Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today

Pattana Kitiarsa


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Reviewed by John Walsh, Editor of the SIU Journal of Management
Newcomers to Thailand are generally led to believe that religious beliefs are syncretic in nature: that is, people are willing to incorporate additional beliefs alongside the philosophy of Buddhism that is professed by the great majority of the population. This is why it is possible to see spirit houses outsides of residences and statues of the Guan Im (Kuan Yin) goddess in some temples. According to the concept of syncretism, there is no contradiction between believing in the need to propitiate the spirits of nature and the dead or else to pay respect to a long-dead Chinese princess who has transcended humanity. Instead, these different elements are incorporated wholesale in a mindset that permits possibly contradictory issues to exist together. However, ethnographer Pattana Kitiarsa, drawing on years of careful and thoughtful observation, believes that Thai popular religious belief should be characterized by hybridization. That is, when new elements are introduced, they are not incorporated wholesale as in syncretism but instead have a dialectical relationship to the existing elements; that is, they change the existing elements in the mind and are themselves changed by them. This is quite a democratic idea in that it suggests more influence for the people vis-à-vis the religious establishment which makes occasional efforts to encourage standardization of beliefs across the Kingdom. In that sense, then, the various outbursts of enthusiasm for amulets and for deceased celebrities and monks should be seen, at least in part, as outbreaks of regional or local consciousness. The very basis of animism, after all, which is very specifically circumscribed in terms of space: the spirits occupy particular parts of nature and tend not to move around too much. As Kitiarsa emphasizes, when local deities (i.e. the deceased celebrities or monks) emerge, they are at once rooted in a specific temple and, hence, bounded in space. People will travel to that location to show their dedication, test their luck and so forth. The processes involved are summarized as follows:

“Deity, media, and money are three key elements in the creation of Thai popular Buddhism. They are central to the triple and interrelated processes of deification, mediation, and
commodification. Such processes are made possible by the
life and work of individual key actors, as much as by mass
followers or their audiences (p.7).”

When a new belief emerges, therefore, it represents an opportunity to
create a new and local power source which can generate income,
influence and good karma. That this has a political subtext in
contemporary Thailand is evident. However, there are broader
implications for hybridization and many of these are related to the
nature of commodification and its relationship with the market
economy. Kitiarsa sees changes in Thai society arising from the
intensification of capitalism and manifest in such phenomena as
increased personal mobility, demographic changes and rapid
urbanization and, consequently, constantly changing the place where
hybridization occurs, which is “… where several religious faiths come
together and where popular concerns over the impact of the market
economy are channeled (p.31).”

Having established this framework for analysis, Kitiarsa then goes on
to explore how popular religious belief is expressed in modern
Thailand and this makes for a colourful and fascinating account,
touching upon spirit mediums, dead pop stars, the mania for magic
amulets and a range of other practices. These are clearly explained in
the author’s sympathetic but well-informed manner. Particularly
interesting (and new to me) is the story of the folk singer Phumphuang
Duangchan, whose not entirely happy life ended very early after
critical medical conditions which have lent themselves to suspicions
of supernatural agency. The lukthung queen has become a goddess
and many pilgrimages are made to her wat with a view to seeking her
assistance in providing winning lottery numbers. The lottery, in legal
and illegal forms, is enormously popular throughout Thailand and the
belief that spirits of the dead and other supernatural entities have the
power to grant knowledge of winning numbers is widespread. In
return, the spirits receive some kind of succor from the attention paid
to them. Locking the spirits of the dead into this kind of cash nexus rather validates the author’s theses.

I was fortunate enough to meet Khun Pattana once at a seminar in Singapore but my wife, who was working there for some years as Labour Counselor, knew him well. He was very active as an academic and particularly in working with migrant Thai workers. He came from a working-class background and never forgot his roots or lost his compassion for and understanding of fellow workers. His death at so early an age was a terrible tragedy for his family and friends. This book helps show the quite separate loss to the academic world.