

# Bribes and Merits: Exchange Mechanisms in Thai society

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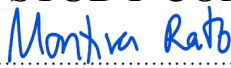
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ความเชื่อเรื่องผีและวิญญาณ ยังคงมีบทบาทสำคัญต่อคนไทยในศตวรรษที่ 21 ซึ่งเกิดจากความเชื่อจากภู่นิสัน หรือการพบเจอ ผี วิญญาณ และ สิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์ ที่มีอยู่ในชีวิตประจำวัน บางครั้ง อาจเกิดจากความเกรงกลัวสิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์เหล่านั้น ที่จะทำให้คุณให้โทษหรือความคาดหวัง ว่าสิ่งศักดิ์สิทธิ์เหล่านั้น จะลดบันดาลสิ่งต่าง ๆ ที่ปรารถนา ได้มากกว่าที่จะได้จากการนับถือศาสนาพุทธ นิกายเถรวาท เพียงอย่างเดียว การนับถือภูตผีวิญญาณ และ นับถือศาสนาพุทธ ของชาวพุทธ มีแนวความคิดการบนบานศาลกล่าว เพื่อให้ได้บางสิ่งบางอย่างที่หวังไว้ นักวิชาการได้อภิปรายกันในเรื่องความเชื่อในเรื่องนี้ของไทยมาอย่างยาวนาน โดยได้กำหนดทฤษฎีทางวิชาการต่างๆ เพื่ออธิบายการถึงการดำรงอยู่ด้วยกัน ในเรื่องของความเชื่อ ที่ขัดแย้งกันอย่างชัดเจน ระหว่างพุทธศาสนา และ ความเชื่อเรื่องผีและวิญญาณ งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อค้นหา ความคล้ายคลึงกันทางทฤษฎี ในเรื่องของความเชื่อ ระหว่างศาสนาพุทธ และ การนับถือผีและ วิญญาณ จากนั้นจึงสัมภาษณ์บุคคลที่เป็นกลุ่มตัวอย่าง ในขณะที่พวกเขามีส่วนร่วมในประกอบพิธีกรรม ทางศาสนา และ ไหว้ผี และ วิญญาณ วัตถุประสงค์ เพื่อศึกษา และ ทำความเข้าใจ ในความคาดหวังและแรงจูงใจของผู้คนที่มีความเชื่อและ ความนับถือทั้งสองแบบ ทั้งในการนับถือพุทธศาสนา และ นับถือผี และ วิญญาณ ที่อาจเป็นไปได้ในทิศทางเดียวกัน หรือมีนัยยะลึกซึ้งกว่าทฤษฎีทางวิชาการที่กำหนดไว้ในหัวข้อแล้วนั้น การทำวิจัยเผยให้เห็นถึงการมีอยู่ และ ความหลากหลายทางความเชื่อ ของชาวพุทธนิกายเถรวาท ซึ่งแสดงออกถึงการให้ความสำคัญกับพุทธศาสนา และการทำบุญ เป็นหลัก แม้ว่าในเรื่องการนับถือ เคารพบูชา และ พิธีกรรม นั้นจะแตกต่างกันไปบ้าง ขึ้นอยู่กับความเชื่อในเรื่องการนับถือพุทธศาสนา หรือ การบูชาผีและ วิญญาณ ของแต่ละบุคคลเป็นสำคัญ

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Animist beliefs continue to play an important role for Thai people in the 21st century, forged by sacred yet intermittent interactions in everyday life. The appeal of spirits' power, and perhaps the fear of them, appears to offer benefits with a worldly-focus that sometimes exceeds or at least complement the more other-worldly scope of Theravada Buddhism. Joining animism and Buddhism, seems to be the idea of an exchange taking place with something to be given and something to be received. Scholars have long debated on the matter of Thai faith, formulating various academic theories to account for the co-existence of these apparently contrasting beliefs in society. The research aim for this study is to first explore the theoretical common ground between the two beliefs systems and then to interview directly individuals as they engage in ritual offerings. The objective is to understand people's expectations and motivations in relation to one belief system over the other, that may fit or go beyond those existing academic theories on the subject. The surveys revealed the existence of different subsets of Theravada Buddhist people, who although both declare the primacy of Buddhism and merit-making, have strong and divergent opinions on its pragmatic value and influence in daily life, in relation to the practice of spirit worship.

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## Introduction

Animist beliefs continue to play an important role for Thai people in the 21st century, forged by sacred yet intermittent interactions in everyday life. Whereas 95% of Thai people are declared to follow Theravada Buddhist faith, the survival of animist beliefs shows how the spirit world still makes up for an inalienable part of Thai identity. Whether we live in a modern condo in downtown Bangkok or in a rural village in the Northeastern province, it is in fact virtually impossible not to come across a spirit house adjacent to any habitation, a beautiful tree adorned by multi-coloured drapes and offering of traditional clothes and red soda next to it, or to take a bus or ferry without noticing a white powder blessing on the ceiling and a garland composed of orange flowers hanging from the rear mirror.

These three encounters are with three different spirits. The cult of spirits is present in these and a myriad of other aspects of daily life in Thailand but never in a mutually exclusive relationship in respect to the official Buddhist faith, and instead, often in an apparent harmony with it.

The appeal of spirits' power, and perhaps the fear of them appears to offer benefits with a worldly-focus that sometimes exceeds or at least complement the more other-worldly scope of Buddhism. A deeper look into the popular practice of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and the ongoing debate on its commercialisation and decline shows a potential divergence from its doctrinal form aimed at self-development and liberation with a form of practice centred more on ritualistic merit-making for the attainments of worldly goals, not too far from the logic of spirit worship.



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Joining animism and Buddhism, seems to be the idea of a ritual offering of exchange taking place with something to be given and something to be received.

Thai people during offering rituals detach themselves from their wealth, materials, time and devote themselves with the same diligence during the ritual process in respect to spirits, deities, the sangha and Buddha. The actual form and engagement of such rituals can differ greatly depending on the perceived cosmological hierarchical position of the entity but also based on the expected return.

Whether people engage in merit-making rituals as an essential expectation of a good Buddhist, or engage in bribing a specific spirit there appear to be an overlapping of certain goals from the two apparently contradicting beliefs, which can be investigated further.

Scholars have long debated on the matter of Southeast Asian faith where Theravada is predominant in order to offer a correct representation to account for the co-existence of Buddhism and animist beliefs in society. Compartmentalists such as Amyot (1965) and Spiro(1978) see society as divided into two different strata, whereas the elite is predominantly subscribed to the doctrinal version of Buddhism, the more rural strata has a stronger attachment to magic-animistic practices that get carried forward with their practice of Buddhism. Syncretists like Kirsch(1977), see Thai faith as the presence of Buddhism, animism and Brahmanism which although of distinct faiths, offer a complimentary function of ultimate and proximate goals that do not conflict with each other. According to Kirsch(1977) such non-conflictual relationship is what allowed for the survival and upgrade of indigenous spirit worship. For



Pattana(2005) however, the paramount position of Buddhism in the syncretist view is overstated and fails to depict the actual picture of beliefs that converge with one another at specific historical times, producing new forms of amalgamation that he defined as hybrid. These and other theories appear to be correct and wrong at the same time, because they attempt to categorise and define a cultural trait of a society which is neither homogenous nor static in its practice. Going beyond the attempt to correctly choose one of these framework, we can appreciate as McDaniel(2011) did that actual individuals who practice faith do not engage in rituals within these academic categorisation in mind that discriminate, rank or too simply amalgamate beliefs systems with one another.

The research aim for this study is therefore to engage the individual, and to grasp the exchange mechanisms within a ritual offering, whether to a Buddhist temple or a spirit shrine, to understand directly from that person what factors play a role in determining the choice of one over the other, if any. Acknowledging past scholar theories on the subject, by interviewing people directly, it will be possible to gather new data, free of academic pre-conceptions and and assess later if individuals conceptualise their own position on the subject within or outside any of those academic theory. To be able to reach this objective the focus of the interviews has been put on the motivation and expectation behind merit-making or spirit worship rituals.

The second section following this introduction will provide context for merit-making within the Theravada Buddhism doctrine with examples of common ritual practices.

The third section, will discuss considerations on Southeast Asian Animism to derive an implicit theory on which to measure today's spirit worship practices, in the absence of an explicit doctrine or structured philosophy as found in Buddhism. The final section presents the rationale, methodology and findings of the interviews conducted at the spirit shrine and Buddhist temple. Direct questions have been formed in order to understand the thought process enticing the individual to perform a ritual. The last section will offer conclusions on these findings on whether the two beliefs systems overlap and represent similar channel for obtaining similar goals or remain distinct in nature.

### **Bribes and Merits**

*“In yonder mountain is a demon-spirit, Phră Khăphŭng, that is greater than every other spirit in this realm. If any Prince ruling this realm of Sŭkthoăi reverences him well with proper offerings, this realm stands firm, this realm prospers. If the spirit be not revered well, if the offerings be not right, the spirit in the mountain does not protect, does not regard; this realm perishes.”*

*(Line 76. King Ramkhamhaeng inscription) (Bradley, 2020)*

The stone inscription of King Ramkhamhaeng, is historically indicative of the important role of spirit worship alongside Buddhism in the early Siamese kingdom. The inscription was erected at the time of the adoption of Theravada Buddhism from the Sinhalese sect, the latest Buddhist wave which represent the current observed faith of Thailand. Much of the content is dedicated at portraying a utopian Buddhist society where all citizens live harmoniously upholding Buddhist ideals living in a free, peaceful and just society where everybody, the king included, perform diligently Buddhist rituals. King Ramkhamhaeng is a fatherly compassionate figure, embodying



the qualities of a Dhammaraja ruler to the point of sharing his own throne with Buddhist priests in a role that unifies kingship and sangha in the duty of teaching Dhamma.

The primacy of Buddhism in the Sukhothai kingdom is uncontested and dominate the inscription but nevertheless, the few lines of the inscription dedicated to the spirit Guardian Phra Kaphung, go as far as linking the prosperity or perish of the kingdom to the correct reverence of the spirit. This reference of Phra Kaphung has been used at times by scholars to justify the syncretist theory, under which the harmony of different beliefs such as Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism, in Sukhothai is the result of their distinction and non-conflictual relationship to one another in terms of providing an ultimate reality. The harmony between these beliefs is the result of their complimentary function in everyday life; namely, the other-worldly focus of Buddhism, and the more mundane worldly goals of animism. (Kirsch, 1977)

Kirsch's syncretist theory is a beautiful solution to the question of how the apparently contrasting beliefs could have co-existed since ancient times, but it appear to project an idea of Buddhism as focus on ultimate goals that may be only partially representative of society today and back then. Merit-making as we will see can be a powerful tool for a better rebirth as well as worldly goals in people's mind. Whether the worldly concerns of citizens were mostly addressed via spirits worship or via Buddhism, can only be speculated at the time of Sukhothai and today without direct engagement. Moreover, whether it is in fact Buddhism to have upgraded and integrated animism within its practice as the syncretist theory suggests, or perhaps

animist logic has influenced Theravada Buddhism to the point of shaping a different popular form, distinct from the orthodox practice is equally arguable. What appear to be factual in regards of people's engagement with Buddhism and animism during the Sukhothai period and in the same way today are the official primacy of Buddhism and the high power still assigned to spirits, both co-existing and strongly linked to the desire on positive outcomes in people's lives. It is then useful for the purpose to later understand the implications of merit-making rituals and spirit offerings to take a step back and contextualise these type of offerings.

### **Merit-making within Theravada Buddhism**

The fundamental message of Gautama Buddha originating Buddhist practice is that our life is identified with suffering. Such suffering is however neither natural nor fatalistic, because it stems from an incorrect appreciation of reality and the resulting attachment and hindrances that derive from it, which can be corrected. Attachments to our bodies, our material cravings and our relationships with people are inherently impermanent given their unsatisfactory nature and our future separation with them preventing us from reaching a true and ever-lasting happiness. The Buddhist path can be understood as the gradual practical, and mindful eradication of these hindrances to be replaced by wholesome actions and an inner self-development that enable us to live a happier life and ultimately reach a stage of awakening as an *arahant* contemplating



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*Nibbana*, the totality of absence of every defilement and an end to the impermanent cycle of rebirth.

Offerings and merit-making rituals are contextualised within this idea of abandoning unwholesome actions and performing instead wholesome actions. Merit according to the Pali canon can be gain via giving, virtue, and mindfulness with *giving* being the most common practice by lay people.(Harvey, 2000) The storage of good actions versus unwholesome ones, make up for our overall *kamma*, whose consequence will manifest in this or in the next rebirth as an expression of our distance to the ultimate awakening. The inner working of *kamma* were literally and graphically represented in the Thai cosmological manuscript *The Traibhumi*, by King Li Thai, explaining the totality of existence within 31 different levels of existence from the low-rank beings of demons and ghosts to the high-ranking arhat and Buddhist saints as results of specific action and attainments during the course of one's life. (Reynolds, 1982)

The cultural derivation of the *Traiphumi* and other teachings of Buddhism is effectively a moral and social hierarchy, where individuals are differentiated according to their morality and association with Dhamma. Such hierarchy is most directly visible in several temples' walls and temples architecture but also indirectly referenced via other artistic expressions, Buddhist literature and political discussion on elitism and egalitarian values up to this day. One of the contradiction in the *Traibhumi*, is on the one hand the promotion of transcending the hierarchy as the ultimate goal, eliminating all the hindrances in life such as greed, pleasure and delusion in order to stop the rebirth cycle and achieve the *Nibbana* status. On the other

hand, part of the text glorifies the heavenly realms immediately above the human world, where the Universal Monarch, nobles and lords that inhabit our world are equally eligible to live as divine beings, retaining the same wealth, riches, pleasures and entertainments and projecting their materiality at exponentially bigger levels. The text justifies the status of the elite as the storage of positive *kamma* in previous lives, reinforcing an alterity between worldly social classes where people can acknowledge themselves much more directly than in comparison with demons, and brahmas, other entities at the extremes of Buddhist cosmological order. The recognition and justification of such alterity among individuals may have had profound influence in the practice of popular Buddhism, where people although recognising the theoretical superiority of *Nibbana*, are presented with an opportunity to navigate between higher social status via merit-making. People as a result may not necessarily aim for the ultimate awakening just yet, but they may aim for the same worldly goals, identified with higher association with Dhamma and higher status in the hierarchy.

Thai Buddhism, and to a larger extent the practice of Theravada Buddhism within Southeast Asia cannot be understood only academically and idealistically, but must appreciate both ultimate goals and the proximate ones.(Swearer, 2010) . Proximate goals, may represent the way people rationalise within a Buddhist interpretation their worldly material pursuits which may not be inherently Buddhist, but simply inherently human. (Chai Podhisita, 1985)

Lay people seeking either ultimate or proximate goals, have endless opportunities to gain merit in everyday life.



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Almsgiving is an important daily occasion which allows monks to abide by their precept of only eating food that has been donated by the lay community, and the latter, with an opportunity to gain merit by doing so. Happening at dawn, monks leave their temple and walk barefoot usually, collecting food and water from lay people, who are waiting sitting on their knees, in preparation of the offering. Once the monks have collected the offering, gently deposited in his bowl, the actual merit gained in this ritual might be intangible, but it is also brought to reality by the monk's blessing that often follows the ritual using a sutra in Pali language resembling an exchange. While the ultimate direction of these merit gained is the scope of this research, there is instead no doubt that exchange mechanism are part of the practice of Buddhism in Thailand whereas monks often act as mediums between lay people and Dhamma.(Swearer, 2010) Monks are being held in very high esteem because of their life choice to detach themselves from every attachment and conduct a life fully identified with the Buddhist teachings. Monks holding faithfully the 227 precepts, are considered powerful entities and sanctified at times into their own cults, as for popular monks from the forest tradition to whom supernatural powers are assigned. The strong association of monks with Dhamma, makes them exponentially more powerful in their ability to provide something of value to the lay person, whether it is directly through a ritual, or through the blessing of an amulet.

The Kathin ceremony, further reinforces this point, being one of the most important annual occasion for merit-making where lay people sometimes travel, across provinces and regions to offer robes and other necessities to monks at the end of the

rainy season in October, a period where monks are expected not to leave the monastery. A long walking procession takes place through the streets, with musical groups and traditional instruments and dancers wearing traditional clothes, and a wishing tree made of paper currency which will be part of the offering culminating with the presentation of robes and donation in the temple. After the abbot recite the Refuge of the Triple Gem sutra, the lay community leader presents the gifts to the monastery and robes to the monks and the ceremony concludes with a spiritual blessing granting protection and happiness to all the devotees. The fact that monks are expected to held more strictly the precepts leading up to the Kathin ceremony is believed to make such blessing an extremely important occasion for gaining merit.

This assumed spiritual power however can also linked to popular distortions of Buddhist principles, which are exemplified in the ongoing debate around its commercialisation. Votive tablets for instance, which were placed in stupas together with important relics of Buddhists saints, are now precious collectible items, believed to have powerful protective abilities. Aside from those historical amulets, it is a practice for some temples in their own quest of fund raising for the renovation of a temple, to do so via the blessing and selling of limited edition amulets to lay people. The important factor, for new amulets, beside the material composition and aesthetics is in fact the blessing being performed to an amulet and the reputation of the monk who gave it, which affect directly the desirability and value of the item for resell. Amulet ownership then, rather than having any relevance within Buddhist philosophy appear to be more easily located within a grey area of magic-animistic features while

retaining a Buddhist presentation as a source of perceived power. The practice of merit-making within Buddhism highlights the presence of exchange between lay people, monks and objects. The presence of an exchange rather than selfless act does not undermine the transmission and appreciation of Buddhist principles and values, but it does raise the question of what goals is the lay person actually targeting to achieve. Whether lay people gain merit to cultivate their moral perfection and attain awakening as in doctrinal Buddhism, or whether they identify the gaining of merits with those hierarchical higher status made of worldly wealth as much as spiritual is an important question to answer. An important point made by the Buddha during his time is the attack on rituals and ceremonial practice proper of the brahmins in contrast with his teachings which were centred on intentionality and mindfulness to be retained during those actions to be effective for self-development. (Tambiah, 1976). This is a core and distinctive value of Buddhism, which reinforce the idea that to understand Thai Buddhism we need to understand how believers conceptualised rituals while engaging in these, rather than simply acknowledging the rituals themselves.

### **Spirit worship**

Spirit worship practices are usually void of a specific doctrine, or structured system of beliefs because of their indigenous nature, but the historical presence throughout Southeast Asia can be used to gain some implicit consistent framework against which we can measure the specific worship practice in Thailand. Tylor (1871) considered animism as a primordial form of religion, where the concept of soul, intended as



awareness of an immaterial self, had been transported by people into a new form of non-human beings in a process of anthropomorphization of nature which preceded the later sophistication into polytheism and monotheism. Natural phenomena such as rain, were turned into active agents in the form of deities and spirits within a cosmos where humans were able to interact with these non-human entities and positively condition their livelihood.

Necessary for this interaction to happen is the intentional agency to spirits, which unlike the unanimous moral upstanding of all Buddhist figures, spirits show a range of positive and negative characters resembling a mirror image of human beings and human society. (Descola 2013)

Southeast Asian animism is distinct from other forms of animism around the world for the unique hierarchical structure as opposed to the egalitarian cosmos where each entity is of equal importance and power found in animistic beliefs in other regions (Kaj & Sprenger 2016). The domain of spirits here has modelled itself after society, and has apprehended, or perhaps contributed to a similar hierarchical structure with asymmetric relationship of power that can be exchanged between entities. This may be the reason why indigenous animist practice may have been integrated easily with the introduction of Buddhism which showed as well a hierarchical connotation in society. The method of interaction that allows for such exchange was historically the sacrifice or offering, which is indicative of a dominant/submissive relationship where the needs and wants of human beings are being put forward to other entities for their granting. Whereas normally production is a relation of humans and things, in Southeast Asia,



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the successful production is highly linked to an exchange mechanism with spirits whose identity and power are directly related to desired outcomes. (Kaj & Sprenger 2016). From here derives the importance for the agricultural community to revered the rice spirit, the rain spirit in order to secure subsistence and livelihood. In the case of Thailand, humans make offering to entities not necessarily considered superior in Buddhist moral and cosmological sense, but superior in the manifestation of power that needs to be at the very least placated for malevolent ones, and at best be appropriated for genuine ones.

Certain forms of spirit worship, overcome any difference between believers in terms of their social class or education background. The appearance of a spirit house placed outside one's home, can differ greatly in size and appearance, but it is almost inevitably outside everybody's home (Thanapol, 2019). The ancient burial practice and worship of ancestors spirits is what may have resulted in a homogenous society that would eventually recognise the worship of both kin and non-kin spirits in an ever expanding cosmos of spirits for different purposes.

The realm of what can be considered Thai spirits today is extremely vast and the absence of a structure or central authority has allowed for a dynamic evolution of the entities that make up for it. There can be different ways to categorise spirits, such as inherently benevolent spirits and malevolent ones and yet most of them would still fall within the grey space in between (Esterik, 1982) and highly subjective according to an individual's own interpretation. Interactions between people and these spirits can also be classified between what are customary interactions such as taking care of

one's own spirit house while others are considered pro-active ones, where a person seeks to visit a specific spirit shrine with a premeditated offering and goal by engaging with it. Hundreds of spirit shrines are located throughout the country with nationally popular figures appearing in several locations while others are only located in a specific city, province or village. Certain spirits may come from Thai folktales and became part of the Thai popular culture, who owe their continued popularity and belief to the movie industry that still portray them for example in horror movies. The worship of spirits may be directed also to contemporary people raised to the level of spirit such as the legendary singer Phumphuang Duangchan whose premature death and the strife over her estate prompted the cult of her spirit to help her moving on to better life. Lastly a popular division related to spirits is the one between white magic and black magic.

An example of white magic is the blessings to one's car, performed with a monk blessings the vehicle with holy water and applying the Yan symbol with white powder on the vehicle in order to gain protection. Black magic on the other hand involves usually the control or appropriation of a spirit's soul to be employed by the person for his own benefit. While the practice of these rituals is not ordinary displayed in public, it wouldn't be correct to call them esoteric, considering how easy is to obtain these tools such as the Yipe black magic love amulet, used to attract the opposite gender to find a husband or get an ex-boyfriend back, or like Khwai Thanu, a black buffalo statue adorned with holy symbols all over the body, who will serve the owner to fight his enemies if properly taken care of, but who might revolt against its owner if

otherwise. Several forms of black magic are considered illegal, because amulets and statues continue to be in some occasions, “charged” via acts of necromancy and trafficking of actual body parts. In the year, 2010, the red shirts, supporters of ousted president Thaksin, have performed a highly publicised black magic ritual by throwing blood over the gates of Government House where PM Abhisit resided, followed by a curse. (Cohen, 2012)

The worship of Mae Nak, comes from the popular story between romance and terror of a woman, Nak who died during childbirth while her husband Maak was conscripted to fight an undefined war. Upon the end of the war the husband comes back to reunite with Mae Nak and his newborn child, not realising they are actually ghosts even despite the other villagers’ attempt to alarm him. Nak unleashes her rage against villagers and eventually her true nature is discovered by her husband. The story concludes with the help of a high ranking monk to perform a ritual that allows the ghost to be at peace and move on to next life. The violent behaviour of the ghost throughout the story is less of a factor in people’s mind compared to the limitless love of Nak and Maak, and for this reason the shrine grew exponentially in popularity after the movie came out in 1999. Located in Phra Kanong, people visit Mae Nak with offerings of cosmetics, traditional clothes for her and toys for her unborn child and in exchange they ask for exemption to the Thai compulsory military service draw, and for a smooth pregnancy given the ghost hatred for the army and her struggle in childbirth. Once a year, on December 31st, nine monks from the nearby temple come



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regularly to chant in front of Mae Nak for hours, sharing merit with her, and effectively legitimising both the story, and the spirit worship.

Whereas the story of Mae Nak was long known to Thai people even before the movie popularity, the case of the Ai Khai is different as this young boy spirit only recently gained national popularity during the Covid pandemic with people from all over the country visit Nakhon Si Thammarat just to pay a visit and hopefully turn their luck during the economic downturn (Rakrun, 2020).

Ai Khai, according to the legend was a young boy, travelling with the revered monk Luang Pu Thuad during the Ayutthaya period preaching villagers on their way up north when they stopped at a deserted temple where today the Wat Chedi Ai Khai stands. The boy was assigned to stay at the temple while the monk went away, and take care for the villagers, who grew affectionate of him despite his naughty nature, thanks to his ability to solve problems, like finding lost cattle and properties. The boy sadly drowned in a pond, and the story goes that the monk cremated him and allowed the spirit to stay at the temple to keep helping the community. During the economic downturn from the covid pandemic, stories have been spread about the spirit granting lottery winnings and thousands of people who until then were unaware of his story have visited the temple to obtain Ai Khai amulets, raising US\$ 2 million for the temple since the pandemic. People offer toy guns, military clothes and aviator sun glasses for the boy used to like to role-play as a soldier while he was alive. The worship of Ai Khai is not limited to the original temple in Nakhon Si Thammarat, and now an increasing number of Buddhist temples across Thailand have placed an Ai Khai statue within their grounds for people to worship. The popularity of Ai Khai



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challenges the definition of animism of localised nature and begs the question on how to account for such a rapid rise. Is the monetary factor of such a high value that we could account for this as a distortion and commercialisation of Buddhism? Are Buddhism and spirit worship so intertwined that a conflict of principle is not perceived by the monks and lay community? Is the historical paramount position of Buddhism in relation to spirit worship actually challenged? I would argue we could potentially answer positively to these questions and fit these answer with their respective academic theories previously discussed, but this would ignore the perception of individuals involved. I consider at least factually that the Ai Khai phenomenon shows how the realm of spirits is dynamic rather than fixed and people are still open to accept new stories and new entities to worship to obtain something from them affecting as a result Buddhist practice as well.

When looking at animism and Buddhism together, we can see there are underlying common themes linking them such as that of moral alterity and hierarchical relationships and methods of exchange in order to interact between differ entities. Kirsch(1977) supports the idea that spirit worship has survived thanks to the inclusion of spirits into Buddhist cosmology texts and the non-conflicting ultimate goal of Buddhism. We could however also propose that the pre-existing logic of offering towards a superior entity has survived and influenced the Buddhist doctrine to shape its popular version as well, of which today's rituals somehow highlights the attention of worldly goals and status, and not necessarily ultimate liberation.



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Understanding the context of merit making and spirit worship, and relevant scholar theories and speculations to account for their coexistence it is now possible to directly confront individuals and appreciate their own thought process and considerations while engaging in these rituals.

## Research Findings

The method used for this research were survey interviews conducted with people just before or after they performed their offering within at a Buddhist temple and a spirit shrine in Bangkok in order to gain direct insight on the expectations and reasons for people to engage in either ritual. This was to allow for the possibility of an outcome that may fall or be outside scholar theories surrounding Thai faith. Surveys have been conducted on two separate occasions, on April 11, 2022 at the shrine of Mae Nak situated in Suan Luang district and on April 18, 2022 at Praram Kao Kanchanapisek Buddhist temple, in Huai Khwang district. The shrine of Mae Nak has been chosen as representative of a popular spirit shrine in Bangkok, linked to specific deliverables and thus attracting individuals who either intermittently or regularly do engage with spirit worship at some level. The Buddhist temple in Huai Khwang has been chosen for its neutral reputation and the absence of any link to spirits shrines or fortune-telling tools, in order to to engage a potentially different pool of Buddhist believers who may have a different conception and engagement level with Buddhism and spirit worship. Formulation of this survey's questions was in part inspired by an online psychometric test conducted online on the relationship of Burmese faith between



Theravada the Nat cult and Weikza line(Stanford & Jong, 2019) .

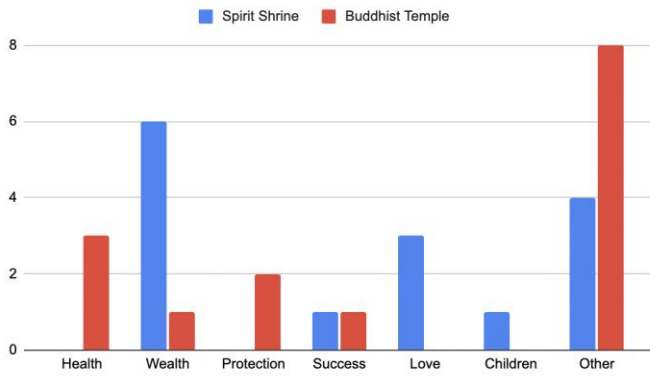
A random sampling of 30 people have been interviewed, 15 in each location with the only pre-requisite of being Thai national, Buddhist and in the process of going to perform or having just concluded performing a ritual offering. Surveys and conversation have all been conducted in Thai language with the assistance of a native speaker and identity of interviews has not been collected in order to facilitate easier conversation. Certain limitations for the interpretation of these findings need to be mentioned before being projected to any claim at the national level, namely the geographical context and the identity of spirit shrine and Buddhist temple in question. The geographical limitation of the two case studies is that both were conducted in Bangkok province, may at some level skew the results towards the urban population of the city, limiting the representation of people living in northeastern, northern and southern Thai demographic, although the migratory effect towards Bangkok does include people from these backgrounds. As a second limitation, in understanding expectation of worshippers is that each spirit shrines are often uniquely linked to specific goals which may inevitably attract people visiting there to that specific goal over others. Lastly, Buddhist temples also have distinctive identity and reputation from one another in people's perception, with certain temples more closely following orthodox Theravada practice while others may feature spirits shrines themselves within their own grounds, fortune-telling tools and may have strong links to luck and lottery. In order to make this study valuable to make assessment to Thai population, more surveys should be conducted at different spirit shrines, different temples across

the different provinces and regions of Thailand. Having understood these limitations, the people from these interactions, although only partially representative of Thai Buddhist target audience, present valuable opinions of people within this large and diversified spectrum that can help assess the thought process in relation to ritual offerings. The set of questions was the same for each location, with five multiple choice questions, and one open ended question available here followed by the findings:

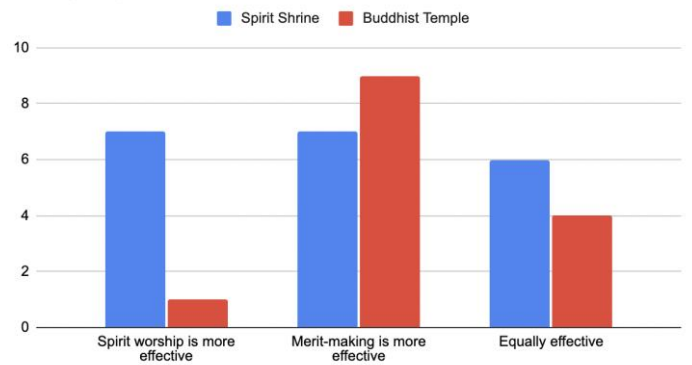
SURVEY	
<b>1. What do you expect to receive as a result of your offering today?</b>	Health    Wealth    Protection    Success    Love    Children    Other
<b>2. Do you believe worshipping spirits is more or less effective than merit-making to achieve your above-mentioned goal?</b>	More effective                  Less effective                  Equal
<b>3. How often do you engage in the worship of spirits compared to merit-making occasions?</b>	More worship of spirits                  Make merit-making                  Equal
<b>4. To what extent do you believe your life is influenced by the spirit worship?</b>	1                  2                  3                  4                  5
<b>5. To what extent do you believe your current life is influenced by merit-making?</b>	1                  2                  3                  4                  5
<b>6. What regulates your choice to worship a spirit as opposed to make merit in order to gain your desired result, if anything?</b>	

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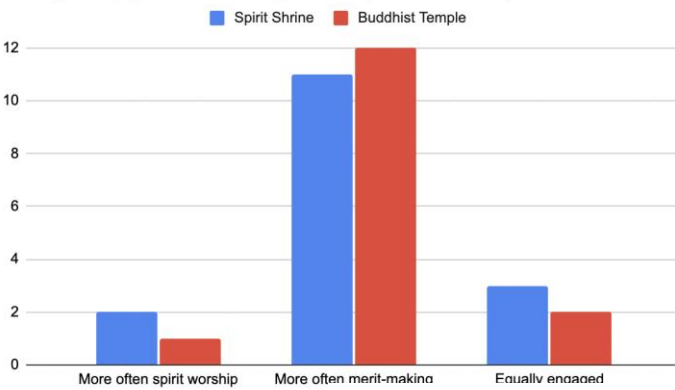
**Q1: What do you expect to receive as a result of your offering today?**



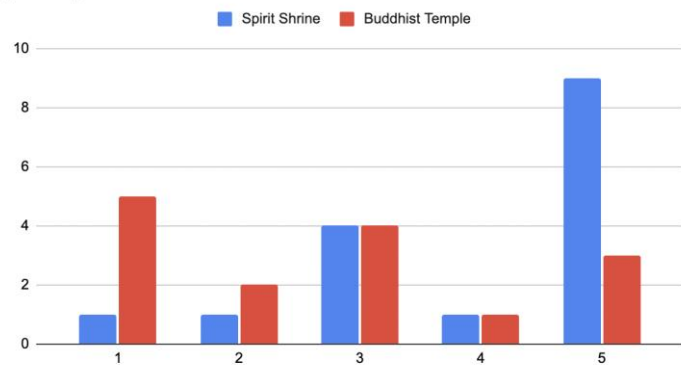
**Q2: Do you believe spirit worship is more or less effective than merit-making to achieve your goals?**



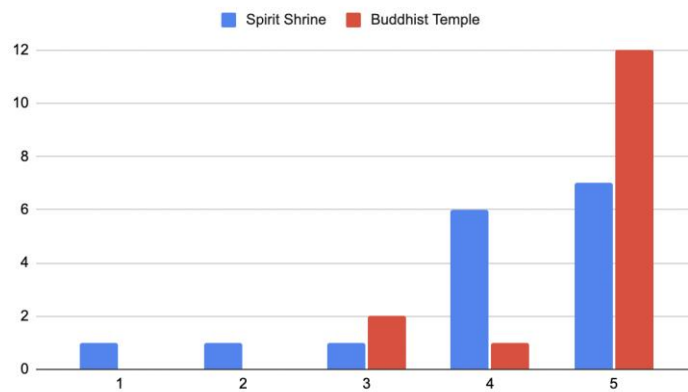
**Q3: Do you engage more often in spirit worship or merit-making?**



**Q4: To what extent do you believe your life is influenced by spirit worship? (Rate 1-5)**



**Q5: To what extent do you believe your life is influenced by merit-making?**



On Q1 more than half of the interviewees from the shrine declared wealth as the main goal, specifically to receive winning lottery numbers from Mae Nak. Another substantial portion declared to come here to thank the spirit for the exemption on the military service received a week earlier from the military draw for which they already made an offering then. From the temple answers, most people indicated their practice of merit-making was not to obtain something specific for themselves but for peace of mind, followed by the sharing of merit with deceased family members and of social purposes, such as visiting the monks and spending time with other members of the community.

On Q2 from the shrine interviewees there was a divergence of opinion showing an equal number of people who considered spirits more effective to achieve goals and the other half who considered merit-making as more effective. From the temple however, almost 3/4 of the people identified merit-making as the only effective way to achieve their goals and only a small portion gave equal weight to both practices.

On Q3 both groups from the shrine and the temple appeared to be consistent in declaring to spend overall more time in merit-making rituals than spirit worship.

On Q4 however there was the opposite outcome of answers, showing that the high majority of responders from shrine declared that spirits have very high influence on their life (score of 5) while from the responders of the temple, the majority gave the least score (1) in regards to their influence.

On Q5 the majority of interviewees from the shrine voted for a very high influence on merit-making (5) with an even distribution on the other scores 1-4 for the rest of

interviewees, while from the temple, all interviewees gave the highest score to the influence merit making in their lives (5).

Q6 was open ended, and people willingness to share their thoughts in this question as well as to add further comments in the preceding multiple choice questions proved essential to the understanding of the rationale behind their choices.

From the open ended answer given by interviewees at the shrine, most people appear to recognise the primary importance of making merit in their life, however, the same people strongly believed that in order to obtain specific goals in life, it is the spirits they need to appeal to achieve them. People from this group linked their past success in business venture, having children, getting a black ball exemption to the military service and winning the lottery through the reverse of the correct spirits such as Mae Nak as well as Phaya Nak, Nang Takian and others.

From the temple data, the interviewees confirmed that they do not seek to obtain something for themselves to begin with, but mainly to reach an internal peace of mind and more importantly share the merit with people close to them and the ones who passed away. Although most of them does not agree on the worship of spirits per se, they acknowledge spirits as entities and do share merit with them as well during the merit-making practice. In a way this answer is consistent with the findings from the shrine, who supported that given the actual location of spirits shrines within the temples compounds, spirits are not necessarily perceived as representatives of a separate belief system but do differ in regards to the principle in engaging such entities.

The findings reveal that although both sets of people, agree on the primacy of Buddhism and engage in merit-making more than spirit worship, the group of people from Mae Nak shrine is not represented at all in the group of people from the temple. In other words, the type of people from the spirit shrine who conferred a higher pragmatic power to spirits while engaging more often in merit-making at temples was not present at all in the temple survey. This is shown by the data, because among the people interviewed at the temple, none of them regarded spirits as having high influence over their lives as regarded by the people interviewed in the shrine.

What the findings do reveal is then a consistency of belief in the primacy of Buddhism in both groups but a strong divergence in regards to the function people attribute to their offering. In the spirit shrine, the majority of people was visiting the spirit shrine only occasionally and motivated by wealth and the military exemption, whereas in the temple the community appeared to be regularly attending the temple with no personal aim other than the sharing of merit and peace of mind, in accordance with Buddhist teachings. Acknowledging the different function of the spirit shrine and Buddhist temple, what is interesting is that although both groups are identified as Buddhists there seem to be no contact between the two groups interviewed, during their merit-making they both claim to engage more often in. Potentially, this non-contact could be explained by the nature of the temple. Having chosen this temple because of the absence of any link to luck and fortune telling services, might have resulted in a group of Buddhists who are more orthodox and doctrinal compared to the average Buddhist person interviewed at the shrine. It is



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possible, were the temple interview conducted in a different temple, the answer might have been different, and the individuals met of the shrine could have been met in the temple as well.

As to what extent the groups of people interviewed in these two occasions represent an average, a minority, or an outlier is not possible to conclude with only two surveys.

In order to identify the weight of these groups and to be able to draw conclusion for people at the regional or national level, more survey can and should be conducted at different temples and shrines to more correctly establish the motivations and expectations of people engaging in spirit worship and merit-making. Only then it would be possible to understand whether the practice of Thai Buddhism and spirit worship in Thai society currently represent two ambivalent channels for a similar quest of worldly goals or whether there is still indeed a surviving separation of functions in the majority of people in regards to world pursuits and self-development.

## **Conclusions**

The bribing of spirits and merit-making practices have co-existed with one another in Thailand for centuries with no sign of decline or dominance over of one another. Rituals performed for spirits and rituals associated with Dhamma stem from a logic that do not find a legitimate connection from a purely theoretical point of view and yet, the popular version of these beliefs co-exist in harmony and non-conflict as representative of different functions in daily life. From the surveys conducted the primacy of Buddhism is uncontested in the people's mind and yet, the dynamic spirits



realm appears to have a higher pragmatic power to obtain worldly goals which could have influenced the practice of Buddhism as well. The surveys reveal the existence of different subsets people who are both Buddhist and engaged in merit-making, but with a strong difference of opinions regarding the influence of spirits in their daily life. These subsets appear not to be in contact with one another within their own spiritual sphere, which prompts the need to identify further subsets and assess how these are more or less representative of Thai society. Religion is ultimately the way people make sense and engage within the world that surrounds them, and correctly grasping the spiritual sphere, could lead to a better understanding of a society and its direction.



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