can be seen in the increased role spirit houses, the "renting" of amulets and the employment of fortune tellers plays in the lives of contemporary Bangkok citizens.

## 1.2 OBJECTIVE

This study will attempt to examine the relationship of these ever changing elements of Thai Buddhism by focusing on the current beliefs and practices of Bangkok Thais concerning spirit houses. Explanations will be sought to explain the current phenomena. It is hoped that observations and conclusions gained from this study will be useful in helping to better understand the current religious environment existing in Bangkok today as it undergoes dramatic and rapid changes.

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\* See Suwanna Satha-Anand, "Religious Movements in Contemporary Thailand," Asian Survey Vol. XXX No. 4 (April 1990), pp. 395 - 408.

หอสมุดกลาง สถาบันวิจัยสังคม  
ภาควิชาสังคมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัย

### 1.3 HYPOTHESIS

In this study, research on the beliefs and expression of spirit house worship by contemporary Bangkok residents is carried out in an attempt to determine whether or not changes are taking place and if so, suggest possible causes. It is this researcher's hypothesis that spirit house worship in Bangkok has changed significantly since World War II and that this is a result of the rapid modernization that has taken place in Thailand during that time.

### 1.4 METHOD OF STUDY

This study was carried out in three distinct phases beginning with general research concerning the topics involved. Books and articles were researched for information concerning spirit houses in historical as well as present day situations. Helpful information was found at The National Library in Bangkok as well as libraries at Chulalongkorn University, The Siam Society, Wat "Phraam" and Abilene Christian University. In addition, knowledgeable authorities were consulted for their assistance in specific areas of expertise. His

Venerable Banyan Nanda Bhikkhu of Wat Cholbrataan in Nonthaburi was interviewed for information concerning the conservative, orthodox Buddhist reaction to supernatural influences currently impacting in society. His Venerable Phra Cru Wamthepmune at Wat "Phraam" was interviewed for information concerning Brahmin beliefs and rituals in Thailand especially in relation to the Phra Phrom shrine. Lastly, two active ritual "experts" were consulted to provide information on the current process of erecting spirit houses and the function these shrines have in Thai society.

The second phase of this study was the collection of data from 893 residents of Bangkok who answered questions pertaining to spirit houses at their place of residence and beliefs concerning the various popular spirit shrines currently revered. The participants contributing data in this project were found in various places around the city such as shopping malls, hospitals, neighborhoods and college campuses.

The third phase consisted of compiling the data. The data was then analyzed in an attempt to find trends and draw conclusions.

### 1.5 LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

This study is bound by certain limitations which must be properly recognized. First, and most obvious is the challenge of trying to pin-point concrete conclusions concerning a topic that is constantly changing. Since the expression of supernatural beliefs and dependence is based on individual perceptions, feelings and personal experiences, ideas vary greatly and can change as quickly as circumstances change. Ritual consultants speak of "opening the windows to the spiritual world" and conversing with the various supernatural beings as if talking with their neighbor. People place heavy confidence in feelings. Subjective ideas and personal feelings are used to justify allegiance to certain shins as if they were indisputable fact. In this sense, everyone is an expert because what they perceive as true is, in fact, true to them. For this reason, tightly wrapped conclusions are very difficult to reach.

In addition, non-scholarly books concerning spirit houses are abundant. Often privately printed and distributed, these popular works confuse the subject by offering misinformation as scholarly fact.

Another shortcoming of this study is the limited number of people from which data was taken. Expecting



893 respondents to be representative of a metropolis like Bangkok is quite bold. None-the-less, care was taken to search for a wide cross-section of people in an attempt to gain as close to accurate picture as possible.

## 1.6 PURPOSE

Spirit houses are one of the most unique features of the Thai landscape. Up until recently, the shrine structures were simple and handmade of wood. They were usually found adjacent to an equally simple wooden house bordering a rice field or "klong." The spirit houses of yesteryear blended in nicely with the natural environment.

In modern Bangkok, however, the scene has changed. The high cost of land and crowded urban environment causes contemporary spirit houses to often stand on rooftops and compete for space with satellite dishes. No longer simple wooden structures, today's versions are store-bought, brightly colored, ornate and sometimes even gaudy creations. Many recently constructed office buildings now have ultra-modern spirit houses constructed of the same marble and reflective glass materials. Also, shrines to Hindu deities, Brahma, Vishnu, Indra and Shiva have become quite popular especially at large department stores.

The changes that have recently taken place in spirit houses in Bangkok deserve attention and study. Hopefully this study entitled, "Spirit House Worship in Bangkok's Modern Context," will provide additional insight to the current situation and be a catalyst for further research on this topic.