



INFLUENCE OF BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN THAI SOCIETY ON BELIEF IN ANCESTRAL SPIRITS

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Abstract

When Buddhism came to Thailand, it caused a great change in traditional beliefs. The Buddhist Philosophy of Buddhism merges with the traditional Thai belief which is the mysterious belief. Especially, the belief in the Ancestral Spirits which is an important belief in the past. Buddhist Philosophy has transformed Thai society into a society of making merit in order to go to heaven and escape from hell after passing away from human life. Ancestral Spirits and mystical beliefs also benefit from Buddhist Philosophy in the origin and emergence of Ancestral Spirits and mystical beliefs. And another belief that has been greatly influenced by Buddhism is the belief in gratitude because it also conforms to the principles of Buddhism. However, Thai people do not fully understand Buddhist Philosophy. Therefore, all beliefs are so intertwined that they cannot be separated from each other.

Keywords: Buddhist Philosophy, Belief in Thai Society, Ancestral Spirits

Introduction

Traditional beliefs of Thai people are characterized as Primitive Religion and Animism. This belief has evolved into supernatural beings, Ancestral Spirits and Ghost (Primitive Religion and Animism) mixed with beliefs of Brahmanism and Buddhism. Although Animism and Brahmanism had great influence in the past, when Buddhism came to Thailand, the traditional beliefs were greatly changed. Until now, Buddhist Philosophy derived from the teachings of Buddhism has influenced Thai society in terms of government, education, belief, arts, and even participation in the development of Thailand.

Traditional beliefs are characterized by the belief in Supernaturalism beliefs and especially Ancestral Spirits. The Ancestral Spirits also act to supervise the behavior of their descendants to be in a moral manner, preventing them from violating certain rules.¹ In addition, it also inspires happiness and prosperity to the descendants who are properly respected. This supernatural belief system is presumed to have its roots in the civilizations of southern China and

¹Komkrit Uitekkeng, *India-Siam Ghost Brahmanism Buddhism* (Bangkok: Matichon Public company Limited, 2017), pp 172-173.

could fit in well with the Brahmanism-Buddhism influence that spread from India through the merchants who traded in Southeast Asia.²When Buddhism came in, it made Buddhist Philosophy blend into a unique belief. Therefore, the researcher would like to study the influence of Buddhist philosophy in Thai society on beliefs in Ancestral Spirits. Then, analyzing how Buddhist Philosophy has influenced Ancestral Spirits beliefs. And how were Ancestral Spirits affected after the entry of Buddhist Philosophy into Thailand?

The Objectives of the Study

To analyze the influence of Buddhist philosophy in Thai society on beliefs in Ancestral Spirits

Methodology

The researcher studied the topic “Influence of Buddhist philosophy in Thai society on beliefs in Ancestral Spirits”. This research is qualitative research that studies corpus-based, it investigates a selected list of books, articles, and researches about social Thailand. This metaphorical study will focus on the influence of Buddhist philosophy in Thai society on beliefs in Ancestral Spirits, starting from the background of belief in the Southeast which has blended with Buddhist Philosophy until Thai beliefs become an identity.

Background of belief in Thailand

Thailand is a country in Southeast Asia, an Asian region. As a cultural identity, Thai beliefs have been blended with cultures acquired from India and China. But this was before Chinese and Indian culture arrived. People had a traditional belief, that is, Primitive Religion, which was characterized by Animism. People in Southeast Asia used to believe in ghosts, angels, and gods such as Ancestral spirits, guardian deities, and dryad.³Human beliefs arise from a feeling of insecurity from supernatural powers when natural events endanger human life and property. When human beings can't find reasons to explain, they have the idea that there must be something to make it happen. And, that thing must have supernatural powers that cannot tell what supernatural powers are. Therefore, there is an imagination based on the feeling that something with supernatural powers.⁴ Traditional beliefs in various areas in Southeast Asia can be found in the form of rituals, beliefs, and legends. For example, the original tribes worshipped the spirits: father spirit, mother spirit, grandmother spirit and grandfather spirit and transformed into House Spirit, guardian deity, Phee Fah (celestial spirit) and Thaēn (Great Spirit), which was later changed to a Brahmin and Buddhist belief.⁵ Spirit and ghosts evolved into a belief in Buddhism

²Srisakara Vallibhotama, *Buddhism and Beliefs in Thai Society* (Bangkok: Lek-Prapai Viriyaphan foundation, 2017), pp 43-45.

³Thaweewat Puntarigawiwat, “Buddhism and Political Society in Southeast Asia,” in *My Dear Southeast Asia*, ed. Suchen Kanparit and Sithaleardphaiboonsiri (Bangkok: Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, 2010), p 284.

⁴Danai Chaiyotha, *Religious cults and belief systems with local traditions* (Bangkok: Odeon Store, 1995), pp 68-69.

⁵Songkhun Chantajon, *Luang Prabang Province Lao People's Democratic Republic: Economy, Society, Culture* (Mahasarakham: The Research institute of Northeastern Art and Culture, Mahasarakham university, 2008), p 15.

because there has been a long evolution in belief. In the beginning, in Southeast Asia there is a basis of belief in Ancestral spirits.

Beliefs in Ancestral spirits evolved from beliefs about Supernaturalism. It is believed that some spirits or ghosts reside in various places. For example, in some tribal households, there is a Spirit pillar and Spirit altar of the House Spirit to protect the household while the people of the community or village have a shrine to reside the House Spirit. For example, in some houses, there is a Spirit altar of House Spirits to protect those in the household and those in the community. Villagers and people in the community built shrines to reside in House Spirit, creating a belief in the House Spirit, mostly Ancestral spirits that were taken care of by their deceased grandparents. This belief is common among people in Southeast Asia. Thai people believe that when their ancestors have passed away, their spirits will remain in their homes to protect their descendants. Therefore, the image of Ancestral spirits towards most Thai people is a good spirit. Who protects, takes care of their children and inspires them according to what their children desire. And, children will have to offer these spirits regularly. This is a concept inherited from the past to inspire fertility from supernatural power. The inheritance of Ancestral Spirits is passed down through the eldest of the female side.⁶ Therefore, women in the past were of higher status or equivalent to men.

These spirits communicate with people through female shamans. Everyone within a community or locality is naturally subject to the ritual authority of a female shaman, a belief system associated with the Primitive Religion.⁷ Spirit Mediumship is a religious phenomenon that has been around for a long time. This is because people in Southeast Asia practiced Animism and Primitive Religion long before Indian religions like Buddhism and Brahmin-Hinduism came along.⁸ The Spirit Mediumship is a ritual part of Animism and Primitive Religion which has multiple meanings and functions. Most of the spirits in the Spirit Mediumship Ritual are Ancestral spirits, who are either real ancestors by blood or ancestors who are mythical figures or local gods.

Belief in Ancestral spirits is not only the ancestors in the family but also the teachers. A teacher who has taught and educated his disciples. One important ritual for Thai people is the Wai Khru ceremony. Muay Thai, Thai music, or doing anything that has the ceremony, there will always practice the Wai Khru or a message to the ancestors or teachers. Wai Khru is a ritual to pay respects to living and deceased teachers who taught and inherited the profession. The expression of traditional Thai people towards Ancestral spirits is an expression of gratitude. This gratitude has both their ancestors by blood, which indicates family ties. It is a reminder of the kindness that grandparents and parents have raised until they grow up. And the expression of

⁶Yuttaphan Taechakeaw, *“Rituals and Lam Phi Fa Belief System in Northeastern Thailand”* (Master of Education, M.Ed. Nonformal Education, Graduate School, Chiang Mai University, 1997), p 135.

⁷Phrakhrubaideeka Hassadee Praking, Asst. prof. Dr., “The Belief of way of Buddhists in Thai society,” *Journal of MCU. Loei Review* 1(2), (May – August, 2020): p 57.

⁸Komkrit Uitekkeng, *India-Siam Ghost Brahmanism Buddhism* (Bangkok: Matichon Public company Limited, 2017), pp 172.

gratitude was also shown to the benefactor teacher. The teacher who gave the knowledge to earn a living and support the family.

At present, the belief in the Buddhist Philosophy of people in the village society is a belief in the teachings of Buddhism mixed with Brahmanism and belief in Primitive Religion and Animism.⁹ It is a compromise between Buddhist Philosophy and a Supernatural being, the power of Ancestral spirits and Supernatural beings in harmony. Those who disobey will be punished both by the Supernatural being and by the people of society who hold such beliefs. The punishment of the spirits can take the form of illnesses and misfortunes. Punishment from people takes the form of gossiping and not associating, etc.¹⁰ Therefore, Thai people believe that Supernatural beings, and Gods, Ghosts, any spirits and Ancestral spirits have the power to bring good, evil, suffering or happiness to human beings.¹¹ As a result, Thai society is a society based on Ancestral spirits and Supernaturalism beliefs with Buddhist Philosophy that are blended until they cannot be separated from each other and will continue to be passed down to future generations.

Influence of Buddhist Philosophy on Belief of Thai Society

More than 93.83% of Thai people are Buddhists.¹² This large number shows the importance of the Thai people and the inheritance of Buddhism from the past to the present. With the importance of Buddhist Philosophy in Thai society, the researcher has analyzed the influence of Buddhist Philosophy on Belief of Thai Society. When Buddhism entered Thailand, the traditional beliefs changed greatly. The traditional beliefs of the Thai people are based on the traditional beliefs of the Southeast Asian region that are characterized as Primitive Religion and Animism. And this belief has developed into a belief in Supernatural beings, Ancestral Spirits and Ghost (Primitive Religion and Animism) mixed with beliefs of Brahmanism and Buddhism, in order of Ancestral Spirits and Ghosts (Animism)-Brahmanism-Buddhism. But in the era of the Sukhothai Kingdom, the king took Buddhism as the main religion of his empire for political

⁹JumnongAdiwattanasit, et all, *Sociology* (Bangkok: Kasetsart University, 1997), p 21.

¹⁰Prakrurphattarasiriwutthi, PramahaprayatPanyawaro, PramahaprathapApiwatthano, PrawanchaiPurithatto, and Moonyasri, Jessada, "A Comparative Study of the Belief of Phraya Thaen, Serpents and Ghosts of People on the Mekong: Case Study in NongKhai and Vientiane," *Journal of Srilanchang Review* 1(2), (July-December, 2015): pp 10-11.

¹¹Phraya AnumanRajadhon, *Miscellaneous Traditions* (Bangkok: Social Science Research & Innovations (SSRI), 1965), p 64.

¹²Social Statistics Division, National Statistical Office. *The 2018 Survey On Conditions Of Society, Culture and Mental Health*. (Bangkok: Statistical Forecastings Division, National Statistical Office, 2020).p 11.
<http://www.nso.go.th/sites/2014en/Survey/social/religion/SurveyOnConditions/2018/Full%20Report.pdf>

reasons. To show independence and to declare that they are not under the mandate of the former kingdom in any way, even the belief system.¹³

In the era of the Sukhothai Kingdom, there was a king named King Lithai who wrote a literary story called "Tebhumikathā". This literature talks about the life after death story of being happy from the good deeds done while alive. And describes the suffering of people who have passed away from their sins according to Buddhist Philosophy. Tebhumikathā literature is the beginning of many things in the corner of beliefs and norms of Thai society regarding sin and merit. The belief in sin and merit in Thai society is characterized by fear. Fear of suffering from the bad karma that they have done. Therefore, Thai society focuses on the teachings of doing good deeds and living in the next world in heaven. In particular, the teachings of Buddhist monks today are still taught in this way, focusing on doing good deeds, do not evil for being born in heaven, enjoying happiness, and not having to suffer back to a difficult life. Nowadays, Thai-style Buddhism, especially those who are local residents, have a strong sense of merit and sin through Buddhist Philosophy. This concept is what has governed the behavior of Thai people since ancient times. Whenever people feel that they or their parents and relatives have committed a sin, they must find time to make merit to atone for that sin. Because if you don't make merit, that sin will reciprocate in either this world or the next world.

In addition to making people see the blame for doing evil and being the new norm of society. Primitive Religion and Animism benefit indirectly from this too. Because originally the spirits in Thai people's beliefs were ancestral spirits that protect and take care of their descendants. And, Ghost, Spirits of nature, and God of the forest are Spirits without a hierarchy. When the principle of "31 Planes of Existence" in Buddhist Philosophy came into existence. It caused these spirits to be raised as examples of the belief that those who did good deeds during their lifetimes would go to heaven to enjoy their good deeds. Those who do merit more than sin to a certain extent will be born as humans. This makes the belief in Spirits and Ghosts originated, systematic, and ancestry clear. In order of sin, Kamma, supernatural power, because from the original belief, the spirits located in various places will have their powers to some extent.

Another belief that is influenced by beliefs from Tebhumikathā literature is the belief in gratitude. Because the beliefs of Primitive Religion and Animism place great emphasis on gratitude. Because, this religion focuses on the respect and veneration of the ancestors as the one who first, the one who protects, the one who gives abundance and lives in comfort through the sacrifice from the ancestors. The story mentioned that the ancestors had a clear principle about where they would go after they died, and how they would live in the next world. It intensifies the worship of ancestors by using Buddhism and monks as a medium to pass on what the descendants' desire to the ancestors. In addition, in the teachings of Buddhist Philosophy, gratitude is mentioned extensively and is one of the cornerstones of the Buddhist way of living. It deepens the firmness of gratitude towards ancestors and results in the value that everyone must

¹³Worabhuri Moolsin and Phraplad Sura Yanatharo, "Role of Buddhism in Political and Governance Development of Thailand in the Sukhothai period," *Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Journal* 10(2), (July-December, 2019): p 85.

be grateful toward one's ancestors. That is to say, both in the living world, they have to take care of the ancestors who are the most benefactors. When those people die, we have to make merit and dedicate merit to the next life so that they can live comfortably. When we recall the ancestors and make merit for them, the ancestors who have passed away will bless and protect their descendants to be safe. It also helps inspire their descendants' livelihood to succeed. Which family has children who disrespect and leave their ancestors starving, despised or disrespected. The ancestors would curse or even believe that the ancestors would hurt sometimes to the point of death. With the emergence of these beliefs, the spread of rites related to substitution and remembrance of ancestors across all regions of Thailand. Each region is different in terms of the date of the event, the nature of the offerings, or the details of the rituals according to the area and the way of life of their region. But what they have in common is the importance of observing these traditions in remembrance of one's dead ancestors.

However, people could not distinguish what was taught from Buddhist Philosophy and what was a belief in ghosts, angels, and gods such as Ancestral spirits, guardian deities, and dryad. When Buddhist society has religious belief systems, Brahmanism, Primitive Religion and Animism are components that are beneficial to society, both at the spiritual level of the individual and at the community level. Buddhism influenced both the elite and the villagers because it was easier to assimilate with the original religion and the culture of the villagers.¹⁴ Supernatural beliefs, Primitive Religion and Animism, are supernatural beings. Contact with them is done through superstitious rituals such as using magic spells. A shaman is a traditional ritual performer which is different from religion.¹⁵ Superstition, Primitive Religion and Animism will be able to meet the mental needs of the people for their mundane needs. Brahmanism focuses on rituals and plays a role in gathering people in the community to perform rituals together and create unity.

Therefore, Buddhism is like the supernatural being in the minds of Thai people. Because when Thai people are unable to solve the problems that come from Primitive Religion, Animism and Brahmanism and the problems that arise in their minds, they rely on Buddhism. In addition, monks in the past had a lot of power because they were community leaders, teachers, doctors, judges, and centers of the villagers' hearts. All sciences come from the monks, so education must start from the temple. The power of the monks thus extends to both the mundane and the supermundane. It led to the belief that the Buddhist monks were holy, and possessed of academic knowledge, Dhamma and superstition. This belief has influenced Buddha images and Buddhist monks to become Supernatural beings. However, the transformation from layman to Buddhist monk does not instantly become a holy person through ritual, but a man becomes a respected

¹⁴Komkrit Uitekkeng, *India-Siam Ghost Brahmanism Buddhism* (Bangkok: Matichon Public company Limited, 2017), pp 14.

¹⁵Amra Pongsapich, Prof., PhD, *Culture, Religion and Ethnicity: An Anthropological analysis of Thai society* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Printing House, 1998), pp 36-40.

person through practice. To be a holy person is to be virtuous and loving-kindness.¹⁶ Therefore, when looking at religion, one must look at the religion that is the result of people in society. The beliefs of Primitive Religion, Animism and Buddhism in Thai society have been mixed. Primitive Religion and Animism in Thai society have been drawn into Buddhism by Buddhism. The benefit of having a belief in Primitive Religion and Animism is that it caters to people in this world while Buddhism is aimed at the next world.¹⁷

Conclusion

When Buddhism came to Thailand, the original beliefs changed a lot. The Buddhist Philosophy combines with traditional beliefs of Southeast Asia including Supernatural beings, Ancestral Spirits and Ghosts (Primitive Religion and Animism). In the era of Sukhothai, the king took Buddhism as the main religion of his kingdom for political reasons and one literature that had a great influence on Thai society was “Tebhumikathā”. This literature has become a new norm in Thai society. Thai society has become a society that strongly believes in sin and merit. The belief in sin and merit in Thai society is a form of fear. Afraid of suffering as a result of the bad karma that he had done when they were a human. Therefore, the popularity of making merit is born in the hope that oneself will be released from suffering in the next life.

In addition, this literature plays a role in Primitive Religion and Animism by making animism have a clear origin, system, and ancestry. And another belief influenced by Buddhist Philosophy is the belief in gratitude. This is because the traditional belief places great importance on gratitude. Although taking Buddhist Philosophy as the core of their beliefs, people still practice the traditional religions, Primitive Religion and Animism, and blend with Brahmanism. The traditional beliefs of the people in Thailand are therefore the beliefs that are in the conscience. Respect Brahmanism in the manner of asking for help when one is under pressure or when one needs something. As for Buddhism, it is in the corner of practice and supermundane. Therefore, the characteristics of Thai people's beliefs are not just Buddhism, but the characteristics of multi-beliefs with Buddhism being the highest supernatural thing. As a result, Buddhist monks, temples, Buddha statues, and Buddhist rites have become Supernatural rites that cannot be touched, criticized and questioned. And Thailand is not a pure Buddhist country, but a society that believes in Supernaturalism beliefs mixed with Buddhist Philosophy.

Suggestion

Because Buddhism devoured Primitive Religion and Animism. It causes certain beliefs in Primitive Religion and Animism to intermingle with the teachings of Buddhist Philosophy which at present can still appear to show many traces of respect. But Thai people tend to deny that they do not respect or believe in these things. Because the values of Thai people today consider

¹⁶Komkrit Uitekkeng, *India-Siam Ghost Brahmanism Buddhism* (Bangkok: Matichon Public company Limited, 2017), pp 47.

¹⁷Srisakara Vallibhotama, *Buddhism and Beliefs in Thai Society* (Bangkok: Lek-Prapai Viriyaphan foundation, 2017), pp 181-183.

people who believe or have these ideas as those who have superstitious beliefs. Causing these people to be looked down upon by those around them as ignorant, nonsense, and uncivilized. But, people still believe in Primitive Religion and Animism, and this belief is deeply rooted in daily life or even in some rituals in Buddhism. It can be seen from some Thai people worshipping the shrine of the household god, the shrine of the ancestor, and various shrines that are believed to have spirits reside. Including paying respect to gods from Hinduism and paying respect to the Buddha image in a Buddhist temple, paying respect to Buddhist monks, and making merit. All of this is due in part to respect, and fear for them. But part of it is to ask for blessings, asking for things to get what they want by relying on the supernatural powers of these things.

Therefore, if dependence on the Supernatural being does not have a negative impact on others, it can be ignored and is their right. If such negative consequences occur, they should also be punished according to social and legal rules. However, the most important thing is to spread the correct principles of Buddhism so that the people in the society can properly understand what Buddhist Philosophy is. Because at present, it can be seen that the influence of Buddhist Philosophy has mixed with traditional beliefs until a new and unique belief has emerged. Therefore, monks and related people should realize and begin to give people detailed knowledge and understanding of Buddhist Philosophy. Because nowadays people's understandings are beginning to be confused and view Buddhism, Supernatural being, Ancestral Spirits and Supernatural being as the same belief. And Ancestral Spirits began to play a greater role in people than the Sangha and the teachings of the Buddha's Buddhist Philosophy and will continue to cause confusion and misunderstandings in the future.

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