

THE TRADITIONAL ROLE OF SANGHA IN THAILAND S SACRED RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

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Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion of Thailand. Its conspicuous traditional feature is the identification of Buddhism with life. It is similar to the forms found in Sri Lanka, Burma, Kampuchea and Laos and is professed by well over 90 percent of the population including not only the core Thai but also the other races living in Thailand.¹ Its conspicuous traditional feature is the identification of Buddhism with life.

Among the Theravada countries of Southeast Asia, Thailand is the sole exception that has managed to remain except from both western colonial domination and the social and political turmoils that have ravaged the area. For this reason, Thailand has been able to perpetuate the Theravada tradition in modern social structures to a higher degree than other neighbouring countries.² This article focuses on the traditional role of the Sangha in Thai society.

The Sangha is an assembly of monks that has authoritatively studied, taught and practiced the teachings of the Buddha since the inception of Buddhism³.

In Thailand the Sangha is the center of religious life and it plays an important role in society. The traditional ideal is that all males will join the Sangha at some time during their lives. It is customary for young men to enter monastic life for a while upon the death of a relative or prior to marriage. The custom is considered to be the proper way of repaying gratitude to one's parents and of achieving recognition as a mature male. In many rural societies today it is still believed that a man who has not gone through the experience of monkhood is likely to be

immature.

It is estimated that currently some 50 percent of the country's male population over 20 years of age have been monks at least once in their lives. Except for a few who commit themselves to the Sangha for life, others spend only a limited time in a monastery, ranging from a few weeks to a few months or years. Most males become monks only for one lent period which coincides with the Thai rainy season (between planting and harvest), since it is a general belief that more merit is earned during this three month period than in any other time of the year. The Thai government even envisages this pattern by granting one rainy season's paid leave to civil servants who wish to have this religious experience.⁴

To become a monk a man must be at least 20 years of age and healthy, be free from debt, have consent of his parents or wife, be able to understand the rules of monastic life and have a token knowledge of Pali. During his stay in the monastery (wat) he learns the Vinaya rules, the basic teachings of Buddha, and memorizes a few Pali texts for the rituals.

Although ordination as a monk is usually regarded as a rite of passage for young men before marriage, there are quite a few who become monks towards the end of life, especially when they no longer have family responsibilities. The long term monk may remain in the order for a few years or a life time, depending upon personal preferences and circumstances. A minority join the Sangha as novices in their youth.

Besides the monks there are a large number of novices and temple boys associated with the Sangha. Temple boys (dek wat) minister to the needs of monks and novices. They are usually young boys who learn the rudiments of reading and writing at the wat school

and live in the wat. However there are no definite age limits. A number of adult men, for one reason or another choose to live in wats and serve as temple boys.⁵

Novices are youths of at least eight years of age. They live in the monastery, wear monastic robes and have their heads shaved. Under the tutorship of senior monks they are trained over the years in the doctrinal knowledge, the ritual procedures, and the rules of the monastic order.⁶

In northern Thailand, which is largely rural, the prevailing custom is for young boys between 10 and 18 years of age to become novices. Many of them leave the wat before 20 years of age; only one in four or five eventually continues to become a professional monk. This practice provides many boys from poor rural areas with the opportunity to acquire education and economic security, which they could not secure otherwise. Today, as in the past, though to a lesser extent, religious education in a wat still continues to be for many disadvantaged youths an avenue of social mobility.

In the past, the monasteries were the only available means for pursuing education beyond the primary grades. Today, with the increasing availability of secular education, a smaller number of boys become novices. But the institution of novicehood is by no means finished. Many villages still lack secondary schools, and many families are unable to afford to educate their sons. In certain places, such as northern part of Thailand secular schools are inadequate in number or relatively inaccessible because of poor communications. In all these cases the wat still continues to attract boys of peasant background and provides them with intellectual and moral education. A monk's vocation is more often the result of the novice's experience of living in a wat rather than an antecedent motivating factor. The most able monks eventually

find their way to important urban monasteries to pursue higher education. Many of them disrobe upon the completion of their education and take up secular jobs, usually going into teaching, ecclesiastical and cranial service.⁷

This relationship of monasteries to educational opportunity explains the unbalanced regional distribution of monks in the country. The northern region is characterized by a large presence of novices.

Presently it is estimated that there are about 200,000 monks in Thailand or approximately one percent of the male population and some 120,000 novices distributed in approximately 30,000 wats. Over one third of them are temporary monks i.e. for the Lenten season. About 50 percent of longer term monks are estimated to disrobe usually between 25 and 35 years of age.

With regard to the routine of monastic life, a monk's daily activity starts at 5.00 a.m. a monk sleeps on a straw mat wearing only a waist cloak and a shoulder cloak. Upon rising, he performs his ablutions and recites a Buddhist prayer in Pali, in which he thanks the Buddha for showing him the way to nirvana and recalls to his mind the caducity of life. Later, in the morning, monks and novices carrying their alms bowls go into the village to beg for food, except on holy days when food is served at the wat by the women of the community. The temple boys accompany them and help them to carry the pinto or a metal food container. Each monk visits 15 to 20 houses on his route. When all the monks have returned to the wat, all the food is pooled and redistributed.

After breakfast, the monks take religious instructions, practice their chants, and attend to personal matters. At 11:00 a.m. at the beating of the wats drum, lunch is served by the devotees (usually women) who take turns donating a daily meal to the monks.

Following the traditional custom, a monk does not thank the donors, since he is one confers merit by accepting the food. The monks do not consume food after mid day. Liquids are allowed at any time, tea is the most popular drink.

The afternoon is spent studying sacred books or in other activities. The abbot himself instructs the monks and novices, and trains those who have to take religious examinations. Evening prayers take place at about 6:00 pm following by further practice of chants before bedtime. Every evening a sermon is also given to the devotees, each monk or novice taking his turn. The sermons are read and are usually in Thai language or in the local dialects related to stories concerning the life of the Buddha.

The organization and administration of the Sangha is hierarchal. The head is the Sangha raja appointed by the king on recommendation of the Supreme Sangha Council. This is the Supreme executive body, appointed by the Sangharaja with the consent of the Minister of Education. At the lowest level are the wats or monasteries, each autonomous under the leadership of an abbot.⁸

From a social point of view the wat plays an important integrative role in the village community in a number of ways, primarily by the performance of religious rituals. The wat is first of all a centre for religious ceremony much of which is regularly carried out according to a ritual calendar. These rites involve the community as a whole even if their ultimate goal is the acquisition of merit by individuals. Other irregular held rites also take place there and almost invariably include the community or some significant segment of it. In addition the temple is the locus for astrological activities important to the community and often carried out by monks.

The temple committee often administers a loan fund where the poor of the community may borrow in emergencies. It is also the repository of mats, dishes and other material items that may be borrowed by members of the community. If the aged have nowhere else to go e.g (if the family system does not work for what ever reasons) the wat is a refuge. But the wat is not resumed for wholly serious matters: entertainment and dances open to the community are also held there.

The traditional New Year (Sangkran) celebration (still practiced in many villages) coincides with the end of the dry season when rains are imminent. It falls around the middle of the April, and it lasts three days. The youngsters of the village symbolically wash away the community sins of the past year by bathing the statue of Buddha in perfumed water. Everything is purified and rejuvenated by the young who also indulge in fertility rituals and rains are invoked. The dead are believed to visit the living and for this purpose the monks perform rituals in the village cemetery. The last day of the festival, which is the first day of the New Year, is celebrated with sports and other forms of entertainment.

Another important recurrence is the Lent period which coincides with the three months of the rainy season. Since there is little work to do on the land the villagers tend to make frequent visits to the wat, while the monks go into retreat. It is a period of piety and asceticism. In June the young men of the village are ordained as monks with the joyful participation of the entire community. With the end of the rains, in October, Lent ends and monks come out of seclusion. Then the Kathin ceremony takes place, when the monks and novices are presented with new robes and gifts by the villagers.⁹

In February, the agricultural cycle comes to an end with the solemn celebration of the harvest (a village s major festival) when

religious and secular interests blend together in the dedication of both nature and community to a higher ethical purpose and in a quest for prosperity and health. During these festivals boys and girls have an opportunity to meet. Adults exchange news and gossip, and farmers gather at the local wat to discuss with the monks the matters pertaining to farming, loans, domestic troubles, auspicious days for business or social undertakings. Children receive their first education at the wats school. People suffering from some illness may seek to be cured by the holy water. Elderly male members who are no longer able to work on the farm may join the monkhood in order to acquire merit and be assured of a daily supply of food. Poor families may send their young sons to serve as ternple boys in order to reduce the burden in the family.

Among the rites, funeral rites are considered to be the most important, and require the participation of the entire village. The rites are the most elaborate among the Buddhist ceremonies and are assumed to secure good status for the dead by transferring merit to them. Monks, by virtue of their religious status act as mediators between death and rebirth. They are not allowed to worship spirits.

Although monks do not participate in any aspect of spirit worship, they indirectly provide legitimation for it. They bless charms, armlets that are used to ward off the evil actions of the spirits. Some of the charms are made by the monks themselves which are more valuable.

Aside from its religious function in the community, the wat also performs a large variety of social functions. Usually there is a wat committee consisting of the abbot and his assistants and some senior male laymen with the task of acting as liason between the wat and the community, and of creating interest among the villagers for all wat activities.

As such the wat is the propelling center of community life. All forms of entertainment take place in the wat compound in connection with various religious events. The wat serves as the news center of the community, for all notices of the district are posted in its compound. It serves as the community chest where various articles, such as musical instruments, lamps, kitchenware etc. are deposited and borrowed by the members of the community on several occasion. During the dry season wats are also a reliable supplier of drinking water due to their large water reservoirs.

In sum, in many rural areas, the entire life of a Thai villager revolves around the wat i.e. from his birth till death. It is said that these people can not conceive of their life without the monks. For the monks are above all the source of merit and therefore a guarantee of happiness, security, safety and prosperity regardless of how modernized Thai society may be. Thus, Sangha s are an integral part of Thailand s Social Structure and no, social event is considered complete without the participation of the Sanghas. Of All the Theravada countries of Southeast Asia Thailand is the only country that still perpetuates this tradition because it escaped colonial occupation.

Similarly, the traditional value system supporting the Thai social studies has remained unchanged. Thai tradition has consistently emphasized, though in modified forms, the three traditional institution of kingship, Sangha and nation as the basic triad of social solidarity and identity. These three institutions have become so intermingled in the course of history and are as deeply meaningful to the hearts of the people as to form the core of the Thai civic culture.

References

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