



Multiplicities and Contingency: Rethinking ‘Popular Buddhism’, Religious Practices and Ontologies in Thailand

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Accepted: 1 March 2024
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Abstract

This paper reconsiders explanations of ‘popular’ Buddhism in Thailand initiated in mid-twentieth century anthropological definitions of vernacular articulations of religiosity in village settings. Buddhist localism, in its various manifestations, is seen to contrast with a doctrinal or literate ‘great’ monastic tradition. In this persisting ethnographic argument, an actor may draw randomly on various syncretic elements of their religiosity according to circumstances (an historical complexity which is sourced in a mix of Sinhalese-sourced Buddhism, animism including magic, and folk Brahmanism). It is therefore not wholly or consistently *one*, but substantively divided into several strands. This long-standing position is problematic as the paper shows. There are multiple coextensive Buddhism/s (plural) within the Greater Theravada tradition, which emerge from an identification of the actors themselves with the one, not the many, as one-unitary-Buddhists. I theorise using a general framework of Meillassoux’s discussion on contingency and, by way of contrast, taking Deleuzian ideas on multiplicity. It is grounded on an understanding of popular or organic lived religion sourced in the early counter-enlightenment or radical enlightenment thinking of Giambattista Vico. Here, it is argued that in Thailand villagers would identify cosmologically as the one, not as the many (in a sense as in the assemblages or varieties of religious practices detached from the totality of the cosmological unitary one). Understanding the creative processes behind cosmological multiplicities is a starting point, with the notion that within specific cultural forms we are faced with a multiplicity of definitions and things to observe, as in an understanding of the varieties of lived Buddhism. The essay is based on an ethnographic assessment from over three decades of field research among ethnic Thai Buddhists at various modalities and settings, and in framing these vernacular religious practices and their ontologies. My gratitude to two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. The essay does not deal directly with specific ethnographic case studies; instead, it is intended as retheorising representations of ‘Popular Buddhism’ in Thailand as based on early scholarship since the 1960s (where Buddhism is constituted as three or more distinctive but intertwined religious strands).

Keywords Popular Buddhism · Contingency · Multiplicity · Vico · Vernacular tradition

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Defining Popular Religiosity

The meaning of what is referred to as ‘popular religion’ is inherent in the early philosophical ruminations of Giambattista Vico (1668–1744),¹ in an emergent context of humanism which contrasts with the rationalism and totalising civilising notions of the European Enlightenment. His religion was based on a poetics of the ancients or folk traditions, the privileging of bodily practices (bodily sensed experience), the use of imaginative terms, creating universals, and a making sense of the lived natural world (Vico, 2000, pp. 71–93). This perspective on lived religiosity stands in contrast to a literate sanctioned theology, or a theology of the canon, and in a genealogy of the religious virtuosi.

Normative or doctrinal religion is civic religion which is transmitted by the mechanisms of socialisation within and regulated by state-sanctioned religious institutions. Popular religiosity may be seen as mass cultural articulations as received in the process of socialisation; it is syncretic, unpredictable, and protean according to defined cultural needs and sensuous embodied socio-cultural life-worlds (see Clasen, 1997). It is a way of seeing and constructing the (lived) world.

In using the term ‘popular’ or folk Buddhism (*phuttha’chaobaan*), I refer approximately to a conceptualisation of a Thai religion associated with the majority people, peasant, or village societies. That is, as a religion of laity and of local village-based monasticism (*wat baan*); a foundation on orality and vernacular literate forms, and as an ‘ideological creation of elites, promoted through folklore societies, museums, historical and ethnographic research, and so on’ (Palmer, 2019, p. 157). In the essay, the term majority ‘Thai religion’ is taken in its broad and inclusive sense as an assemblage of religious rituals and practices that are associated with the category ethnic Thai Buddhism/s (plural). This includes civic religion which generates that (Durkheimian) sense of ‘collective effervescence’, or the socially reinforcing of collective ethnic values. This captures the variations in religiosity as defined by the local actors themselves as ‘Buddhist’.

In a study of popular Buddhism, the concept of reason or rationalism (without contingency) has no legitimate basis of analysis and instead I use the term contingency as taken *in part* from Meillassoux’s (2008)² ‘principle of unreason’ or ‘factuality’³ (everything, including all laws, is contingent),⁴ though

¹ For a discussion on Spinoza’s influence on Vico, see Preus (1979).

² Meillassoux’s thought is based on a quasi-radicalization of Alain Badiou’s conception of the event where chance is the pure thought of the event (‘la pensée pure de l’événement’), a radical occurrence that breaks with the pre-existing parameters and rules of every system. Meillassoux argues that *radical contingency* is itself the ultimate ‘ground’ of being, the only possibility we have of rationally establishing the absolute nature of reality (Kennedy, 2017, p. 73). See also Meillassoux (2012).

³ The meaning here is that everything is a fact, and that it is necessary that everything is a fact. The (unreason–) principle that things could be other than they are (one can imagine reality as being fundamentally different even if we never know such a reality). This forms part of part of Meillassoux’ critique of correlationism (facticity, as in the ‘ultimate absence of reason’, referred to as ‘unreason’, see Meillassoux, 2008, p. 22).

⁴ The principle is suggested in order to account for contingency in the world and that, as Meillassoux (2008, p. 60) argues, in order that there be genuine contingency, there must be no reason for anything to be or to remain the way that it is: ‘everything must be able, without reason, to be other than it is; everything must, without reason, be able not to be and/or be able to be other than it is’.

moving this argument beyond an abstract set of inherently unrelated possibilities, or in terms of nothingness, but in terms of an enigmatic something: a continuum within which actual entities are specifiable in terms of relations (Ramey, 2014).

In general perceptions of popular Buddhism, we may concur with reasoning that all causal relations are contingent, that it is hardly certain what various effects could follow from the same causes. Mysticism, magic, and divination, elements of popular Buddhism/s, as forms of human consciousness and modes of analogical thought (Greenwood, 2020, 2; Tambiah, 2017 [1973]) and unreason or arbitrary reasoning, are discussed below to show a particular religiosity of the one that is supported in the view of contingency. Here I imply the notion that textual or canonical religion and its 'detraditionalization' reveals that all causal relations are contingent, that it opens the possibility that completely different effects could follow from the same causes. In other words, popular religious practices are openings to various consequences and (connected but autonomous) effects which are grounded in vernacular experiences of individuals and the varieties of lived worlds.

There is much more that we do not know than what we do know about the natural world that cannot fit into neat and ordered causal configurations. The relationship between humans and the cosmos can only be established through representational structures, such as among those rituals which are found in popular religion. Essentially, I am arguing that everything is other than what it already is via the lack of scientific reason. It is sufficient to be based on chance, on contingency. Rural 'popular' Buddhists may, in a ritual or metaphorical sense, as aleatory reasoning (Meillassoux, 2012), simply throw the dice, and whatever eventuates from the configuration of numbers must have some inherent sense, and is therefore sufficient (reason) in itself.

As Meillassoux (2012, p. 330) notes:

For, just as a coincidence in a game of chance, as surprising as it might appear, becomes conceivable as the result of a purely aleatory combination if one gives oneself a sufficiently high number of 'turns', so the order of the world might be considered the result of a purely hazardous combination of events with no necessary relation between them, a combination supposed however to be capable of producing, on the basis of an immense number of chaotic attempts, the stability we observe in the universe.

Indeed, contingency has relevance in popular religious studies as it stands at the end of reflections on the limits of reason, while at the same time maintaining an 'ontic reservation within view' (Wuchterl, 2019, p. 185). In a Buddhist correlational (post-Kantian) 'causal' argument,⁵ more attuned to Deleuze minus his correlational

⁵ That is, as in 'correlationism', referring to the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other (see Meillassoux, 2008, p. 11).

absolutism, we may indicate that (*kammic*) cause {equals} (a thought that is contingent on) an effect of an action, but we cannot define a correlation or what it is in the first place.

In the realm of speculation and uncertainty, Buddhist adherents of the eclectic popular religion may move from seeking a clear absolute to one of causal contingency as expressed through the multiplicity of rituals and the fluid possibilities that may be available to them.⁶

Early Ethnographic Delimitation and the Multiple

The early ethnographic search for the organic and in social and cultural forms (as in structural-functionalism) was based on differentiating archaic, peasant-folk societies and cultures. These small-scale societies, although not bounded nor discreet, are intimately connected to each other in overlapping kinship relations and through mutual interpretations of the moral and social order. The communicative modalities noted in small-scale societies imply an intuitive and empathetic comprehension of the lived world and the meanings which are embedded in the connections between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and nature. In other words, the organic nature of the community and the moral order was associated with a broad religiosity which we see expressed in customary or traditional (if changing) organic peasant-folk societies, compared to more complex (urban) and impersonal, allegedly rational modern societies (*Gesellschaft*). Popular religion was then associated with an all-embracing set of beliefs, rituals, and shared moral values of a society based on defining the causes of certain consequences (as in the prescribed choice among actors to turn to various cultural remedies for spiritual ailments). These ensure that the lived world, its material, natural, and its spiritual dimensions are in concurrence or in a correlation.

Popular religion is assumed to be a religion of the (majority) ordinary folk, rather than that of the urban literate monastic clergy, though these distinctions in rural Thailand have little bearing other than as modalities of ethnic traditions, historic monastic practices, and lineages, which are found in various settings. The literate (educated) monks carry out the authority of the great tradition using religious texts. These texts may in turn (over time) be reworked at a local level to conform to vernacular traditions (as in the elaborate annual recitation of the Vessantara Jataka, the *Bun Phra-Wet* festivities among Thai-Lao speakers).⁷

⁶ Rather than privileging epistemology — ‘or the study of other people’s representations of what we may know to be the real (lived religious) world’ — such an approach ‘acknowledges the existence of multiple worlds’ (Carrithers et al., 2010, p. 153).

⁷ See for instance Jory (2002a, 2002b), Bowie (2018), and Gabaude (2016).

This spatial division led observers to posit a clear distinction in their analysis between urban and rural religious forms.⁸ The work of early anthropologist Robert Redfield (1897–1958 see (1956, 1960))⁹ on 'little tradition', the folk-peasant societies and their cultural transitions, is notable here. Since then, numerous studies have defined little and great religious traditions (Obeyesekere, 1963).¹⁰

The religious and the moral orders are one and the same and interconnected and constitute a continuum, as in the sense of peoples' lives connected to a rhythmic repetition in the *nomos* based around the agricultural and ritual calendar, genealogies, and, among local religious devotees, its (predictable) cyclical processes.¹¹ Earlier, for example, Opler (1959)¹² commented on the central role typically attributed to religion in Indian village life, saying that a detailed record made of daily activities in the Gangetic village of Senapur showed that over a 366-day period, religious activities occurred in 302 days of the year in the village, and on many of these days more than one such activity occurred.

In transitional folk-peasant societies as a consequence of modernity, religion constitutes the ultimate ground and substance of culture, a pervasive element articulated not only in its religious institutions but in every aspect of cultural life. The popular in religion was in the original forms of culture, as in the roots of self- and collective identity, in holistic frames of understanding, and in providing meaning in the lived world. It is observed in folk tales and its vernacular mythology along with its transmissions which allowed for varieties of popular religion to be extended and enriched over time, as it confronts the project of modernity, orthodoxy, and in reformed urban religion.

Kidpromma (2022) has recently cautioned about simplistic categories of Buddhism/s in modernity, as defined by rational, normative practice, but instead suggests an ongoing integration of traditional cosmologies and mythologies already present in lived religion. It should be remembered too that the normative Buddhist texts are replete with tales of the Buddha's supranormal/supernatural powers (*abhiññā/iddhi*) because of meditation achievements. As Reynolds (2015) noted, in Buddhism, this is a reason why the boundary with magic is especially blurred given that the Buddha himself was accredited with the possession of such powers.

⁸ However, as discussed later, in late modernity, there is a complexity confounded in these spatial polarities as an intermingling between two or more religious' orientations (cultural hybridities).

⁹ See also Singer (1959) and Marriott (1955).

¹⁰ Stanford and Whitehouse (2021) more recently suggested an evolutionary and dialogic or cooperative relation between the 'wild' little and the doctrinal/great traditions based on their studies of Burmese Buddhism (though one involving more as an unconvincing cognitive, psychological assessment, rather than an ethnographic mode of analysis).

¹¹ A further differentiation can be made between complex urban societies where there is a somewhat clearer distinction between sacred and profane in the social world and the simpler, peasant societies where the distinctions are deemed less relevant.

¹² Opler is better known for his work on the North American Apache Indians.

Buddhist Modernism is itself, in part, a product of the engagement between Buddhism and the European Enlightenment, mediated by the experiences of colonial encounters. In Thailand, this is embedded in the nineteenth century royalist reforms as Thailand transitions from what Mongkut referred to as superstitious to a rational ('Protestant' (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988)) Pali Buddhism. Indeed, as a critique of the royalist foundational text *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* ('Three Worlds of King Ruang'),¹³ it is the culmination of a long history of visionary and cosmological literature within the Theravada tradition, representing in a vivid and concise form, the religious universe within which Thai Buddhists have traditionally lived. But, in the case of the *Phra Ruang*, it is an elite-based cosmology which is interpreted from the perspective of its literate royalist author. The world is, as the world is represented (*Vorstellung*) or conceptualised.

A further point to be made here is that since and even preceding the crisis of modernity and its radical immanence, emergent middle-class in Theravada countries have sought secular and vernacular traditions to complement the literate religious traditions. These include, for instance mediums, magical monks, traditional healers, use of protective tattoos, and associated rituals and incantations, a liturgy of media-fused ghost stories and the idiosyncrasies of well-known magical Buddhist monks, practices of divination, astrology/fortune-telling, and a thriving protective amulet market-place (Jackson, 2023; Baker & Phongphaichit, 2013; McDaniel, 2011; Nilsen, 2011; Taylor, 2015). The transmissions have not necessarily occurred from the little to the great tradition, but also in reverse and meeting mid-way. In Scott's (1979, p. 130) words, though referring to revolutionary contexts, an intermingling situation whereby the "little tradition" percolates up... [and the] "great tradition" percolates down'.

A key focus of analysis into popular religion is divination or astrology and how divination substantiates the irreducibility of the actual for possibility (contingency). In popular religiosity, archaic or folk arts of divination are intended to address the problem of a world that is replete with contingency. But, as Ramey (2014) notes, this contingency is nevertheless linked to actuality in ways that recur in patterns that are uncannily significant, at least for devotees to feel satisfied that they are complete through ritual practices.¹⁴ Evans-Pritchard would have argued that magic and divination practices do not deny the power of efficient and material causes or involve a theory of causation that is anything but primitive. Deleuze (1990, p. 163), who was always concerned with contingency, makes the point that divination (and associated magic) involves a grounding in ethics and that 'divinatory interpretation consists of the relation between the pure event (not yet actualized) and the depth of bodies, the corporeal action and passions whence it results'. Vico (2000, p. 7) (as noted earlier) also postulated that divination is in fact the oldest, the most archaic form of (Christian) religion which binds (*religio*) the heavens to earth. Let us also not forget that the various forms of magic are as much part of the modern world as the primitive (see also Styers, 2004; van Schaik, 2020).

¹³ (Translated) Frank and Mani Reynolds (1982).

¹⁴ See for example Evans-Pritchard's (1935) classic study of witchcraft among the Azande.

Early Scholarship and Cultural Divisions Within Practicing Buddhism

Several early Buddhist scholars in observing Buddhist actors could not see the unity of one, but only the many separate or segmented cultural emanations from the one. They tended to argue for a differentiated approach. That is, that the subject cannot be true to one unless they discarded or compartmentalised the other distinct cultural accretions. It was noted in earlier scholarship that Thai (popular) Buddhism has been seen as constituted by at least three distinct syncretic and historical layers ('subsystems') bound loosely together: (animism [localism], folk Brahmanism [Indic culture], and Sinhalese/Pali Buddhism [the Mahavihara tradition]).

For instance, Barend J (Bas) Terwiel (1976), in his ethnographic research in the late 1960s at the central Thai village of Wat Sanchao, was fundamental to this debate. He had earlier categorised rural Buddhism in two tiers as 'syncretist' or 'compartmentalised'. Terwiel's central argument was that Buddhism is fundamentally syncretic and magico-animistic (the monkhood seeking worldly pursuits or goals, or perhaps enabling the laity to seek worldly pursuits), syncretism in the sense that villagers do not make a sharp distinction between Buddhism on the one hand and various kinds of 'magical' practices on the other. He stated that some scholars cannot differentiate between Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices and beliefs; some consider a fusion of religious typologies while others that the distinction between Buddhism and non-Buddhism can be clearly drawn (where Buddhism and non-Buddhism viewed as complementary subtypes of religion, with each subtype fulfilling a distinct function in society) (1976, p. 392). These three functional subsystems mutually reinforce each other, seemingly without any cultural conflict.

Indeed, as Terwiel (1976) further showed, many scholars agree that Theravada Buddhists adhere to more than one religious tradition or cultural ontology, but still regard themselves as 'one' (e.g. an interpretative problem which echoes Weber's early explanatory modalities). These Southeast Asian peoples adhere to other strands of religion, generally classed under rubrics such as 'non-Buddhist beliefs', 'folk religion', 'animism', or 'supernaturalism'. Yet, though virtually all authors recognise this situation, there is no consensus in their views on how the different 'subsystems' are interrelated or are correlational, or indeed even ontologically (rather as univocal ontology, as individuated differences), that is how villagers themselves (self-) identify. For instance, Patchanee Malikhao (2017) remarked: 'in my opinion, the Thai's common beliefs are more of an animistic than a Buddhist nature, the Thai is more oriented toward the exterior, institutionalized norms of Buddhism that the core moral principles, while supernatural elements are ever present...' (etc.) Confirming Niels Mulder's (1985) argument, she concludes that 'the Thai Weltanschauung combines the sophisticated elegance of a universal principle with the primordial directness of animistic thinking'. Further, in unifying the many, that somehow ontologically Theravada Buddhism and the 'Buddhist animistic heritage have corroborated and concluded a perfect marriage...' (Malikhao, 2017, p. 55).

As noted, Terwiel's fieldwork was focused on the interface between Buddhism and the magico-animistic aspects of Thai religion, showing the lack of distinction

between these categories for the villagers he studied. However, in a subsequent revision (2012) to his earlier work, he recognised these limitations which differentiated folk-peasant religion of the village from urban (doctrinal) Buddhism and where he stated that magico-animism was relevant only in the village context. As Reynolds (2019, p. 8) said, in fact, the beliefs and practices concerned with magico-animism are found throughout the religious systems of the Tai people and among regional (Theravada) Buddhist cultures.

More than thirty years on since Terwiel's ethnography in a village community, under the impact of modernity and globalisation, the town or city and village everywhere have colluded. Indeed, forms of urban religion now integrate mysticism and magic into its normative social field (Kidpromma, 2022, p. 14). McDaniel (2011) more recently was also concerned with the 'magic' question and correctly seeks to prioritise emic understandings over analytical models that impose distinctions between 'Buddhism' and 'magic', or between 'elite' and 'popular' religious orientations, as arbitrary multiplicities. What I am arguing here is that from the root of one is a multiplicity itself, and that the concept of layering in order to form the one is redundant. As Laruelle (1998, p. 35) notes, ontologically, we may say that the one ultimately determines the multiple as such, or in its identity. Thai Buddhism, as we may observe (and even experience it), is constituted by multiple discursive layers which may include (multiple) historical forms, (multiple) local pre-Buddhist animism/s, and (multiple) folk Brahmanism/s. In the context of such variables, the issue for the post-modern ethnographer is, how do syncretic rural-dwellers in Thailand then self-identify as constituted in these unstable relations of difference.

In Sri Lanka, Michael Ames (1964) was one of the earliest exponents of a structural analysis of the religious system of the Sinhala Buddhists. This study included magico-animism in a reductive, functionalist Maussian/Durkheimian analysis, not unlike the criticisms in the later work of Stanley Tambiah's totalising sociological approach (Taylor, 2013, pp. 51–67), critiqued by Charles Keyes (1978, 1987).

Thomas Kirsch (1977; supported by Hans-Dieter Evers, 1977) argued for a 'syncretic approach' to understanding Thai religion. This explains how religious systems have influenced, evolved, and interacted with other value systems. In so doing, it recognises that the coexistence and interplay of indigenous and non-indigenous elements in Thai religion have long persisted throughout Thai history (indigenous-animist, Brahmanic, and [scriptural] Buddhist).

In this intertwined complexity, or correlation, one religious element is contingent on the other/s, and essentially between an 'abstract Buddhism' and the other non-Buddhist elements mediated by the 'vicissitudes of everyday life' (p. 266). Kirsch further emphasised the principal religious rationalisation called 'Buddha-ization', in which Buddhism, as a major state-sponsored religion, worked to upgrade the overall religious system by absorbing and converting non-Buddhist elements of the population into Buddhist ones. That being the case, as villagers may resort to various traditional cosmologies of healing, divination, and thaumaturgy, are they consciously acting as (being-) Buddhist, or as something else?

In Meillassoux's sense, there is only a correlation between thinking and being, rather than the misleading consideration of one to be set apart from the other. Here, being is always meditated (through language, culture, consciousness etc.) and that

it is therefore not possible to think anything outside the correlation, it can only ever describe the fact of this correlation. It may be that villagers take recourse to empirical contingency as chance, at times when things go wrong in the life cycle and failing any certainty about what will happen. At least one can be certain that it will occur within currently existing magical parameters, derived from the experience of others. It must also be remembered that for villagers, as Mauss (2010, p. 114) states in a general sense of the improbable and seeking certainty through magic, 'nobody seeks out a magician unless he [sic] believes in him'.

Popular Buddhism in Thailand and Notion of Multiplicities

The nineteenth century Protestant missionary and Sinologist Ernest Eitel remarked that.

Certainly, if I had asserted that Buddhism remained anywhere or for any length of time a mere system of doctrine and consistently developed itself in practice life, as it was developed by thinking minds in the solitude of the cloister or in the study of the philosopher, I would have to demur at these charges. But the fact is, I have constantly kept in mind that Buddhism is one thing as a dogmatic theoretical system and another thing as a living practical religion, that Buddhism developed itself in one form when cast into the crucible of logical thought and was moulded into another shape under the sober practical influences of daily life, in the struggle for existence (1873, p. 75)

This statement referring to a religious binarism and transformation reverberates with the early modern analysis of Buddhism in South East Asia which delineated a literate clerical (universal) tradition from folk or local village variants of the Theravada religion. In this logic, the great tradition 'moulded' or shaped the little tradition. Late nineteenth century Anglican missionary Reginald Copleston (in Ling, 2013 [1973], p. 249) also talked about the 'two Buddhisms' in Sri Lanka, with a marked divide between the little and great traditions; one was pure, the other impure. Since this time, the frame of reference for viewing living Buddhism has sought to divide and categorise religion pertaining to its soteriology, pragmatism, and accessibility to devotees, whether as 'kammatic' (or apotropaic) or 'nibbanic' (virtuosi religion) (King, 1964; Spiro, 1971; also, for Thailand see Keyes in Keyes & Daniel (eds.) 1983) or in its normative (scriptural) and non-normative (lived) element of a belief system.

Trevor Ling (2013 [1973], p. 22) may have been incorrect to postulate that Buddhism is not a 'religion' per se, that is, not a belief system. Instead, he argued that it was originally a non-religious philosophy,¹⁵ one that is devoid of the devotional

¹⁵ In textual matters alone, an understanding of the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) — the essence of Buddhism — would dispel any doubts about both its logico-epistemology *and* soteriology as a religion.

element of the common folk. However, he concedes a later development of multiple articulations of the religion and the many Buddhism/s.¹⁶ It may be many ‘Buddhisms’ to an observer; but from an actor point of view, it is the one. It is in contradistinction to a dialectical position where the multiple/many is opposed to the one.

A study of contemporary Buddhism in Thailand would indicate that an either/or position in defining the religion is redundant. Instead, it is more useful to perceive a creative third-way space in an emergent hybridised¹⁷ religion (Kitiarsa, 2012, pp. 14–16). That is, neither are there any actor associations solely with the little, nor with the great traditions. But it is argued, historically, cultural hybridisation and change from within has always been an element of the syncretic tendencies of localism and its transformations over the centuries. The religion was never static, except in the momentary prism and the distorted lens of the observer’s gaze.

Indeed, as stated, from the sociology of actor perspectives, religion is seen as unitary one, not of the many. In late-modern urban Thailand, Taylor (2008) and Kitiarsa (2012, n.28) for example described a melange of new and imaginative hybrid religious practices. These were a consequence of modernity and globalisation indicating cultural creativity and the persistence of vernacular religiosity.

As in much of Buddhist Southeast Asia, there are then multiple conterminous Buddhism/s within the Greater (regional) Theravada tradition. As mentioned above, the Thai religious context is observed to constitute a variety of apotropaic magic practices, each with their own spaces. Given Thai Buddhism’s cultural multiplicities, it is not hard to see that the various tendencies and practices that constitute popular religion include magic-animism and its moral contingencies. Nonetheless, in a Deleuzian sense, we may ask: are these epistemological orientations and practices sourced from the one, or from the many?

Deleuze and Multiplicities

I take the concept of multiplicities from Deleuze (1994 [1968]), and later elaborations in Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as varieties of articulations, a concept which does not imply a combination of the many and the one (singular), but instead an organisation (of difference) which belongs to the many as such, and which has no need for unity of order to form a system. The multiplicities referred to here pertain more to a correlationism,¹⁸ to self-identity as unifiable (molar) wholes (as in civil religion), expressing self-similarity across its variations, organisable and which desires to make an either/or from the both/and complex. In response to the syncretic variants of popular magical and religious rituals and practices available

¹⁶ See for instance recent work show variations among Buddhism/s outside but not within national traditions, e.g. Nicholas Brasovan and Micheline Soong (eds.) (2019) and John Strong (2015).

¹⁷ As discussed originally by Homi Bhabha (2004 [1994]), here used in relation to a creative space that lies between the discourses embedded in ‘little’ (cf. subaltern) and ‘great’ (dominant) traditions (the latter statist and hegemonic), and their respective subjectivities (e.g. peasants and elites).

¹⁸ Deleuze in fact does not entertain the possibility of existence without correlation in his sense of absolutism, but concurs with Meillassoux on contingency.

to them, popular Buddhist practitioners would argue that they are one-unitary-Buddhist. However, we need to keep in mind that there are also unconscious, intensive (molecular) multiplicities, as a multitude of (heterogeneous) assemblages that tend to compose (virtual) identity and being (as in 'becoming'-Buddhist) (see also Tanabe (2016) for northern Thailand).

Identification as a Buddhist person ([...*nabthuer-saasanaaphut*] however defined by normative categories) is adequate. Rather than postulate binary oppositions between the one and the many, we could instead see only 'multiplicities of multiplicities' which form a single assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 38; Tanabe, 2016, 3–9), in this case as extending to the subjects' identification as ethnic Buddhists. Multiplicities are of course rhizomatic, lacking a basis of unity and subjective division; by their nature, they expose the unitary arborescent (great tradition) structures (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 8). It seems that local or vernacular religion is based on decentred pluralism, non-unitary practices, multiplicities, which move away from the canon. Although we cannot dispense with the canon as a traditional, historical-philological paradigmatic reference (Freiberger, 2004), we must emphasise the obvious multifaceted character of Buddhism and deal with its diversity, its historical breaks, its differences. Each religious element that constitutes the whole (a self-identifying ethnic Buddhist) may be marked by a persisting identity produced by a prior relation, an intensity, between variant religious expressions. These emanate from a particular historicity.

In fact, although Deleuze seems to work with juxtapositions of unity and difference, as earlier considering the problematic of difference, in his later work with Felix Guattari, he shifted more to a theory and practice of free multiplicities.¹⁹ The multiplicity variable Deleuze argues (influenced by Bergson's continuous/discrete multiplicities) is in the 'how many, the how and each of the cases', and that everything is a multiplicity insofar as it engenders *an idea* (and in having an arbitrary number). The one is also a multiplicity, which dispels the philosophical notion of many to one and one to many typologies. The variety of multiplicity was, it seems, simply stated in his early work as difference (Deleuze, 1994, p. 182). Religious systems, and the identification that individuals attach to their beliefs, are sites for *the actualisation of Ideas* (neither one, nor multiple) but a (continuous) 'multiplicity constituted of differential elements, differential relations between those elements, and singularities corresponding to those relations...' And that these three dimensions, e.g. elements, relations, and singularities, constitute three aspects of multiple reason (Deleuze, 1994, p. 278). The individual (or system), far from being indivisible, never ceases to divide and change its nature (constantly in flux), not constituting a fixed entity, but articulates itself in the form of internal multiplicities.

It is clear in the individual who says that they are an (ethnic) 'Buddhist' in a 'populist' (mostly rural) setting exposed to multiple layers of historical cross-currents and influences is not 'one', but multiples of one. To divide the individual into many in his case is erroneous. The one being their (Self) identity (Deleuze, 1994, p. 257). In vernacular Buddhism, individuals are representations of the one and

¹⁹ See Francois Laruelle's critique of Deleuze in Terence Blake (n.d.)

the many, the normative marker drops away and becomes meaningless. Textualists or canonists may ponder on this metaphysical dilemma as they need to mark certain practices under observation in accordance with a measurement of doctrinal or scriptural traditions, hence as certain elements pure (normative) and others impure (non-normative).

In seeking difference, White (2017) noted how certain spirit practices within Theravada Buddhism were a persistent topic of study for early anthropologists of Buddhism in South East Asia in the early decades of the post-war years. Thus, instead of seeing Buddhism as ‘containing plurality, contradiction, and even incommensurability within itself’, these scholars used structural–functional descriptions of ‘local configurations of various religious systems at play within any particular Theravada Buddhist cultural order’ (p. 191). The problem is these tended to see modalities of spirit possession for instance as an aberration of Buddhism (p. 193). What is needed are new socio-cultural lens of analyses to challenge the classical models of spirit possession, Theravada Buddhism, and their relationship with each other. This would then open new possibilities for understanding spirit possession within Thai Theravada Buddhism and the relation between them ‘highlighting the plural, fluid, and contested understandings of possession at play within contemporary Thai Buddhist landscapes’ (p. 194).²⁰

In accord with this methodological approach and for new anthropological understandings of lived Buddhism, it is useful to see this as a religious unitary one (a multiplicity of one, not the many; as an assemblage or as an interactive, contingent correlation). In this understanding, we can explore actor-orientations on the lived world, the practicalities, limitations, and conceptions of an interactive, intense moral universe.

Popular Religion and National Politics

Popular forms of religiosity were always a problem for the modern western-influenced Thai nation-state, attempting to bring everything into a structured administrative order. It was also a response to western religious (Christian) influences in the country (Winichakul, 2015). The national monastic reforms at the turn of the twentieth century in Thailand may have been exaggerated in terms of the extent of the state’s rationalisation and standardisation of Buddhism. Regional or multiplicitous variants of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand have long existed and coexisted with state reform (orthodox) Buddhism. For instance, even the active destruction of village spirit shrines initiated by some wandering reform-Nikaya monks in Northeast Thailand as promoted in the turn of the twentieth century to eradicate ‘superstitious’ ritual practices, these failed to annihilate vernacular difference. These practices were not seen by royal Bangkok monks to be in accord with new (western) science and an emerging ethos of the modernising Thai state.

²⁰ See also on Thai Buddhism and spirit mediumship Muecke’s early work (1992), Morris (2000), and the edited collection by de la Perrière and Jackson (2022).

As noted in Taylor (1993, p. 118), the intensity of the national campaign was such that one forest monk noted local shrines were burned and 'there would be nothing but smoke all day long'. The villagers were left to a vulnerability to unseen spirits after this centre-nation purification of the national religion and so in place of the destroyed animistic shrines, they were handed out instead doctrinally normative inscribed Pali chants. The canon was supreme and for a while displaced vernacular or cult (*latthi*) traditions, though these regional varieties of Buddhism were never destroyed. As found today in regional Thailand, variants of Buddhism at times subsumed under normative state Buddhism are practiced and maintained through the enactment of rituals and lineage traditions. For instance, some Northern Thai *kammaṭṭhāna* chanting texts, translated from the early Tai Tham script, were passed down to regional monks in the nineteenth century and have maintained a uniqueness in northern Thailand monasteries.

How effective was this normative appropriation of diverse religious practices in the periphery which occurred under centre-nation royal auspices? Since late modernity, we have seen an increased diversity of Buddhist practices largely sourced at the periphery as part of localised attempt at a revitalised vernacular religiosity. This diversity (sourced from the one) of Buddhist doctrinal hermeneutics in rural Thailand, Parnwell and Seeger (2008) call 'relocalization', led by a few activist monks and middle-class Buddhist laity. It was impactful at some level, but also limited in scale as the centre-nation-state has to some extent shown itself capable since modernisation of capturing and appropriating cultural symbols or religious diversity in the social and political margins, and converting this to civic religion as an absolute religio-political space (Lefebvre, 1991).

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that villagers identify cosmologically as the one, not as the many (in a sense here as in the assemblage or varieties of religious practices detached from the totality of the cosmological unitary one). Understanding creative processes behind cosmological multiplicities²¹ is a starting point, with the notion that within specific cultural forms we are faced with a multiplicity of definitions and things to observe, as in understanding the varieties of lived Buddhism. In the context of small-scale societies that were subjected to peripheral, heterogeneous, and uneven modernisation, popular expressions of religion survived and have not been muted by the imposition of outside canonical religion, far less from the influences of modern secularism (Parker, 1998).

Popular religion is also not static, but contingent, and like all cultural forms liable for transformations which enable it to persist and remain meaningful. The essay has looked at the dialectical relations between doctrinal religion, the bourgeois and intellectual forms of religion, and the contingent multi-complex religion of the majority devotees. The early debates which still resound in studies of contemporary Buddhism need to be re-theorised in the context of contingency and multiplicity. Indeed, an understanding of the meaning of popular or vernacular Buddhism among various actors can only be had through the notion of contingency. The simplistic notion

²¹ E.g. as in Fredrik Barth's classic work among the Ok people in New Guinea (1990 [1987]).

that an embodied/unitary person may be constituted in multiple ways is misleading; instead, correlatively, an organization (of difference) which belongs to the many and which has no need for unity of order to form a systemic (molar) whole is perhaps a better conceptualization.

The Deleuzian multiplicities that I have been concerned with here pertain more to religious self-identity as ontological univocity among actors as unifiable wholes, as self-similarity across variations, and which in normative religion in turn creates an either/or, from the both/and the complex. The logic of binarism, which pervades studies of doctrinal Buddhism, renders totalisation problematic. It is not possible as an observer to define Buddhist orthopraxy while discounting the multi-complex variants of popular Buddhist practice. Here I have argued for a more nuanced and pluralistic understanding of varieties of popular religious practice and ontology within self-perceptions among actors of *being* religious.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions

Declarations

Competing Interests The author declare no competing interests.

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