

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION



When I first came to Thailand, I firmly believed that Thailand was a predominantly Buddhist country. Not long after I had lived in Thailand, I concluded that Thai religion is not pure Buddhism but a blend of Buddhism and other religious beliefs namely, Hinduism and animism. Since then, this “religious complexity” in Thailand has been my interest.

The “religious complexity” in Theravada Buddhist countries such as Thailand, however, is not new to anthropologists who study religious phenomena in Theravada Buddhist countries. I should first mention previous anthropological studies on religious complexity in Thailand. Major studies on Thai religious complexity are: *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* by S. J. Tambiah, *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand* by B. J. Terwiel and *Complexity in Thai Religious System* by A. Thomas Kirsch.

Tambiah studies the relationship between Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in a village in North-east Thailand. He describes the religious practices performed in the village, then classifies them into four kinds of rituals: Buddhist rituals, *khwan* rites, cults of the guardian spirits and malevolent spirits. These four ritual complexes are examined, both independently and in respect to their mutual links. He describes the structural relations between the different kinds of rituals in terms of linkage, opposition, hierarchy and complementarity. He says that the total field can not be displayed into a neat hierarchical scheme because those complexes not only portray oppositional features but also share similarities and complementarities. Each kind of ritual functions in response to people’s needs in different situations and contexts. It can be noted that his view is stratigraphic in seeing two strata in the Thai religion, namely Buddhism and spirit cults.

In “Monks and Magic,” Terwiel observes rituals in a rural community in

central Thailand and demonstrates the fundamental difference between the intellectual, elitist conception of Buddhism and the rural, magico-animistic interpretation of Buddhism.

Kirsch's "Complexity in Thai Religious System" deals with the complexity in Thai religious system as well. This study is not based on anthropological fieldwork but basically on information from various sources. His analysis is also structural and functional; he illustrates a clear distinction between three components, that is Buddhist, Brahmanist and animistic components. In his study, Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism are examined in the following aspects: goal orientation, worldview, ritual, specialists, participants and social focus.

Kirsch also attempts to illustrate a clear hierarchical structure of the three components that make up the Thai religion. He gives a paramount position to Buddhism within the complex religious situation, viewing Brahmanism as a subsystem of the larger Buddhist system, and perceiving animism in opposition to Buddhism.

Given various academic views of the complexity in Thai religion, I attempt to understand such religious complexity by focusing on one specific case study.

I will use the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the most important Royal and National temple, as a case study of Thai religious complexity. I will examine art, rituals and people's behaviors around the Temple to analyze the relationship between Buddhism, Hinduism and animism that co-exist in the Temple.

## Objective

To analyze and illustrate the complexity of the Thai religious system through art, rituals and people's behaviors as observed in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.

## Hypothesis

Although Thailand is a Buddhist country and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the most important Royal and National temple, basically reflects Buddhistic elements, one can find the religious complexity as evidenced in the co-existence of Buddhism, Hinduism and Animism in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in terms of art, rituals and people's behaviors.

## Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework in approaching the religious complexity in Thailand is mainly structural and functional. Firstly, following Kirsch's standpoint I shall distinguish between three elements, namely Hinduism, Buddhism and Animism, found in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Secondly, each component will be examined along a number of dimensions as displayed by Kirsch. Thirdly, I will attempt to analyze the structural and functional relations between each element using Tambiah's terms such as hierarchy, opposition, complementarity and linkage and then discuss how they constitute a single total religious system.

The term "Buddhism" is a problem since one can never find "pure Buddhism" in any of the Buddhist countries. What we find is Thai Buddhism, Burmese Buddhism, etc. The fact is that Buddhism is always found mixed with indigenous beliefs or animism. According to Rajadhon<sup>(1)</sup>, a Thai scholar, views Theravada Buddhism is always associated with animistic beliefs and practices. He calls such a blend of Buddhist and animist beliefs and practices "Popular Buddhism". I agree with his view that, most of the time, animistic aspects cannot be excluded from Theravada Buddhist beliefs and practices. However, since this thesis is an analysis of religious complexity in Thailand, I sometimes need to lay out separately Buddhism and animistic Buddhism, in order to decode the

complexity, as animistic beliefs have always been part of the Buddhist traditions.

#### The Case Study: The Temple of the Emerald Buddha

I selected the Temple of the Emerald Buddha as a case study of religious complexity in Thailand for the following reasons:

Firstly, it is the most important Royal and National Temple. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha, or *Wat Phra Kaeo* as it is called by the Thai people, was constructed in the precincts of the Royal Palace by King Rama I in 1782 A.D. in order to install the Emerald Buddha as a religious symbol of his Dynasty. It has been used as the site for Royal ceremonies ever since. It can be said that *Wat Phra Kaeo* is the most important Royal Temple.

Besides being a Royal Temple, it is also a National temple. How can it be called a National temple? It is because *Wat Phra Kaeo* is a temple for all the Thais; it is not associated with one ethnic or one specific community group as other temples are. In this respect, it can be said that it is a National temple for everyone to visit.

Secondly, the Temple houses the Emerald Buddha image to which people come to pay respect. It is said that it has attracted more people than any other Buddha images because it is believed that the image has sacred power to grant devotee's wishes. Thus, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha is an interesting place to observe the religious rituals and religious activities of people.

Thirdly, in this Temple three religious components namely, Buddhist, Hindu and animistic elements, can all be observed. Buddhist elements are clear in this Temple because it is a Buddhist temple and Buddhist rituals are regularly performed. One can see Hindu elements in art and architecture since this is a Royal temple. <sup>(2)</sup> One can also observe people's animistic behaviors such as worshipping the Emerald Buddha, treating it as a benevolent spirit whom people can ask for what they wish. Therefore, it can then be said that *Wat Phra Kaeo*

is an appropriate place for a case study of the complexity of Thai religion.

## Research Procedure

### 1. Review related documents

Related document concerning the religious complexity in Thailand and the temple of the Emerald Buddha will be studied and referred to.

### 2. Fieldwork

Field data collecting in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha will be conducted, together with participant observation of people's behaviors.

## Definition of the Terms

### (1) Buddhism

In this thesis, the term Buddhism indicates Theravada Buddhism in Thailand.

### (2) Hinduism

In this thesis it indicates Hindu aspects of the Thai religion. The Hindu elements found in the Thai religion are, for example, the concept of divine kingship (*devaraja*), court Brahmins and certain procedures in court rituals of Hindu origin.

### (3) animism

It indicates beliefs and rituals concerning spirits such as ancestor worship, village guardian spirits, etc.

### (4) animistic-Buddhism

In this thesis it indicates animistic aspects integrated in Buddhist

rites. For example, the worshipping of the Emerald Buddha can be viewed as animistic-Buddhist behavior since it seems that the Thai Buddhists treat the Emerald Buddha as a sacred spirit.

(5) religious complexity

A complex religious situation in a single religious field. In case of Thailand, it means basically a blend, or a co-existence of Buddhism and non-Buddhist religious traditions.

(6) hierarchy, opposition, complementarity and linkage

These terms from S.J. Tambiah's *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* will be used in this study in order to analyze the structural relations between Buddhism and the rural spirit cults.

The term "hierarchy" means the structural order of each religious system ranking from the highest to the lowest within a total religious field.

The term "opposition" means contrasted features or orientation, particularly used in the case of Buddhism and spirit cults.

The term "complementarity" means the functional relations between each religious system which make up for each other within a single constituted field.

The term "linkage" means the structural relationship that unites or combines two or more religious systems.