



Chapter 5

Data Analysis and Discussion

In the previous chapters I distinguished the various religious elements that one can find in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. I then classified them into three components, namely, Buddhism, Hindu and animistic elements in Thai religion. They were each examined using three dimensions; art, rituals and people's behavior. This chapter attempts to discuss these three components within one single religious system, then clarify how each element functions within a total field by using Tambiah's concepts, that is, hierarchy, opposition, complementarity and linkage. Before I discuss Thai religious complexity using Tambiah's concepts, let me first summarize each religious element in *Wat Phra Kaeo*.

5.1 Theravada Buddhism in *Wat Phra Kaeo*

It is clear that the Temple has housed Buddhist different forms of art. It has Buddhist architecture and environment surrounding the basic structures, such as the chedi, the *ubosot* and so on. In the *ubosot* one can see a prominent depiction of the Buddhist world on the walls. The mural paintings depict the life of the Buddha, the *jataka* tales of the previous lives of the Buddha, the Buddhist cosmology and the enlightenment of the Buddha. Buddhist rituals are performed on *wan phra* and other Buddhist holy days. Thai people who visit the Temple are basically Buddhists. They visit the Temple to listen to monks on Buddhist holy days, to practice meditation in order to develop a peaceful mind, or to pay respect to the Emerald Buddha image.

5.2 Hindu Elements in *Wat Phra Kaeo*

Wat Phra Kaeo comprises Thai Buddhist architecture, which is highly-

decorated with Hindu concepts and cosmology. The structures within the Temple complex are thought to be expressions in architectural form of ancient concepts about the nature of the Universe. The divinities and guardian creatures that decorate the Temple of the Emerald Buddha are also earthly embodiments of cosmological concepts. It is paradoxical in Buddhism that the teachings of the Buddha, who is not considered a god and who teaches that Buddhism is a religion of self-help, are totally independent of divine elements and appear to be covered with original Hindu polytheistic mythology.

This mythology is, in fact, merely a framework or way of aiding understanding, through allegories, of some of the teachings of Buddhism. Springing from the same roots as Hinduism, Buddhism did not repudiate but incorporated the Hindu gods and gurdians in its world view. After all, these ancient gods and their powers were manifestations of the harmonious functioning of the universe, and thus provided a cosmic framework which Buddhism, with its focus on personal perfection, lacked. (Ringis, 1990: 21)

Apart from Hindu cosmology, the Hindu concept of a god-king is also used by Thai Kings. All Thai kings in the Chakri Dynasty are titled Rama, an incarnation of the great God Vishnu. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha is a temple for the Kings, but it is also a temple for the great God Vishnu, the abode of the god Vishnu as well as other gods. That is why *Wat Phra Kaeo* is highly decorated with various Hindu mythical creatures and guardians. Thus it shows stronger Hindu elements than in other temples. It is interesting to observe the scene of the King passing through the gate guarded by a pair of demon guardians. Then proceeding to mount the steps along the multi-headed serpent balustrades into the Royal Pantheon, fabulously decorated with the mythical half-human and half-animal celestial beings. This reminds us of a great cosmic mountain as the abode of the gods, Mount Phra Sumeru or Mount Meru.

When Thai Kings used the Hindu idea of the ruler as god-king, they

incorporated Hindu or Brahman originated rituals into the court. There are still court brahmin priests whose function is to perform court rituals such as the Ploughing Ceremony and the King's Coronation Ceremony. They sometimes predict future events using astrological knowledge. Surprisingly, the court Brahmins and Buddhist monks, historically rivals, now share the same platform at a variety of Royal ceremonies.

5.3 Animistic Elements in *Wat Phra Kaeo*

Thai people who visit the Temple are basically Buddhists, but their world views often appear to be animistic. Such animistic world views are strongly observed around the Emerald Buddha image especially in the case of people who make wishes and offerings to the Emerald Buddha. When I interviewed people, some answered that they made a wish for winning lottery, and some said that they wished for promotion. There were various worldly wishes made by people paying respect to the Emerald Buddha. On the contrary, Buddhist worship should be theoretical and other-worldly oriented on the following points. First, that Buddhism is a religion of self-help and it is often said that it is scientific in nature.

Buddhism is scientific in nature. It is certainly the most scientific of all religions. Its teachings are logical and its methods are compatible with scientific methods.
(Plamintr 1977: 4)

Second, that Buddhism is a religion of renouncer and Buddhist worship should be based on wisdom and made without selfish motives by no means superstitious acts
(18)

In Buddhism, worship is an expression of respect and gratitude to the Triple Gem. It is an act of veneration offered to that which is worthy, not a prayer or a gesture of submission to a supernatural being. Thus, although

Buddha images are used in worship, idolatry is a practice not encouraged in Buddhism. The Buddhist concept of worship is totally different from that of idol worship. Its nature is more of a spiritual practice rather than a mere exercise in faith and devotion, although such elements are also present in the practice.” (Plamintr 1997: 33)

Offerings to the Emerald Buddha image, which are seemingly reflections of one's wishes, are also showing one's strong animistic world view around the Emerald Buddha image. There were many interesting offerings observed around the Emerald Buddha through the field work; boiled eggs, grilled chicken, sticky rice, Thai fruits and sweets etc. Among them the most impressive offering was tobacco because articles of a stronger character such as liquor and tobacco are usually offered to spirits together with other food for bargaining or taking care of spirits. It is said that offerings to the Buddha statue may basically consist of rice, meat and fish (non-vegetarian) but exclude liquor, and that basic *bucha* offerings also include candles, flowers and incense. The Emerald Buddha is not a spirit but often treated as if it were. One prays and bargains with the Emerald Buddha, and the tobacco is offered to the Emerald Buddha as a result. As to the questions asked of people about bargaining with the Emerald Buddha image, almost 100% interestingly answered that they would never forget to *Kae bon* if their wishes were granted by the Emerald Buddha, otherwise something very bad and unlucky would happen to them. This shows that it is widely believed that the Emerald Buddha has special animistic power to grant one's wishes, and also the power to punish people if they don't keep their promises. Such views about the system of bargaining with the Emerald Buddha help to understand people's animistic world views of the Emerald Buddha image.

A very interesting saying illustrates this point; “Scratch a Buddhist; find an animist” (Kirsch, 1977: Vol. XXXVI, No. 2) Thai people visiting the Temple of the Emerald Buddha are mostly Buddhists. They appear to be devout Buddhists such as when they come to make merit and listen to sermons on *wan*

phra. But if one peep into their minds, one would know that they are also animists, especially the way they treat the image of Emerald Buddha as a sacred spirit. It seems that the saying, "Scratch a Buddhist; find an animist" is not only true for people in rural areas but also for people in towns and cities as well as the poor, the rich and the educated people according to the interview data in the previous chapter. Such animistic views seem to dominate Thai people when they pay respect to any other Buddha images in other *wats* as well as in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the most important Royal and National temple in the capital city. In *Wat Phra Kaeo*, it is interesting to observe that such animistic elements are always side by side with Buddhist beliefs and practices. The people who behave in an animistic manner incorporate animistic world views into Buddhism. As a result, he or she performs both Buddhist and animist practices. Also, those people who probably call themselves Buddhists and appear to be devout Buddhists may never know that they are a member of several different religious systems at the same time. Here one can see a strong linkage between Buddhism and animistic elements in the Thai religion.

5.4 Structural and Functional Relations

The structural-functional relations between the three religious components observed in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Buddhism, Hindu and animistic elements) will be analyzed and discussed within a total single field using Tambiah's four terms; hierarchy, opposition, complementarity and linkage. Chart 2 on the next page explains the complexity in Thai religion.

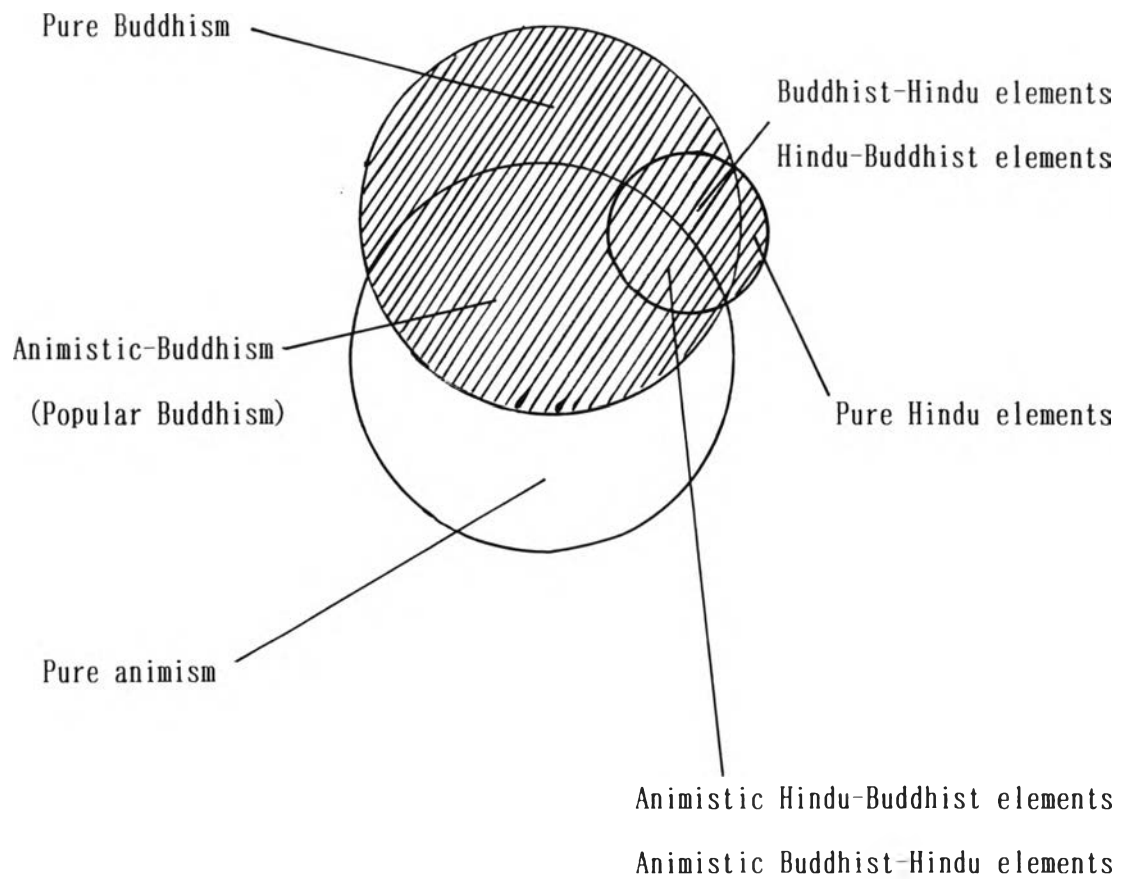
As mentioned before, Tambiah studies and describes the religious practices performed in a village in North-east Thailand. My study is only limited to the religious practices and beliefs observed in *Wat Phra Kaeo*. Tambiah covers every religious element from Buddhism to pure animism explained in Chart 2. My study covers only limited religious situations observed in *Wat Phra Kaeo* (highlighted section in Chart 2). This is because *Wat Phra Kaeo* is a Buddhist

temple and the religious practices and beliefs are always side by side with Buddhism. Pure animism is different from these animistic Buddhist elements found in *Wat Phra Kaeo*. Pure animistic elements (shown in Chart 2), such as village guardian spirits or ancestor spirits, can not be explicitly observed in the compound of *Wat Phra Kaeo* because all animistic elements are related to Buddhism, even animistic offerings, they are all made with respect the Emerald Buddha. Anthropologists such as Tambiah, Tanabe and Rhum illustrate examples of pure animistic beliefs and practices in the Thai religion in their studies. Tambiah studies the spirit cults such as guardian spirits and malevolent spirits practiced in a village in North-east Thailand. Both Tanabe and Rhum study the cults of ancestral lords in a Northern Thai village. Rhum makes a clear distinction between Buddhism and pure animistic spirit cults.

... Buddhism and the spirit religion are about different things. Buddhism is an ethical religion of salvation. The spirit religion is an amoral technology for the this-worldly manipulation of supernaturals. The Thai make the identical distinction between "religion" (which include Buddhism, Brahmanism, Hinduism, Islam, and so forth; in short, book religions), which they call *satsana* (Pali, *sasana*), and spirit-propitiation, which they do not. (Rhum 1994: 170)

Tambiah who studies both Buddhism and the spirit cults in North-east Thailand sees a clear oppositional relationship between Buddhism and pure animistic elements in his study. But, such clear oppositional relationship between Buddhism and pure animistic elements which Rhum and Tambiah see in their studies are not observed in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha because it was a Buddhist temple and animistic aspects were always observed side by side with Buddhism.

(Chart 2) The Complexity in Thai Religion



The religious complexity observed in *Wat Phra Kaeo*

(Examples)

Pure Buddhism: Philosophical aspect of Buddhism. Buddhism for elite monks and scholars.

Pure Hindu: Court Brahmins, the idea of a divine god-king.

Pure animism: Pure animistic aspects not related to other religious elements.
eg. *phi* (spirits)

Hindu-Buddhist: Buddhism adopting Hindu elements, eg. Hindu-Buddhist cosmology

Buddhist-Hindu: Hinduism, particularly the concept of *devaraja*, was adopted in the Thai Kingship.

Animistic-Buddhism: Popular Buddhism.

Animistic Hindu-Buddhist: Procedure of casting Buddha images. (19)

Animistic Buddhist-Hindu: eg. Ploughing ceremony.

In the Temple of the Emerald Buddha it is clear that Buddhism has a paramount position within a complex religious situation. *Wat Phra Kaeo* stands at the apex of all of Thailand's 27,000 *wats*. It serves the King (as a Royal temple) and his people (as a National temple) as a most important Buddhist temple. Buddhism is recognized as the state religion and the Thai King must be a Buddhist to maintain his role as Defender of the Faith. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha is a place where the King would be conscious of his role as Defender of Buddhism and where the Thai people affirm that they are Buddhists.

In the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the ceremony of the changing of the costume of the Emerald Buddha takes place three times a year at the beginning of each season. This ritual is performed by the King who is the divine god. Here, one can see a complementary relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism. Buddhism legitimizes the Thai Kingship by Buddhist karmic law of merits made in previous lives. In return to this legitimacy the Thai King, as the supreme Buddhist layman, supports the *Sangha*; Thai Buddhists follow the King. The King fulfills the *Sangha*'s needs, and vice versa. The changing costume ceremony of the Emerald Buddha shows this complementary relationship between Buddhism and the King very clearly.

Principally, the *Sangha* has a higher position than the King. This hierarchical relationship can be applied to the King's status as observed in *Wat Phra Kaeo*. The King has a two-level status as the defender of Buddhism and Rama, an incarnation of Hindu-god Vishnu. In the ceremony of changing the costume of the Emerald Buddha, it can be seen that the King (the divine god) worships the Emerald Buddha (Buddhism) by changing its costume with his own hands. Therefore, it could be argued that Buddhism stands in a higher position than Hinduism in this regard.

Given the paramount position of Buddhism, there are Hindu elements which are understood in relation to Buddhism. In the case of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, the court brahmin priests may be viewed as the remains of the pure Hindu element. Hindu elements were presumably derived from the Hinduized

Khmer and used to enhance the prestige of the Thai Kingship throughout the history. Later when the Thais conquered the Khmer capital, they recruited Cambodian court Brahmin priests (Hinduized Brahmins) and Thai Kings adopted many of the Brahman court rituals to support their reigns. The court brahmin priests played a key role in important state ceremonies; the rice Ploughing ceremony, the King's Coronation, Royal cremations and weddings, the topknot cutting for Royal children, the giant swing ceremony and the oath of allegiance to the King (the last three are discontinued now). However now, all important state ceremonies are conducted not without monks, but performed both by court Brahmins and monks even-the rice ploughing ceremony. They have both become so symbiotic in Thailand that by the 1930s it was considered a prerequisite for a man to become a Buddhist monk before becoming a Brahmin priest ⁽²⁰⁾. Thus one can see the superiority of Buddhism over court Brahmanical elements and their special linkage in court rituals.

Usually in Thai society, animistic elements are at the bottom of Thai religion. However when it comes to people's world view, one can see very strong elements of animism when considering how people make wishes and bargain with the Emerald Buddha image.

Animistic elements usually stand in symbolic opposition to Buddhism. How do such oppositional elements get along well with each other in the way people behave in *Wat Phra Kaeo* ? It could be said that this is due to their complementary relationship. It is often said that the quest for salvation as practiced by the world-renouncing monk has little appeal except for the intellectual gentry. The masses are more interested in other objectives: emotional satisfaction and a favorable rebirth. This can be applied to Buddhist worship performed in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. The major concern regarding the Emerald Buddha is not "other-worldly" but rather mundane "this worldly" matters. Buddhism and animism thus get along with each other in order to satisfy various needs of the people. Animistic elements complement what highly sophisticated Buddhism lacks in response to people's psychological needs

in this world.

In *Wat Phra Kaeo*, animistic elements are always observed together with Buddhism. Sometimes it is very difficult to separate the two. The term "popular Buddhism" (animistic Buddhism) is therefore used. Offering 99 boiled eggs to the Emerald Buddha, making a wish to the Emerald Buddha, drinking sacred water, these are all aspects of popular Buddhism observed in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. One can see a strong linkage between Buddhism and animistic elements in those popular Buddhist actions.

One can also see complementary relationship between Buddhism and Hindu elements: Hindu-Buddhist cosmology. In Buddhism, the Buddha is not considered a god, however the teachings appear to be enshrined with polytheistic mythology. It may be possible, because springing from the the same roots as Hinduism, Buddhism borrowed and incorporated cosmological ideas such as the Hindu gods and guardians into its world view as a framework or way of aiding understanding. Hinduism complemented Buddhism by providing a cosmic framework which Buddhism adopted, and as a result now they share the cosmology in many respects.

The concept of the Thai kingship also shows a complementary relationship between Buddhism and Hindu elements. On the one hand, the Thai King must be a Buddhist to maintain his role as Defender of the Faith, and on the other hand, the Hindu idea of a divine god is used to declare that he is Rama, an incarnation of Hindu god Vishnu. The Hindu idea of a divine god king appears to complement Buddhism. The Thai King as a Defender of the Faith legitimizes Buddhism, and Buddhism also legitimizes the Thai King by Buddhist karmic law. However Buddhism cannot provide the status of divine god-king to the Thai King, so Hinduism provides the concept of a divine god-king to the Thai kingship.

Concerning the concept of the divine god king and Thai kingship, Mr. Kukrit Pramoj gives a further discussion;

The cult of divine Kingship in Cambodia originated in Indonesia where it was known as Cailendra cult, meaning the

lord of the mountain, by which the King is identified with the God Shiva in Hinduism, who inhabits the top of a mount named Kailas in the Himalayas. Evidence of this cult are to be found in plenty in modern Bangkok. The Temple of the Emerald Buddha and the great thrones of State of this country are constructed with the same Cailendra motif.

Because the King of Ayudhaya became a divine being, his office came to be surrounded with an air of mystery and sanctity. His rule became divine and despotic. His commands became divine laws which all must obey. Various taboos were introduced such as the royal person must not be touched by ordinary human beings; the King's face must not be looked upon; there is a special court language which is still in existence today and the elaboration of royal pomp and ceremonial. However, numerous taboos in regard to divine god Kingship are still retained: the court or royal language is still in use, millions of Thais in the country still prefer prostration as a form of paying respect to the King and to most Thais an audience with the King seems to have a great uplifting effect on the mind in the same manner that a divine manifestation would cause. (Pramoj 1974: 42)

It seems that the last three lines well explain the way the Thais think. When I sat on the floor among the Thai people waiting for the Crown Prince to come to the *ubosot* on the day of the ceremony of the changing the costume of the Emerald Buddha. I could feel the people's strong feelings toward the Crown Prince as a special and divine person. The Thais call their monarch in various ways and one of the most popular names is *Phra Chao Yu Hua* which literally means God upon head. According to this name, one can see the way the Thais

think of the King. It seems that having the King who is the divine god is a very strong national pride of the Thais. Sharing such feeling for the King can help bring the unity of the people and the strength to the Thai state. It can be said that a strong linkage between the Thai kingship and Hinduism help unite the Thai people, the Thai monarch and the Thai state.

One can also see a strong linkage between the Thai Kingship and the Emerald Buddha (Buddhism). This linkage also helps to unite the people, the monarchy and the state. As discussed by Reynolds, one can see an important role that the Emerald Buddha has played in legitimizing the status of the Chakri Kings by identifying the King's power with the Emerald Buddha's sacred power. When people worship the Emerald Buddha, it can also be seen as worshipping the King. It then seems that this extended relationship makes the Thai Kingship more sacred. One can feel a strong ideology of the Thai kingship through Buddhism (the Emerald Buddha) and Hinduism (the concept of a god king).

In this sense both Buddhism and Hinduism complement and support the Thai kingship.

5.5 Religio-social Relations

In a ritual one can see a religious hierarchy between each religious element and a social hierarchy.

When one telescopes these various ceremonial episodes which we have discussed - and in fact they are telescoped in a variety of different ways in the ritual context itself - the lineaments of a strongly hierarchical religio-social ideal can be discerned. (Reynolds 1978: 170)

As discussed before, for example, in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, one could see a religious hierarchy in the ceremony of the changing the costume of the Emerald Buddha. In the relationship between the Emerald Buddha and the King one can see that Buddhism has a higher position than Hinduism since the King,

who is a Hindu-divine god, worships the Emerald Buddha. Animistic elements observed in the ceremony, for instance people's animistic views of the sacred water used for the ceremony, can be viewed to be at the bottom of the religious hierarchy.

In this ritual, one can also see a social hierarchy among the attendants. In the ceremony, the Emerald Buddha appears at the peak of the hierarchy. Below the Emerald Buddha stands the divine god King, and lower are Buddhist monks (in service of Buddhism) and Brahmin priests (in service of the court). Next in the order come the commoners attending the ceremony. I could strongly feel this hierarchical religio-social relations when observing the behaviors of the attendants at the ceremony.

5.6 Syncretism or Co-existing?

This appears to be a most popular but difficult question for those who study the complexity in one religion. Through the case study at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha I continued to look for the answer and arrived at certain conclusions.

The situation of religious complexity observed in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha can be described as both "co-existing" and "syncretism". In cases where one can distinguish each element I would call "co-existing", and in cases that are difficult to distinguish one element from the other I would call "syncretism".

When thinking of the religious complexity in *Wat Phra Kaeo* in terms of art and architecture, it appears not so difficult to classify various elements into each category; with the exception of the cosmology. In most cases, Hindu and Buddhist art and architecture are observed as co-existing in *Wat Phra Kaeo*. When it comes to the cosmology, Buddhism adopted Hindu cosmology.

In the case of rituals, my thinking was sometimes divided when trying to classify them. Later I realized that I had to look at them from two different

angles: procedure and nature. Regarding the procedure of rituals, each religious element can be observed one by one in a ritual in most cases. For example, the Ploughing Ceremony and the King's Birthday. The Ploughing Ceremony is performed by both Brahmin priests and Buddhist monks alike, although it was only conducted by Brahmin priests in the past. It also has animistic aspects as well. For instance in the scene of the blessing of the sacred rice to be used for the ceremony. Brahmin priests (Hindu element), Buddhist monks (Buddhist element) and the scene of the blessing of the sacred rice (animistic element) are observed in a different process in the ceremony. In case of the King's Birthday, one can see animistic aspects in worshipping ancestors, Buddhist aspects in Buddhist rites performed by the King in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha on his birthday, and Hindu aspects in the ceremonial bath attended by Brahmins. This is considered a Hindu bath of purification. This case also shows different religious elements co-existing in a different process of the ceremony. Yet, this can also be seen as syncretism since Hindu, Buddhist and Animistic elements are interwoven in the same ritual.

However when it comes to the nature of rituals, in some cases it is difficult to see each religious element individually, for example, Buddha *bisek* ceremony. This rite is conducted by both Buddhist monks and Brahmin priests. But when focusing on its nature, Buddhist and animistic elements are so syncretized in the ritual that one cannot distinguish one from the other. Buddhism has completely adopted and incorporated animistic elements into aspects of popular Buddhism. Another example is the Songkran festival. Although this festival has its origins in Hindu mythology, now it has completely transformed into a Buddhist cultural festival consisting of various Buddhist rites. In the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, no special ceremony is performed on *Songkran* because of its Hindu origin. However some people visit *Wat Phra Kaeo* to pour water over the replicas of the Emerald Buddha image outside the *ubosot*. Today most Thai Buddhists may not know that it has Hindu origins. In this act one can see the syncretistic nature of the festival.

To sum up, in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Buddhist and Hindu elements seemingly exist side by side (co-existing) except Hindu-Buddhist cosmology (syncretized); for example both monks and court brahmin priests officiate over court rituals. One can see a hierarchical and a complementary relationship between them. Buddhist monks occupy higher positions than do Brahmin priests, but they work together complementing each other in religious rites. Concerning the Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, one can see a strong linkage in the syncretized cosmic world.

In case of Buddhism and animistic elements, it is interesting to note that animistic elements are always observed in relation to Buddhism in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Animistic elements appear to be so completely incorporated into Buddhism that sometimes they are not distinguished from each other, and the specific term "popular Buddhism" is given to such religious situation. One can also see syncretism in such popular Buddhist aspects and a strong linkage between Buddhism and animistic elements.

As discussed above, I reached the conclusion that both religious situations, co-existence and syncretism, can be observed in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha depending on the situation.