

Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today. By Pattana Kitiarsa. 2013. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 196 pages. ISBN: 978-0-295-99272-3 (soft cover).

Reviewed by Leedom Lefferts, Carolina Asia Center  
(lleffert@drew.edu).

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Popular Thai Theravada Buddhism today is rife with conversations about magical monks, spirit mediums, ghosts, amulets, and, generally, weird things and happenings.[1] These conversations are part of daily life and constantly referred to in TV programs, community radio, and local dialogues. Because these down-to-earth conversations dominate this book, those who observe, research, and write on Thai popular Buddhism should place this volume at the forefront of their work. It is the product of a superb 1999 PhD dissertation, the same time as work by other researchers began to appear.[2] However, while Pattana Kitiarsa published a number of articles, he only compiled them and the dissertation's main theoretical and methodological structure into a single volume toward the end of his too-short life.

In contrast with that of most observers, Dr. Pattana's work was and remains important for two reasons: he was a native Northeastern Thai, giving him credentials held by few other researchers writing in English; and he proposed an organizing framework for understanding the changes emerging in Thai popular Buddhism: post-modernism.

Today some observers aver that Thai Buddhism is disappearing or disintegrating; if those observers are not conversant with the multifaceted range of "religious" practices, they see these as distracting the institution from its primary purpose. But Pattana builds on his knowledge of practice in his home community -- see the preface to understand this background -- to note that what happens today needs more cogent understanding, description, and theory.

The first chapter discusses Theravada Buddhism from the points of view of its agents, those who

"have established themselves as part of everyday religio-social institutions. . . more often than not, official authorities find themselves in a difficult and ineffective position when dealing with them. Popular Buddhism is where religion converges with the multidimensional structural forces of the nation-state, market economy, modernization, and globalization" (1-2).

He continues:

"Popular Buddhism in Thailand is a large-scale, cross-social spectrum of beliefs and practices . . . that have emerged out of the interplay between animism, supernaturalism, folk Brahmanism, the worship of Chinese deities, and state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism . . . . Popular Buddhism is different from its scriptural or canonical counterpart due to its loosely organized and pragmatic nature" (2).

Pattana puts "agency at the center stage of the anthropological study of religion . . . focusing on people making their own collective and institutionalized religiosity" (5). Then he notes: "Religious agents, whether they are humans or objects, keep ordinary people's religiosity alive, meaningful, and relevant to their changing society" (5). It is in the observation and understanding of this booming, bustling, competitive, aggressive arena of practice that outsiders can come to understand what is happening. Pattana writes, in chapter 2, that we have to go "beyond" seeing Thai Theravada Buddhism as "syncretistic" and should accept its dynamic hybridism -- a popular postmodern creation to understand and cope with the many environments in which these people move in their daily lives.

This may be a practice different from that which many outside observers have read about or wish to think about. Laying this framework for understanding, Pattana provides us with access to the major agents in this process: magical monks, spirit mediums, and amulets. He makes clear that, while these agents may operate in an expanding universe of practice, they are not involved in activities which threaten general societal structures or the governmental system. "Magical monks and spirit mediums . . . help their clients morally or spiritually in modern life, where 'money has established itself as a distinctive religion'" (quoting philosopher and religious commentator Suwanna Satha-Anan) (55). These agents reflect "the dialectical relationships between class and gender . . . and common religious beliefs and practices." They "do not gain access to power and technology, but their aspirations to earn as much money as possible are the same as everyone else's in the country." The popular religion they espouse "is engendered, framed, and practiced along existing gender divisions" (54).

Pattana devotes three chapters to case studies, illustrating how "a belief in luck, gambling, spirit worship, and the desire for material wealth are the pulses of Thai popular religion" (57). To illustrate, he considers a dead superstar singer, Phumphuang, whose spirit animates a cult devoted to lottery predictions; a magical monk, Luang Po (pronounced "paw") Khun, whose name means "increasing," as in getting richer; and amulets, which hold power and may bring prosperity as well as ward off illness and other problems. Pattana sees testing one's luck through the twice monthly national lottery, with its local, nominally illegal spinoffs, as central.[3] That most people lose, sometimes stupendously, helps to show that one deserves the position one is in. Pattana points out that there is a constant search for lucky numbers, which might be visible in the leaf that falls from a tree on the grounds of the wat in which Phumphuang is celebrated, or which a monk might foresee in a complex diagram drawn from his dreams. Of course, against the many failures, someone always wins, gaining notoriety, keeping the game going. Additionally, one can always refer to the last drawing, where one bought numbers which would have won today.

While Pattana hints at long-term institutional reasons for the emergence of this post-modern religion, he is more concerned with the ways people act, why they do it, and what they do. Such a focus is at the heart of folklore. Pattana has made Thai religion an exceptional study for folklorists as well as for anthropologists and students of religion. Material things and their constructions are central. What is most deeply regretted is that this volume represents Pattana's major effort; had he lived longer, he would have done much to shape the exploration of a phenomenal field.

[1] "'Lucky' dead kitten in foot-long sausage"

<http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/341137/dead-kitten-contaminated-in-sausage>, accessed 3 June 2013.

[2] For example, Peter A. Jackson, "The Enchanting Spirit of Thai Capitalism: The Cult of Luang Phor Khoon and the Post-modernization of Thai Buddhism," *South East Asia Research* 7(1999):5-60, and his "Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods, and Magic Monks: Thailand's Boom-time Religions of Prosperity," *South East Asia Research* 7(1999):245-320.

[3] This thread was tapped into earlier in Alan Klima's *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

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