

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL REFERENCES

2.1 IN THE PALACE COURT

The complexity of Thailand's religious system was first documented on the well-known Rama Kamhaeng inscription dated at 1296. (Griswold and Na Nagara 1971) Here it is apparent that the different elements of Thai Buddhism had already begun to integrate. In the inscription, the King of Sukhothai extols his people for their devotion to Theravada Buddhism yet he also notes a special relationship toward "Phra Khaphung Phii," a spirit deity living in a nearby mountain. Prosperity of the kingdom is portrayed as being directly relational to reverence to "Phra Khaphung". No doubt the intermingling of Buddhist and animistic elements was already very strong even then and has persisted through the centuries.

For example, when King Rama I sought to reestablish order after the Burmese sack of Ayudhaya in 1767, one of his decrees (ratified in 1782) listed the various types of "phii" (spirits) and "thewadaa" (deities) that might be

legitimately honored by sacrifice. (Chakrabongse 1960:89)
The king later reminded his subjects, however, that good fortune and affliction alike ultimately result from karma, not the actions of spirit beings.

Most of the historical documentation concerning religious beliefs in ancient Siam center around the royal court. Here, the interwoven blend of animism, Brahmin mythology and Buddhist teachings are clearly seen. Every king had court Brahmins to assist in the conduct of religious ceremonies as well as for supernatural advice concerning auspicious days. The priests served as mediators between the various gods of the spiritual world and man. Quaritch Wales writes, "Although most of the Royal Ceremonies were of Hindu origin and retained much Brahminical ritual, it should, however, be clearly understood that Buddhism is now and has been for many centuries, the real religion of the Siamese people and their sovereigns." (Wales 1931: vii) In India, the Brahmins were the highest class of people and were considered the repository of all Hindu learning. Since Hinduism was considered essential to the monarchy, the Brahmins received a great share of royal favor. They were considered as indispensable to the ruling class, even in Buddhist Thailand.

The duties of the Court Brahmins were classified under three headings. First, were the duties of the chief chaplain to the king, a post held by the head priest. Second, were the duties of astrologers or soothsayers. Third, were the duties of the officiating priests. In the early days, astrologers were deemed as having the greatest importance to the king. (Wales 1931: 62) Siamese history records that Brahmin astrologers were held in exceptionally high esteem. Frequent mention is made of various supernatural omens which were interpreted by Brahmins. Siamese kings would always consult the soothsayers before engaging in warfare. Contact with Western science in the late nineteenth century, however, undermined the astrologer's credulity and reduced the dependence on such prognostications.

Royal court ceremonies are well documented and it is easy to observe the influence of Hinduism in their origin and nature. The role of animism in court ceremonies, however, is harder to document. Wales suggests that perhaps this is due to the perceived primitive nature of the animistic beliefs.

Many items in the king's possession, however, were thought to have special spiritual powers. The king's nine-tiered umbrella, for example, was believed to host a

resident deity that provided good luck and protection. (Wales 1931: 94) There were also certain ceremonies which involved the use of magic to control the forces of nature. Kite flying was believed to have been a magical way of bringing on the northeast monsoons. (Wales 1931: 222) The "Speeding of the Outflow" ceremony also involved magical ritual believed to induce the dispersion of flood waters which endangered the crops. The last occasion this ceremony was performed, however, was in 1831. (Wales 1931: 225) It was likely discontinued because the King himself, not the Brahmins performed the ceremony and it detracted from the dignity of the King when it continued to rain.

2.2 OUTSIDE THE PALACE

This intermingling of Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements in historical Thai Buddhism was not limited to the royal courtyard. While the influence of Brahminism was not significant outside the palace, animism played a major role. Although written historical records detailing beliefs and worship rituals of commoners are practically non-existent, traditions, rituals and beliefs were carefully passed down orally from one generation to the next. It can therefore be

assumed that recent rural folk Buddhism is not much different than generations ago.

Traditionally, each village would have a shrine to honor the guardian spirit of the land or "Jaow Thii". This spirit was worshipped regularly with offerings. It also was the focus of special honor on auspicious days. In return, it was believed that the guardian spirit would protect the village from dangers and harsh natural disasters as well as provide blessings of happiness and plenty. The rural Thai had strong beliefs in supernatural beings called "phii". Like men, "phii" were believed to be both good and bad. Good "phii" were enlisted for protection against bad "phii" and the harm they could bring. A fear of "phii" continues to be indoctrinated into the Thai mind at a very young age. It is very common to hear parents attempt to control the behavior of their children by telling them that the "phii" will get them if they are bad.

Rural Thais have always been very superstitious. Numerous beliefs concerning taboos and behavior can be found. One interesting example is the belief that when the men went hunting the women were to be subjected to the strictest of superstitious discipline:

They must not use creams or oils on their skins, nor use any fat in their food. In fact, it is believed that if the wife

neglects these precepts, her husband will not be able to climb a tree in order to escape from an elephant's fury, and will thus be exposed to certain death by her fault. Their wives must also avoid all finery and perfume and must especially refrain from indulging in love affairs. Likewise, they must not quarrel with nor strike their children, otherwise the hunters will lose all authority over the Spirits whose good graces they must win, willingly or not. (Plion 1973: 155)

Terwiel's anthropological studies reveal that the lives of rural farmers centered on a "magico-animistic" complex of beliefs and practices. (Terwiel 1976) While most of the rituals were animistic in nature they were all set in the context of Buddhism. He suggests that the main link between the villagers and abstract Buddhism was the myriad of merit making rituals:

The Buddhist message and the moral order it represents are deemed to be universal. *Karma* functions inexorably regardless of any belief in its operation. Buddhism, then is not only all embracing; the boundaries and limits of any Buddhist moral community, extending through space and time, are amorphous at best. Merit-making rituals make this community visible and define some of its dimensions. Participants identify themselves with this community and simultaneously encounter questions that Buddhism poses for its adherents-and some answers as well. (Terweil 1976: 247)

In this setting, the monks were traditionally seen as the apex of the Thai religious and social order. The

temple served, accordingly, as the center of education and social mobility. Merit making rituals provided opportunities to live out key themes of Buddhism even if the abstract concepts were never completely grasped. In symbolic exercise, the participants identified with the Buddhist world view by expressing their readiness, and in some degree, to actually rid themselves of worldly attachments for religious (and social) rewards. The intermingling of these various elements is so complex that seemingly pure, unadulterated features of Buddhism are sometimes attributed to magical power. Wright, for example, even sees the Thai Buddhist monk's dedication to celibacy as having magico-animistic roots:

This strength does not flow to the Thai from classical Buddhism; in Ceylonese temples scandal is the order of the day. The celibacy of Thai Buddhist monks could be called heroic if it did not seem to come so easily. Their celibacy can only lead us to admit the vast strength that animism still has in the hearts of the sophisticated. The monks know themselves to be more than men, not in moralistic or rational terms, but in magical terms. (Wright 1968: 7)

Kirsch further observes that despite the individualism that characterizes abstract Buddhism, merit-making activities in Thailand are eminently social. (Kirsch 1977) He observes that Buddhist rituals and festivals had

more than just narrow religious functions. Combining ingenious animistic tradition with Buddhist teaching, they served to unite a community around a system of beliefs which gave order to society and direction for life.

2.3 SUMMARY

Documented evidence as well as traditions passed down through the generations show that Thai Buddhism has always been a complex intermingling of classical Buddhism, animism and Brahminism. While traditional Buddhism served as the central core, uniting communities and giving structure to society, the assimilation of animism and Brahminism served to provide a sense of protection through the enlistment of favor from spiritual beings. It is in this context that we now focus on spirit houses.