

Chapter 6

Conclusions



In this thesis I observed and examined the complexity of the Thai religion in *Wat Phra Kaeo* from different angles: firstly, art and architecture, secondly rituals and finally people's behaviors. In terms of art and architecture one can clearly see Buddhist features in the Temple. It fulfills all the requirements of Buddhist architecture and shows Buddhist elements in art. For example the mural paintings inside the *ubosot* depict many Buddhist scenes from Buddhist stories. In addition, Hindu influences are also clear in the Temple art because Hindu-Buddhist cosmology determines the art and form of the structures. Mythical beings placed around the Royal Pantheon are good examples. The Temple is the highest Royal temple serving the King: the incarnation of Hindu god Vishnu. This also helps to add Hindu elements to the art. As for rituals one can see clear Buddhist and Hindu elements in the existence of Buddhist monks and Court Brahmin priests. However it is interesting to note that Brahmin rites are always observed along with Buddhist rites and never exist independently. For instance the Ploughing Ceremony, which is a Hindu ritual, is conducted by both Court Brahmin priests and Buddhist monks. Furthermore in some rites one can see animistic elements, too. The ceremony of the changing of the costume of the Emerald Buddha can be said to be animistic. In terms of people's behavior it is clear that the Temple functions as a Buddhist temple in the same way as other *wats* and people visit the Temple on Buddhist holy days and every Sunday for Buddhist activities. However in this most important Royal and National temple, one could see people's animistic views in their Buddhist behaviors in much the same way as those recorded in Tambiah's and Terwiel's rural cases. This is clear in their behavior around sacred water and especially, the Emerald Buddha. For example, their behavior in making wishes (*Bon*), bargaining with the Emerald Buddha and making offerings (*Kae Bon*) to the Emerald Buddha show their strong animistic views.

Tambiah sees a clear oppositional relationship between animism and Buddhism in a rural setting. What his animism shows is the spirit cults practiced in North-east Thailand. What I view as animistic is totally different from his interpretation. In *Wat Phra Kaeo* animistic elements or people's animistic views are always associated with Buddhism. This observation reminds us of Kirsch's words;

In fact, it has frequently been observed that Theravada Buddhism is never the sole religious component in these societies ⁽²¹⁾, that there are invariably "non-Buddhist" religious elements present as well, leading H.D Evers to suggest that Theravada Buddhism is, in some sense, an 'incomplete' religion." (Kirsch 1977: 241-242)

Anthropologists like Tambiah and Terwiel conclude that such animistic views are typically found among uneducated people in rural areas or poor areas in towns and cities. The difference between Tambiah, Terwiel and my study is that I arrive at the observation that such animistic views are also found in the "worldview" of the rich and educated people in the capital city. (For example, the worldview of the rich and educated looking people I interviewed, such as fluent English speaking high school teacher and the elite of a construction company, was also very animistic.) Some of them even know of the complex situation of the Thai religion and consider Buddha's teachings superior to the beliefs and practices which are obviously animistic. How could this complex religious situation happen? This is possible because Buddhism has totally incorporated animistic elements and is reborn as a new religious form - Thai Buddhism. Thai Buddhism is Buddhism as it is practiced in Thailand. Thai Buddhism is not just a philosophy but is a religion that is well integrated into Thai life. People's most basic needs for religion is to cope with difficulties in their daily lives.

Komin, who studies the Thai value system, did a survey of people's supernatural behavior: bargaining with spirits (*bon ban san klao*). The survey

shows interesting results.

What is more interesting is to find that the urban Thai practiced it more than the rural Thai; the more educated slightly more often than the less educated. The data seem to suggest that education has nothing to do with occupation in relation to such practices. From an occupation standpoint, students as well as Government employees practiced it more often than other groups. It might sound inconsistent that the urban, the more educated who have continually been found to be on the modernized side of society, are more superstitious. One possible reason may be that these these practices dealing with the supernatural serve to psychologically relieve one's frustration and anxieties caused by uncertainty or by what is perceived to be impossible to cope with. This suggestion is supported by their fatalistic perception regarding status gain and promotion. Government employees and farmers were the two categories believing most that status and promotion were the result of good luck and opportunities rather than hard-work and competence. (Komin, 1997: 219-220)

Komin's study about the Thais' bargaining with the supernatural power confirms my findings that the Thais treat the Emerald Buddha as supernatural beings and like to bargain with the Emerald Buddha in the same way as they like to bargain with any spernatural spirits in Thailand.

In Thailand, Buddhism is practically recognized as the state religion. It enjoys paramount position under the patronage of Thai Kings. In Thai Kingship one can see clear Hindu elements. Buddhism practiced by Thai people also contains popular or animistic aspects because it is a religion well integrated into Thai life. One can also see clearer animistic elements in the spirit cults or in worshipping spirits. These three religious elements, Buddhist,

Hindu and animistic relate to each other, incorporate and sometimes exist together side by side. They can also show various patterns and relationships. As a result they form a highly complex Thai religion.

NOTES

⁽¹⁾ "Here I mean the religion, not of the educated or of scholars, but of the people in general; for religion is the mainspring of behavior as manifested by people." (Anuman Rajadhon 1986: 25)

⁽²⁾ For example, Hindu mythical beings placed around the Royal Pantheon. See Matsushita 1994: 144.

⁽³⁾ M. Weber also adds Hinduism, Confusianism and Judaism to the "world religion".

⁽⁴⁾ Buddhist sage Nagasena.

⁽⁵⁾ Terwiel 1995: 213-214

⁽⁶⁾ Swearer (1976) described a model temple-monastic compound in northern Thailand, the *Wat Hariphunjaya*.

⁽⁷⁾ For example, the pilgrimage centers relating to Buddha's relic are *Wat Phra Pathom Cedi* (Nakhon Pathom), *Wat Sraket* (Bangkok), *Wat Phra Samut Cedi* (Samut Prakan), *Wat Phra That Doi Suthep* (Chiang Mai), *Wat Phra That Hariphunchai* (Lamphun), *Wat Phra That Doi Tung* (Chiang Rai), *Wat Phra That Phanom* (Nakhon Phanom), *Wat Phra Boromathat Chaiya* (Surat Thani), *Wat Phra Naha That* (Nakhon Sri Thammarat), etc. The pilgrimage centers which are famous for Buddha images are *Wat Phra Kaeo* (Bangkok), *Wat Phra Sing* (Phra Phuttha Sihing), *Wat Phra Sri Ratana Naha That* (Phra Phuttha Chinarat), etc. *Wat Phra Phuttha Bat* (Saraburi) is famous for the Buddha's Footprint. *Wat Phra Sri Mah Pho* (Prachinburi), Boon tree. *Wat Phra Thaon Sila At* (Uttaradit), Holy Seat. *Wat Phra Phuttha Bat Tak Pha* (Lamphun), Foot print and impression of Buddha's robe in rock.

⁽⁸⁾ Warren quoted this passage from Somerset Maugham in his book "The Grand Palace".

⁽⁹⁾ Suksri 1998: 92

⁽¹⁰⁾ Vishnu has in his hands objects which are called his weapons and ornaments. There are variations in his weapons and ornaments. Those I

introduced here are based on Majupuria's understandings.

⁽¹¹⁾ Six bronze Khmer lion gurdians stand in pairs at the base of each set of steps of the *ubosot*. The middle pair are the originals from which the others were copied.

⁽¹²⁾ There are two interpretations concerning the multi-pronged metal spires on top of prangs; some say that they are Shiva's weapons and others say that they are Indra's weapons.

⁽¹³⁾ Examination in Pali. There are seven grades from three to nine. One calls someone who has passed the examination "Parian".

⁽¹⁴⁾ See Traditional Festivals in Thailand. Gerson quoted from Wells (1975: 243-4).

⁽¹⁵⁾ The term is used by Buddhists for their tenth stage of perfection, but more popularly for the ceremonial bathing in sacred waters as widely practiced in Hinduism.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Containers of lustral water are generally pots, alms bowls or basins.

Each container has its own underlying story. (Manilerd 1988: 86-87)

"Pot: The utilization of pots for lustral water is primarily derived from the Bhramanistic concept of 8 propitious objects which are diadem, cudgel, disk, conch, banner, ox, long hook to control an elephant and pot full of water. The water pot is usually made of bronze. In some places, where bronze is not available, the pot can be made of baked clay. Bronze or baked clay may be blessed before being processed to the final product.

Alms Bowl: The act of putting lustral water in the alms bowl has been passed down from Lord Buddha's time, when a disaster occurred in the city of Bhaisali, with evil epidemics, intolerable starvation and murder. The Lord, then, had lustral water made in an alms bowl and sprinkled the lustral water onto the city walls. Thus, alms bowl have been in use as a lustral water container ever since.

Basin: There are many categories of basin used for lustral water such as a basin standing on a pedestal, a basin made of bronze, a finely turned and

polished stone basin .

Other containers for lustral water include earthenware in many shapes such as jars, flower pots or basins. These containers can be found in front of the monk's abodes and are for those who have the faith to drink lustral water, take a lustral shower or be sprinkled with lustral water "

(¹⁷) It is not allowed to light candles and joss sticks and to put food offerings on the offering table inside the *ubosot*.

(¹⁸) Discussed by Plamintr

(¹⁹) "When Buddha images are cast today, the hot metal is poured by men dressed in white clothes, much like the Brahmin priests of old. Monks transmit power and life into the figure through prayers, without which the statue would be just a lump of lifeless metal. But the statue cannot be worshipped until it is brought to life by having its eyes symbolically opened, following Indian custom." (Guelden 1995: 21)

(²⁰) Guelden 1995: 20

(²¹) Theravada Buddhist countries; Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.