Beyond Hybridity and Syncretism:
Kala-Thesa Contextual Sensitivity and Power in Thai Religious and Gender Cultures

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    ความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรมของประเทศไทยเป็นประเด็นหนึ่งในการศึกษาวัฒนธรรมทางศาสนาของประเทศ และนักวิชาการพยายามจะชื่นชมศาสนาของไทยที่มีรูปแบบที่ซับซ้อนและแตกต่างหลากหลาย ไม่ได้เป็นเนื้อเดียวกันแต่มาบรรจบพบกันและมีระบบของพิธีกรรมความเชื่อที่ถูกจัดเป็นช่วงชั้นสูงต่ำ คำถามสำคัญคือความซับซ้อนของการรวมกลุ่มทางศาสนาของไทยนั้นเป็นระบบบูรณาการเพียงระบบเดียวหรือเป็นกลุ่มของศาสนาที่แตกต่างกันหลายกลุ่ม ผู้เขียนเสนอว่าในการสำรวจแนวคิดเรื่องการผสานความเชื่อทางศาสนาและทฤษฎีเกี่ยวกับการเป็นลูกผสมไม่สามารถทำให้เกิดความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับความซับซ้อนของศาสนาและแบบแผนทางวัฒนธรรมต่าง ๆ ในประเทศไทยได้ คำอธิบายเกี่ยวกับการเป็นลูกผสมทางวัฒนธรรมวางอยู่บนความคิดแบบคู่ตรงข้ามซึ่งเน้นความสำคัญของการหลวมรวมกันและการสร้างสิ่งใหม่ที่เข้ากันได้ ในทางตรงกันข้าม ประเทศไทยเป็นสังคมที่มีความหลากหลายซึ่งมีรูปแบบทางวัฒนธรรมและศาสนาที่มากกว่าสองรูปแบบและมักจะปรากฏอยู่พร้อมกันแต่ไม่ได้เชื่อมต่อกัน ผู้เขียนเชื่อว่าความคิดเรื่องบริบทแห่งกาลเทศะ (เวลาและสถานที่) ของไทยจะเป็นแนวคิดที่เป็นประโยชน์ต่อการทำความเข้าใจรูปแบบของการผสมผสานทางวัฒนธรรมในด้านศาสนา เพศภาวะ ภาษา และเรื่องอื่น ๆ ผู้เขียนได้สรุปแนวคิดของนิธิ เอียวศรีวงศ์เรื่องกาลเทศะในฐานะที่เป็นส่วนสนับสนุนทางทฤษฎีที่สำคัญในการทำความเข้าใจความซับซ้อนของศาสนา รวมถึงความหลากหลายทางชาติพันธุ์ วัฒนธรรมและภาษาที่ถูกจัดการในประเทศไทย ผู้เขียนอธิบายการมีบริบทของกาลเทศะในฐานะเป็นรูปแบบของอำนาจเหนืออิทธิพลของวัฒนธรรมต่างชาติที่มีอยู่ในช่วงเวลาประวัติศาสตร์ไทย ผู้เขียนสรุปว่าจำเป็นต้องขยายขอบเขตของแนวคิดและคำศัพท์ในการอธิบายการผสมผสาน

ระหว่างวัฒนธรรมและศาสนาเพื่อช่วยให้เราชื่นชมลักษณะของศาสนา เพศภาวะ และรูปแบบอื่น ๆ ของความหลากหลายทางวัฒนธรรมที่เกิดขึ้นในประเทศไทย ในปัจจุบันจากประสบการณ์ของพหุนิยมและความซับซ้อนที่ลึกซึ้งของสังคม

คำสำคัญ: ศาสนา, การเป็นลูกผสม, การผสานความเชื่อ, สิ่งที่ผสมรวมกัน, กาลเทศะ, การมีบริบท, เพศภาวะ, ภาษาไทย, อำนาจ

Abstract

The polycultural multiplicity of Thailand is one of the defining issues for studies of the country's religious culture, and scholars have struggled to appreciate Thai religion as a complex of multiple, partly discrete yet also intersecting and hierarchically organised ritual-belief systems. A key question is whether the amalgamated complexity of the Thai religious field is a single integrated system or a conjoined constellation of several distinct religions. I argue that in exploring this question notions of syncretism and theories of hybridity do not capture the full complexity of Thai religious and other cultural forms. Accounts of cultural hybridity are based on a binary notion that emphasises fusion and the formation of new internally coherent wholes. In contrast, Thailand is a polyvalent society in which more than two cultural and religious forms are often present in contiguous but non-intersecting ways. I contend that the Thai notion of *kala-thesa* ("time and place") contextual sensitivity offers a useful additional concept to understand patterns of cultural amalgamation in the fields of religion, gender and language as well as more broadly. I summarise Nidhi Eoseewong's account of Thai *kala-thesa* "spatialities" as an important theoretical contribution to understanding how religious complexity, as well as ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, are managed in Thailand. I describe *kala-thesa* contextualisation as a modality of power over a succession of foreign cultural influences throughout Thai history. I conclude that an expanded conceptual vocabulary and theoretical repertoire of cultural and religious mixing is needed

to enable us to fully appreciate the character of religious, gender and other forms of cultural diversity that have emerged in modern Thailand from the society's deep historical experience of pluralism and multiplicity.

Keywords: Religion, Hybridity, Syncretism, Amalgam, *Kala-thesa*, Contextuality, Gender, Thai Language, Power

> From the dawn of their existence, the Thai states were part of at least three different orders: they were on the periphery of the Chinese commercial and cultural order; in the path of the Indian religious, philosophical, and commercial influence; and part of the multi-centred, multicultural collage of Southeast Asia. (Gerrit Gong, 1984: 202)

> The Siamese people may well be a hybrid (*luk-phasom*) of a multitude of ethnic groups, the children of a hundred fathers and a thousand mothers (*roi phor phan mae*), who have been woven together through common use of the Thai language and belief in Buddhism, and living together in the region that is now Thailand. (Siraporn Nathalang, 2002: 7)

Introduction

The polycultural multiplicity of Thailand is one of the defining issues for Thai religious culture, as scholars have struggled to appreciate Thai religion as a complex of multiple, partly discrete yet also intersecting and hierarchically organised ritual-belief systems. In studying religion in Thailand scholars have variously employed notions of "complexity" (Kirsch, 1977), "syncretism" (Mulder, 1990), "pluralism", and "hybridity" (Pattana, 2005; 2012). However, there is still no agreement about how to characterise Thailand's diverse and multiply intersecting religious landscapes. In 1976, Barend Terwiel wrote,

> Many authors state unequivocally that Theravada Buddhists adhere to more than one religious tradition. Apart from 'otherworldly' Buddhism, 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 related. (Terwiel, 1976: 391)

Over four decades later, scholars continue to disagree on whether Thai religiosity is fundamentally "Buddhist" with influences from other traditions or rather is essentially a hybrid or syncretic phenomenon in which Buddhism is one, albeit valorised and privileged, component among others. Justin McDaniel observes, "The lack of consensus of where Buddhism begins and ends remains today" (McDaniel, 2011: 228), and Patrice Ladwig and Paul Williams state, "Despite the widespread skepticism about concepts that try to understand the relationship of Buddhism and indigenous culture, the problem does not disappear" (Ladwig & Williams, 2012: 11).

Erick White is of the view that the novel phenomenon of professional spirit mediumship is "categorically and analytically confounding" (White, 2014: 11) in terms of the models that earlier generations of scholars used to interpret Thai religious life. As White observes, some of the most salient characteristics of professional spirit mediums are that,

> [T]hey are possessed by virtuous divinities from the elevated heights of the religious pantheon, they practice mediumship as a full-time vocation, they perceive their vocation as an unabashedly and meritorious Buddhist calling, and they inhabit a robust collective identity as part of a generalised, supra-local and expansive subculture. None of these ... features is easily accommodated within conventional models of possession. (White, 2014: 13)

For White, the key outstanding question is how scholars of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia are to understand the character of the amalgamated religious complexity of this religious field and whether we should, "envision the resulting amalgam as

either a single integrated syncretic religious system or a conjoined constellation of several distinct and/or alternative religious systems .... In general, the view that this complex amalgamation constitutes a single, integrated syncretic religious system has dominated the interpretation of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand." (White, 2014: 160) Given the inadequacies of current analytical categories, White argues that we need new models "to adequately describe and interpret the empirical complexity and diversity of cultural discourses, social practices, and structural relations" (White, 2017: 198) that are found in Thai Buddhism. Benjamin Baumann similarly contends that the multiplicity of Thai religious forms makes ethnographies of Thai popular religion difficult and states that, "we need to work on an analytic language that moves our anthropological understanding beyond the paradoxes of qualified modern concepts" (Baumann, 2017: 60). He maintains that the hypercomplexity of the Thai sociocultural formation requires, "a theoretical eclecticism capable of addressing the simultaneity of modern and non-modern cultural configurations that shape the meaningfulness of social practices in contemporary Thailand" (Baumann, 2017: 159).

White argues that we need to see, "Buddhism as containing plurality, contradiction, and even incommensurability within itself" (White, 2017: 191) with new theoretical models needing to emphasise "plurality, contingency, contestation and agency" as well as foregrounding a "conceptual language of 'formations', 'fields', and 'assemblages'" (White, 2017: 198-9). This provides an empirically based understanding of what counts as Buddhism and White contends that in rethinking Theravada Buddhism we need to explore in detail the "articulation, integration, hierarchy, and boundaries within this composite unity" (White, 2017: 194) by conceptualising Thai Buddhism, "as a hierarchical composite of multiple religious styles, modalities, or systems working in tandem, either in harmony or in conflict, either loosely or tightly integrated"

(White, 2016: 12). Stanley Tambiah foreshadowed such a reconceptualisation of Thai Buddhism as a complex field when he used the expression "formations and amalgams" (Tambiah, 1990: 137) in referring to Thai religious forms and urged scholars to develop a "phenomenological account of multiple realities and finite provinces of meaning" (Tambiah, 1990: 101).

In this article I argue that the analytical problems detailed by many scholars of Thai religious studies derive from the inability of current theories of cultural diversity, notably accounts of cultural hybridity, to describe the distinctive forms of amalgamation found in Thailand. Notions such as "syncretism" and "hybridity" emphasise the merging of culturally distinct forms in a new synthesised unity. However, the Thai religious field is characterised by multiple ritual and cosmological domains – including but not limited to Theravada Buddhism, Brahmanism, Chinese divinities, spirit possession, divination and astrology. All of these ritual and cosmological forms maintain distinct, bounded and differentiated identities. We need an expanded and augmented analytical framework to appreciate the patterns of amalgamation without merging that are observed in the Thai religious field, and indeed in other cultural domains in the country. I argue that the Thai emic notion of *kala-thesa*, which can be understood as "contextual sensitivity", describes the forms of amalgamation without merging found in the religious and other cultural fields, and constitutes an important conceptual addition to the analytical and theoretical repertoires of Thai anthropology and cultural studies.

This article is a theoretical reflection on Thai and international scholars' studies of Thai culture to outline an account of *kala-thesa* contextual sensitivity as a model for understanding patterns of cultural amalgamation in Thailand. After detailing the limitations of hybridity theory, I summarise Nidhi Eoseewong's account of *kala-thesa* as an important contribution to theorising patterns of cultural diversity in Thailand. In the first instance, my argument

that *kala-thesa* contextual sensitivity describes a significant process of cultural amalgamation distinct from and in addition to cultural hybridity emerges from an attempt to respond to the limitations of that theory in accounting for the multiplicity of Thai religious culture. However, forms of amalgamation without merging also characterise other cultural domains in Thailand, and I conclude with examples from Thai gender studies and linguistics that indicate the productive application of the theory of *kala-thesa* contextual sensitivity in studies of Thai culture and society more broadly.

The Limitations of Hybridity Theory

As noted above, earlier generations of scholars often drew on notions of syncretism to characterise the Thai religious field. Pattana Kitiarsa (2005) has critiqued this "syncretist paradigm" of popular Thai religion for placing institutional Theravada Buddhism in a rigidly paramount position and viewing Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism as isolated and static rather than being in constantly dynamic relations. In contrast, he describes Thai religion as hybrid, in Bakhtin's sense of the mixing of, "various languages … within the boundaries of a single dialect" and which "gives birth to new forms of amalgamation" (Pattana, 2005: 467). While he sees hybridisation as having been present in Southeast Asian religions throughout history, Pattana argues that the dynamism of Thai popular religion today is different in scale and complexity, with the religious syncretism model having been outdated by the "fast track, cut-and-paste, postmodernising realities" (Pattana, 2005: 487) of contemporary Thai society.

However, even notions of hybridity do not capture the full complexity of Thai social and cultural forms. Ideas of cultural hybridity are based on a binary notion, while historically Thailand has been a polyvalent society in which more than two forms are present in intersecting and often contiguous ways. In Homi Bhabha's (1994) account, hybridity refers to situations where two cultural

forms merge in a context of differential power to form a distinct, new third space or third category. However, in Thailand multiplicity and diversity do not function as a critique of hegemonic unity as in Homi Bhabha's account of cultural hybridity. Rather, differences are foundational and often are not resolved. As Edoardo Siani notes, in Bangkok, "exchange and encounters with alterity [are] part of the everyday.... Foreignness is not new here. It is part of the familiar." (Siani, 2018: 421). Bangkok is a city that has been, "inhabited by deities and spirits originating from other cosmological realms or worlds since its very foundation" (Siani, 2018: 421). White also sees Thai Buddhism as being characterised by foundational diversity, "There is an irreducible plurality, ambiguity and even contradictory character to Theravada religiosity as an ideological, social and institutional phenomenon within late twentieth century Thailand." (White, 2014: 214). Indeed, foundational diversity characterises Thai culture more broadly and strategies for negotiating this diversity are deeply embedded in cultural norms, ritual modes and forms of habitus. As White notes, Thailand's multiple religious fields represent, "a wide spectrum of more or less distinct and differing religious beliefs, practices, collectivities and agents" (White, 2014: 9).

Benjamin Baumann notes that theories of syncretism, hybridity and creolisation are not sufficient to explicate the full diversity of Thailand's epistemological and religious complexity because these accounts, "overemphasise fusion and the formation of new internally coherent wholes" (Baumann, 2017: 173). He argues that, "the epistemological multiplicity of Thailand's kaleidoscopic socio-cultural configuration .... is lost in approaches that emphasise the homogenising effects of global capitalism under syncretic readings of hybridity" (Baumann, 2017: 222). Justin McDaniel similarly contends that theories of religious hybridity, whether based upon Bakhtin (1981) or Homi Bhabha (1994), are lacking because both

reduce religious phenomena, "to unified products of diverse influences or parts" (McDaniel, 2016: 930).

The Thai Religious Field as an Amalgam

An example of the type of religious amalgam found in Thailand is the existence of parallel "Buddhist" and "Hindu" *khatha* or incantations to worship the deity Brahma at the famous Erawan Shrine in downtown Bangkok. Devotees of the Brahma image at the Erawan Shrine have the option of honouring the deity with either a "Hindu incantation" (*khatha bucha khorng Hindu*) or a "Buddhist incantation" (*khatha bucha phra phrom baep phut*), with the Hindu incantation being written in Sanskrit and the Buddhist one written in Pali. Here Brahmanical and Buddhist rituals are not merged into a single hybrid but rather are kept apart in separate ritual forms that may be practised in honour of the same deity in the same location.

Thai popular religious culture relates to the country's spiritual diversity by incorporation within an expanding hierarchy. As Nitdhi Eoseewong observes in his account of the prosperity cult of *Jao Mae Kuan Im*, "The Thai system of belief is able to increase the number of spirits and gods indefinitely." (Nidhi, 1994: 90). As will be detailed further at the end of this article, the amalgam-like ritual complex of Thai popular religion tames pluralism and incorporates diversity within a frame that both preserves difference and ensures that it always remains subservient to a greater order. The multiple constituents of the Thai religious field are hierarchically ordered under Buddhism. Nonetheless, within this overall hierarchy Thai popular religious culture accepts difference while normalising it in a system where even rapidly proliferating forms of religious and cultural diversity can support and enhance the status quo rather than threatening or challenging it. This is a highly malleable and expandable system of cultural power, eminently suited to

interacting with and incorporating foreign elements while not erasing or overwhelming pre-existing local and indigenous forms.

Polyontologism: Comparing African and Thai Popular Religions

Based on her research on divination and healing rituals among the Giriama people of coastal Kenya, who draw on both folk and Islamic beliefs, Janet McIntosh (2019) also argues that notions of syncretism and hybridity fail to account for all pluralist religious practices. Like Baumann and McDaniel, McIntosh contends that the theoretical tool kit for considering religious encounters and comingling has been impoverished by an overemphasis on a presumed coherence in religious belief and practice. She reports that in Giriama religiosity, "religious plurality is not about reconciling Islam and Giriama Traditionalism into a new, 'systemic' whole, but rather about drawing on both while continuing to mark them as distinct. More than one religion may be used, but the religions are juxtaposed rather than blended." (McIntosh, 2019: 116). Giriama ritual practice is based on a patterned alternation between two systems of supernatural power – traditional belief and Islam -- each of which has its own spiritual forces and its own terms of address.

This pattern of distinct, contiguous but non-blended sources of religious potency has close parallels to Thai popular religion. McIntosh argues that notions of syncretism and hybridity fail to capture this pattern of religiosity because they imply that the trajectory of religious change is, "from conflict and discrepancy to consilience, harmony, synthesis, integration, 'cross fertilization,' and other terms that imply the fusion of difference into a new whole" (McIntosh, 2019: 115). The syncretistic or hybrid image of distinct religions merging into a new, coherent system is influenced by "Western and Abrahamic premises about the very category of religion" and "by the presumption that religions are by definition systems of 'belief' that are integrated, internally consistent, and preoccupied with universal 'Truth'" (McIntosh, 2019: 115-116).

In words that closely echo White's call to develop an account of Theravada Buddhism as a "composite unity" noted above, McIntosh contends that a new model is required to account for religious pluralism that preserves "discontinuity between loci of religious power" (McIntosh, 2019: 112). She calls this model "polyontologism", which she defines as an emic stance that is recognised by cultural insiders and which acknowledges the mystical potency, and the ontological reality, of more than one set of religious or cosmological forces,

> In polyontologist practice, the plural ontologies are not modeled as 'ultimately one,' nor are their associated deities or forces semiotically aligned or equated …. Differences between the systems in question are (emically) recognized and upheld by practitioners…. [T]he differences are not erased or minimized because practitioners are not ideologically expected to be consistent in their beliefs or committed to a single tradition of practice …. No attempt is made to assimilate the potentially contradictory premises of each system because there is no ideological prioritization of consistency to begin with. (McIntosh, 2019: 117).

McIntosh observes that in 2019 it is still a challenge for many scholars of religion, "to wrap their minds around an approach to religion that embraces a multiplicity of potentially contradictory cosmological options", which indicates that, "we have some distance to travel to come to grips with religion's many futures" (McIntosh, 2019: 118).

The type of polyontological practices described by McIntosh in Kenya are also found in Thai popular religion, such as the division of responsibilities between Buddhist monks and Brahman priests in many rituals. In August 2018, I observed a five-day *ngan somphot* ritual at the *Jatukham-Ramathep* City Pillar Shrine in Nakhon Si Thammarat, which is now a central locale for the empowerment of the *Jatukham-Ramathep* type of amulets. Within the setting of

this multi-day ritual complex, Buddhist and Brahmanical ritual specialists performed highly contextualised and separate roles. There was no ambiguity. Buddhist monks performed Buddhist chants of blessing from the *Tipitaka* and then left the scene and returned to their monasteries before the Brahmanical rituals began. Once the monks had departed, the Brahmans began to perform their rituals, using hybrid *khatha* incantations that invoked Hindu deities in the context of a Buddhist cosmology. As McDaniel notes, amulets of Hindu deities are often "forged in rituals performed by both Buddhist monks and Brahman priests working together" (McDaniel, 2011: 276)

Edoardo Siani also reports a situation that mirrors McIntosh's account of polyontologism. When asking Thai diviners (*mor du*), astrologers and spirit mediums (*rang song*) their understandings of their practices he found no single belief system but rather, "competing cosmological narratives" that represent the "cosmological multiplicity" (Siani, 2018: 417) of Thai popular Buddhism. Siani states, "As the Thai Buddhist cosmos multiplies, it eludes cosmological treatises, revealing itself to be negotiable, dynamic and always in the making." (Siani, 2018: 420). Nonetheless, Siani did find that Buddhism provided a foundation for all the forms of "cosmology making" engaged in by ritual specialists, "The only cosmological notion that is unquestioned, and that indeed plays a crucial role in different narratives, is the law of karma ... as a natural, moral and ultimately political principle that determines individuals' position in the sociocosmic hierarchy". (Siani, 2018: 420)

It is not only Thailand that is characterised by this form of non-rationalised multiplicity. Benedict Anderson argued that, "contemporary Javanese political culture is ... a heterogeneous, disjunctive, and internally contradictory complex of traditional and Western elements, with a lower degree of internal logic and coherence than in the past (Anderson, 1972: 5)" (Cited by Baumann, 2017: 163). Religious and other forms of negotiating multiplicity

also emerge from Thai political history. Visisya Pinthongvijayakul notes that in the Northeastern province of Chaiyaphum spirit shrines and Buddhist monasteries are twin realms of power and this dualistic, non-exclusive religious schema is reminiscent of the workings of the premodern polity in this region, whereby a chiefdom on the periphery of two powers might seek protection from both, "Premodern chiefdoms in northeast Thailand … simultaneously paid tribute to both the Bangkok and Vientiane courts. The present religious practice reprises a premodern form of power relations in the multi-concentric mandala system." (Visisya, 2018: 71). Visisya contends that in northeast Thailand political dynamics as well as the religious system are informed by the fact that this region's "peoples have encountered a multitude of imposed authorities throughout history" (Visisya, 2018: 73). In discussing religiosity across the Mekong river in Laos, John Holt (2012: 255) similarly observes that the religious system of the Lao can be described, not in terms of syncretism between a cult of spirits and Buddhism, but rather as separate and complementary ontologies.

Kala-thesa "Time and Place" Contextualisation in the Thai Religious Amalgam

One of the most important processes by which diversity and tensions within the hierarchical amalgam of the Thai religious complex is managed is contextualisation. This contextualisation needs to be clearly distinguished from processes of cultural or religious hybridisation in which two distinct modalities or cultural forms merge into a new "third space" (Bhabha, 1994). In Thai forms of contextualisation religio-cultural differences are often preserved in contiguous bordered spaces rather than merging into a blended hybrid. Indeed, contextualisation and compartmentalisation are key principles of the broader Thai social structure and emerge to a significant degree out of the multiplicity of the Thai religious system, whose components remain in ambiguous differentiation.

Nidhi Eoseewong has presented a detailed account of the contextualisation of multiple forms of difference in his account of Thai ideas of "spatiality" (*pheun-thi*) and "time and place" (*kala-thesa*). As Nidhi emphases, "Human beings live amidst spatialities and times (*pheun-thi lae wela*)" (Nidhi, 1991: 180) and "worldviews are founded on notions of space and time" (Nidhi, 1991: 181). In his account, Nidhi variously uses the formal term "spatiality" (*pheun-thi*) and the local cultural category *kala-thesa* "time and space" to denote ritually bounded cultural domains and social spaces. He argues that Thai social and cultural spatialities are bounded and multiple, with each zone having a distinct set of rules of conduct and behaviour,

> In Thai thought spatiality has many characteristics that are the opposite of contemporary ideas of space. Spatiality in Thai thought is not a single, unbounded plane but rather is divided into sections by clearly marked dividing lines. Each section of spatiality has specific, distinctive features.... Hence, in each sectional space there are different laws (*kot*) that must be followed. When humans cross from one spatiality to another they need to behave according to another, different set of laws (*kot*) or *dhamma*. (Nidhi, 1991: 183)

Nidhi maintains,

> Thai people look upon spatiality and time as discontinuous sections (*pen suan-suan mai seup-neuang-kan*). Whatever one does has to be undertaken 'correctly according to time and place' (*thuk kala-thesa*), an idiom that cannot be directly translated into English because Westerners (*farang*) do not think about time and space in a Thai way. (Nidhi, 1991: 191)

Nidhi contends that English terms such as "proper", "appropriate", "impeccable" and "correct" do not fully capture the meaning of the expression *thuk kala-thesa*, literally "to be correct according to time and place", because each society's ideas are based on radically different worldviews with incommensurable

notions of time and space. Penny Van Esterik (1999: 277) describes the notion of *kala-thesa* (from the Sanskrit *kāla-des'a*, "time-place"), as denoting contextual sensitivity to the setting for actions and statements in a society that is characterised by multiple forms of power over social life and cultural expression (Van Esterik, 1999: 278). According to Baumann, *kala-thesa*, "describes the embodiment of the relational logic that structures Thailand's hierarchical social organisation" (Baumann, 2017: 229).

Nidhi argues that Thai *kala-thesa* spatialities have clear borders or boundaries (*khorp-khet*) in both the horizontal and vertical dimensions (1991: 184-185). The vertical divisions of Thai spatialities are forms of hierarchy, and Nidhi provides the example of the gendered hierarchicalisation of Thai contexts that gives men privileged access to more spaces than women. He contends that Thais, "construct the boundaries that separate different spatialities by means of ritual (*phithikam*)" (Nidhi, 1991: 183) and that all Thai people are socialised and conditioned to instinctively respect the divisions between and amongst different spatialities.

The Multiplicity of Thai Contextual Kala-thesa Subjectivities

Moving between different spatialities also changes the subject who inhabits each *kala-thesa* setting, and Nidhi maintains that, "When humans cross from one spatiality to another they need to change themselves (too)." (Nidhi, 1991: 183) Van Esterik similarly observes that *kala-thesa* contextual sensitivity leads to the formation of multiple identities that "slip easily over each other like tectonic plates" (Van Esterik, 1999: 278). On the multiplication of Thai contextual subjectivities, Nidhi observes,

> An important principle of entering another spatiality is that of changing oneself, because each spatiality has its own specific characteristics. A person in one spatiality cannot enter another spatiality without changing their status (*sathana*) or condition (*saphap*). Not to do so may lead to dangerous or inauspicious (*mai-pen-mongkhon*) consequences. (Nidhi, 1991: 187)

He gives as an example government offices that display signs, "Government Offices: Please Dress Politely" (*sathan-thi ratchakan prot taeng-kai suphap*), where Thais need to adapt their dress and bodily comportment before they can enter these locations in order to conform to the specific performative norms of that time and place,

> Government offices (because they are official locales [*khorng luang*]), hence are placed at a different level from ordinary spatialities. Government offices exist at a higher level than ordinary spatialities and citizens do not dare enter these locales without changing their selves, at the very least by changing their clothing. (Nidhi, 1991: 189)

> The signs ordering one to dress politely in government offices have meanings that extend beyond clothing. They are signs that mark the divide between lower ranked spatialities outside government offices and the higher ranked spaces of government service. A person who sees these signs does not only have to check their clothing before entering the government office, they also have to compose their demeanour and manners (*samruam kiriya-marayat*) much more than normally, because they well realise that they are entering a spatiality at another [higher] level. (Nidhi, 1991: 189)

Nidhi says that the personal transformation involved in moving from one bounded, rule-defined spatiality to another has several aspects: (1) changing one's physical presentation, such as one's dress; (2) changing one's behaviour, "which has the result of producing a different personality (*bukkhalikkaphap thi taek-tang*)" (Nidhi, 1991: 191); and (3) changing oneself by ritual means, such as conducting protective rituals before starting a journey or undertaking the ritual practices of ordination before becoming a Buddhist monk. A person who is able to enter more numerous and diverse spatialities than others, or who enters spatialities barred to ordinary people, is said to possess "special powers" (*itthirit*) (Nidhi,

1991: 187). Nidhi uses the term *itthirit* to denote the ability to enter special social and cultural domains, an expression that in Thai ritual discourses refers to "magical power".

In local discourses, those who transgress the norms of time and place contexts are criticised as not knowing how to "locate themselves appropriately" (*wang tua mai mor-som*), acting "wrongly for the time and place" (*phit kala-thesa* [formal], *mai thuk kala-thesa* [informal]), or "not knowing the [right] time and place" (*mai ru-jak kala-thesa*). Van Esterik notes that, "As individuals and shapers of institutions, Thais shift between contexts easily and skillfully." (Van Esterik, 2000: 96). Yet, despite the centrality of *kala-thesa* to Thai life, most foreign visitors have difficulty in noticing the divides between time and place contexts,

> Even after many years in Thailand, one seldom knows when boundaries are crossed, when one has *phit kala-thesa* [acted wrongly for the time and place context], only that the coming together of time and place and relationships is not quite right, that either the knowledge of contexts or persons was incomplete or inaccurate. (Van Esterik, 2000: 39)

Baumann calls the implicitly marked liminal frontiers between *kala-thesa* contexts "phantom walls" (Baumann, 2017: 236). Nonetheless, Van Esterik notes that,

> Children are taught from birth to recognise *kala-thesa*, lest they *phit kala-thesa* (make an error in *kala-thesa*). But in my experience the concept is rarely talked about or written about, except to correct children. It is so deeply taken for granted among Thais that I knew the concept years before I learned the word. (Van Esterik, 2000: 228)

Accounts of Contextualisation in Thai Studies

While not referring to the term *kala-thesa*, which as Van Esterik notes is rarely verbalised explicitly, a number of scholars have nonetheless remarked upon this phenomenon in a variety of

ways. Andrew Johnson observes that the Thai, "religious system is not seamless, rather it rests upon internal contradiction and division" (Johnson, 2015: 293). Tambiah notes that Thai cultural logics are not based on binary or exclusionary notions of "either/or", with participation in Western and traditional systems not regarded as being "fraught with conflict" even for Western-educated Thais because this state of affairs, "is aided by the different contexts of their relevance and therefore their insulation from direct confrontation" (Tambiah, 1977: 129). Tambiah states that his Thai informants found, "no reason ... why all systems of knowledge [Thai and Western] could not co-exist, without one finding it necessary to supplant another according to some exclusive criteria of falsifiability and experimental proof" (Tambiah, 1977: 129).

White emphasises that "contextually situated and bounded practices" (White, 2017: 196) form the analytical ground of Thai religious life, also noting the "context-dependent" character of Thai "cultural identity and social positionality" (White, 2017: 197) more broadly. As Nidhi emphasises, "Not only uneducated rural people, even members of the urban middle class who adopt *farang* (Western) ways, may unconsciously behave or have attitudes based on old Thai notions of spatiality." (Nidhi, 1991: 182) Baumann describes contemporary magical epistemologies in Northeast Thailand as "non-modern" and contends that,

> Most persons born and raised into contemporary Thai language games have thus incorporated this simultaneity of modern and non-modern epistemologies as essential aspects of a shared Thai habitus.... The contextualised validity and practical meaningfulness of these seemingly opposed epistemologies for individual actors varies, however, along socio-cultural features. (Baumann, 2017: 29)

Jovan Maud also notes the complex negotiation of the boundaries that separate the multiple spatialities of the diverse amalgam of ritual systems and cosmologies that make up the Thai religious field,

Such interactions require the complex interplay of boundary crossing and boundary maintenance, of recognition and incommensurability, and of sameness and difference. In the context of the [Buddhist] robe offering ceremony, as with other cross border religious interactions in southern Thailand, it is the complex negotiation that takes place, where boundaries and differences are simultaneously elided and evoked, problematised and realised. (Maud, 2007: 379)

The contextual specificity of meaning between different systems in the Thai religious amalgam may even result in the same phenomenological event being mapped by different religious logics. As noted above, the Brahma image at the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok may be worshipped by either a "Hindu" or a "Buddhist" *khatha* incantation. Marjorie Muecke describes a ritual in Chiang Mai in which a female spirit medium was possessed by the spirit of one of the Lord Buddha's closest followers, Mogallana, and at which Buddhist monks were present. She notes that spirit mediums involved described the ritual in Brahmanical terms as *phithi kan yok khru*, "the ritual to ceremonially honour one's initiating master", while the monks who were present used Buddhist terminology to describe it as *phithi kan khao phansa*, "the ritual of entering the Buddhist Lent rainy season retreat" (Muecke, 1992: 101). Baumann emphasises that time and place contextualisation not only separates different ritual spaces, it also differentiates multiple epistemological systems,

Kala-thesa determines not only which practices are performed, but also the validity of Thailand's multiple epistemologies and thus how to interpret a practice in a given context. It is thus not only the performed practice that changes with 'time and place', but also its meaning. This contextuality of meaning is even harder to grasp for modern minds than the contextuality of social practices. The difficulties Western observers have to notice the boundaries monitored by *kala-thesa* are [compounded] by the fact that they are invisible and manifest only as embodied aspects of Thai habitus. (Baumann, 2017: 229)

Origins of *Kala-Thesa* Contextualisation in Thai Religious Complexity

Van Esterik suggests that the Thai cultural system of *kala-thesa* may be influenced by "Buddhist orientations to impermanence" (Van Esterik, 2000: 96). There have been numerous attempts by scholars to explain the forms of Thai culture and social structure, both in the past and today, by referring to the influence of Buddhism as the dominant religious form. However, in the case of *kala-thesa* contextual sensitivity we need to look beyond Buddhism alone to the collective influence of the amalgam of spirit beliefs, Brahmanism, Theravada Buddhism and, more recently, of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism, that constitute the total field of religion in Thailand. Attempts to explain the forms of Thai culture and social structure by referring to the influence of Buddhism, as the dominant but not the only religious form, leads to interpretative gaps and often has limited explanatory power. This is not because religion has no influence on the patterns of Thai culture and society; it most certainly does. Rather, it is because the wrong model of Thai religion is invoked as the basis of social explanation and cultural interpretation. Buddhism has often been overrated as an explanatory principle for the patterns of Thai society, while, in contrast, the complex amalgam of Thai religion – in which Buddhism is but one albeit significant component -- has been underrated as a basis for understanding the society's complex cultural order.

Contextualisation -- the attempt to contain diverse religious and ethno-cultural influences to bounded "time and place" zones – is a strategy to establish social and cultural order in Southeast Asian societies that are characterised by multiple, co-existing religious traditions and which have been impacted historically by diversely intersecting and often discursively incommensurable foreign influences. Clifford Geertz argues that in Java what he terms "contextual relativism" developed as a mechanism "making for a moderation of religious conflict" and the

promotion of tolerance, being a "social mechanism for a pluralistic non-syncretic form of social integration" (Geertz, 1960: 373). Also writing on religion in Java, Konstantinos Retsikas describes the development of contextual relativism as a process involving "the domestication of alterity" (Retsikas, 2010: 474).

Contextualisation is a strategy of managing multiple forms of difference in situations where doctrinal integration or rational harmonisation into a single internally consistent intellectual system is not possible. *Kala-thesa* contextualisation is a mechanism of living with multiple incommensurable discourses and cultural logics. In discussing gender pluralism in Southeast Asia, Eric Thompson identifies the negotiation of multiplicity as a key strategy of politically and economically successful states in the region,

> What are the conditions that encouraged the development of gender pluralism (and perhaps an ethos of pluralism more generally) in the first place? Why do we find gender pluralism in Southeast Asia? I would suggest that the development of gender and other pluralisms is not a result of isolation … but of the particular long-standing modes of 'globalization' in which substantial areas of Southeast Asia have been engaged since at least the first century CE…. Politically and economically successful states [in Southeast Asia] have commonly incorporated some degree of pluralism. (Thompson, 2006: 332)

The Thai cultural strategy of contextualisation is not a result of Buddhist influences alone, but rather emerges from the need to negotiate within the same cultural body all of the cultural patterns that have historically intersected in Thailand – including pre-Buddhist, Hindu, Chinese, as well as Theravada Buddhist. Rather than attempting to create a singular cultural order or gender regime based on harmonising disparate expectations and norms, the Thais have historically tolerated and indeed encouraged a proliferation of distinct social and cultural settings, each with its own norms of speech, dress, behaviour, and bodily comportment. The arrival of

each new cultural influence in successive historical periods was not necessarily accompanied by attempts to erase the old or to make the established cultural patterns conform completely to the new influences. Rather, we have seen an historical proliferation of religiously and ethno-culturally patterned *kala-thesa* contexts that have been formed by a partitioning off of some domains of life, which continued to be guided by "old" norms, from often-contiguous settings that were guided by new rules. Thai culture rarely deals with novel foreign influences by rejection or denial. Rather, new circumscribed socio-cultural contexts are created within which the original character of that influence may be preserved but its capacity to influence the rest of Thai society is contained.

Epistemological Multiplicity in Thailand

Occupying a geographical zone of cultural intersection, Thai society has often deployed a strategy of contextualising or compartmentalising the multitude of diverse and at times incommensurable influences from Southeast Asia, India, China, the West, and elsewhere. In contrast to historical patterns in the West, which has often attempted to reconcile cultural difference by the imposition of a single, integrative, unifying rule or regime, Thai culture has isolated or contained multiple cultural differences to defined contexts, which are not all expected or required to conform to the same rules or epistemic patterns. As Rosalind Morris observes of religious culture of Chiang Mai, "the episteme, which now inhabits Northern Thailand, is not singular" (Morris, 2002b: 77). Justin McDaniel describes the epistemological multiplicity underpinning the Thai religious amalgam as follows,

> [T]he ability to retain and maintain several seemingly mutually exclusive belief systems, is common in Thailand. If we study an individual's evolving religious repertoire, then we do not need to fit their actions and beliefs into a cultural system, rationale, or single religious tradition…. Why can't we expect that a person will hold and act upon simultaneous, multiple

ideals? Why don't we see this as an advantage? Why is consistency or orthodoxy seen as the ideal? (McDaniel, 2011: 226-227)

As a result, there is no general rule that governs all Thai religious or cultural contexts. There is no expectation that the norms of one setting should necessarily carry over to another, let alone to all *kala-thesa* contexts. The containment of distinctive sets of norms and rules of interaction to specific contexts may produce an appearance of "contradiction" within the Thai cultural order. However, the notion of "contradiction" can only be invoked in a situation where a given set of cultural rules, or the patterns of a singular cultural logic, are broken. If there is no single cultural logic, and if social life is divided up into demarcated contexts guided by markedly different, perhaps even incommensurable, logics, and each context is bounded and kept apart, then while they can indeed be said to be different they cannot be considered to be in contradiction with one another.

A complex, multiple and hierarchised religious formation can be seen as the foundation for the emergence, persistence and further modern evolution of an equally complex, multiple and hierarchical social and cultural order. That is, Thai religious complexity, and the *kala-thesa* contextualisation of religious ritual and practice, constitutes a paradigmatic model for complexity and multiplicity in social and cultural domains outside the religious field. Indeed, as detailed below, this pattern of dealing with complexity by means of culturally institutionalised relativism is repeated in domains as diverse as Thai gender culture and the Thai pronoun system.

Kala-thesa Contextuality Beyond the Thai Religious Field
Thai Gender Culture and Contextualised Gender Identities

Penny Van Esterik describes Thai gender culture as a complex palimpsest in which newer discourses are written on top of older ones, which, in turn, have not been fully erased. According to Van Esterik, this leads to, "multiple contested gender statuses and

ideologies not ... a single hegemonic [gender] system." (Van Esterik, 2000: 61) Van Esterik describes Thailand's multiple gender norms as being contextualised within *kala-thesa* time and place settings, which require Thai women and men to move between differently structured gendered contexts in their daily lives. According to Van Esterik, Thai gender is,

> a context-sensitive process.... It is Thai sensitivity to context -- expressed as *kala-thesa,* knowing how time, space, and relationships between people intersect to create appropriate contexts -- that allows for a flow of multiple gender identities. Identities slip easily over each other like tectonic plates, alternately revealing and concealing what lies beneath.... [S]urfaces are transformable, temporary, and aesthetically pleasing, while the self remains hidden and ultimately unknowable, an argument compatible with the Buddhist concepts of 'non-self' (Pali: *anatta*) and 'impermanence' (Pali: *anicca*). (Van Esterik, 1999: 278)

Van Esterik identifies three historical layers in modern Thailand's palimpsest of multiple contextualised gender cultures and identities: (1) indigenous Southeast Asian understandings of masculine and feminine genders as complementary and intersecting; (2) Indian- and Chinese-derived Hindu-Buddhist patriarchal culture in which gender is understood as a hierarchy and in which in maleness and masculinity are given more prestige and value than femaleness and femininity; and (3) Western views of gender as a domain constituted by a binary opposition between masculinity and femininity imagined, perhaps, as being equal but nonetheless distinct and radically different from each other.

The Thai Personal Pronoun System as a Model of Kala-Thesa *Contextualisation*

As detailed above, Nidhi observes that as Thais move between *kala-thesa* contexts, modalities of subjectivity also change. According to Nidhi, the Thai subject is not a fixed constant "I", but

rather a context-bound form of personhood. This contextualised character of Thai subjectivity is indeed reflected in the Thai personal pronouns system, which is characterised by a plethora of first person, as well as second and third person, pronouns. Voravudh Chirasombutti and Anthony Diller (1999) have noted the significant relationship between the Thai pronoun system and the construction of multiple subjectivities, analysing the ways in which the system of personal pronouns positions all speakers within complex discursive and socio-cultural hierarchies. As Voravudhi and Diller point out, "Unlike speakers of English and other Western languages, Thai speakers are confronted with multiple ways to say 'I', each with particular resonances and connotations of deference, social status, intimacy, formality, and similar interrelated factors." (Voravudhi and Diller, 1999: 114). The Thai first person pronoun or term of self-reference is not selected on the basis of any grammatical rule. Rather, cultural and social rules of status and hierarchy determine pronoun usage. One chooses a first person pronoun which marks one's status, age, mood, and so on relative to another person or group of people.

Thai speakers constantly move between different first person terms. They constantly change the term they use to call themselves "I" as they move between different everyday *kala-thesa* contexts. One has to use a different pronoun to label oneself "I" when speaking with one's boss, one's spouse, one's child, one's mother, one's housemaid, a Buddhist monk, the King of Thailand, and so on. One must first be aware of the cultural norms of Thai society's diverse *kala-thesa* contexts of inter-personal interaction in order to be able to refer to oneself correctly. This is because one must know where one fits into the social hierarchy before one can choose the first person pronoun that marks the precise rung on the social ladder that one occupies at any particular time or place. The system of second person pronoun terms, "you", is just as complex as the system of first person pronouns, because for

each term for the speaker "I" there is also a distinctive corresponding term for the person or persons spoken to, "you". This pairing of multiple "I"-"you" terms marks the relationally defined character of Thai subjectivity, as the plethora of Thai "I" terms only exist in relation to an equally large number of "you" terms.

Being able to select and employ the correct self-reference term when speaking Thai is taken as an indicator of a person's social skills in understanding the distinctive hierarchical norms of etiquette, deference and respect that structure different social contexts. Knowing the cultural rules and social norms that permit one to talk correctly about oneself, and hence also about others, is called "knowing the [correct] time and place" (*rujak kala-thesa*) and "knowing self-placement" or "knowing one's [speaking] position" (*rujak kan-wang-tua*). Choosing an inappropriate first person pronoun in Thai then is not a grammatical error comparable, for example, to using the wrongly gendered indefinite article, *un* or *une*, in French. It is a more serious error than this, for it indicates either one's cultural ignorance (and hence outsider status) or else a willful neglect of convention that can be interpreted as a sign of aggression, rudeness, etc. Voravudh and Diller note, "Some speakers seem to relish the playful switching among first person reference possibilities, effecting a rather mercurial communicative persona." (Voravudhi & Diller, 1999: 122).

As described above, new foreign influences may be managed or contained by the creation of new *kala-thesa* contexts, each with its own protocols of context-specific rules. And just as the relational *kala-thesa* social contexts within which the subject is positioned and speaks are constantly changing in Thailand's dynamic society, so too the pronoun system is in constant refinement in response to these broader changes. The institution and operation of a specific context-defined set of rules of interaction is often marked linguistically by the use of a distinctive pair of first and second person pronouns. Indeed, one of the most common markers

of the existence of a specific *kala-thesa* context is the use of a distinctive set of first and second person pronouns in interactions *within* that context. For example, the English pronouns "I" and "you" have been borrowed into Thai for use in some settings when Thai speakers interact with native English speakers who are also able to speak Thai. Earlier in the 20th century, a dialectical Chinese first and second person pronoun set -- *ua, leu* -- was also added to the repertoire of Thai pronouns for use in interactions between Thais and Chinese immigrants. As with the incorporation of *ua-leu* into the expanding set of Thai pronouns, the Thai borrowing of "I"-"you" did not mark the usurpation of any Thai pronouns that were already in use. No Thai pronouns were lost in this borrowing. Rather, the pair of English pronouns has augmented and expanded the already extensive Thai personal pronoun system.

The now indigenised terms "I"-"you" have been accommodated within the Thai cultural order, which situates, delimits and contains all interactions within a hierarchical framework. Indeed, in being appropriated into Thai, the English "I" has been stripped of its original sense of marking a universal subject. In contrast, within Thai, the signifier "I" is a context-defined and context-delimited term, only being invoked as a marker of subjectivity in some instances of Thai-Western interaction. The English pronouns were borrowed when a socio-linguistic need arose to mark an expanded set of social contexts following the Thais' increasing interaction with Westerners in recent centuries.

While the Thai pronoun system has been studied in some detail by sociolinguists such as Voravudhi and Diller, to date anthropologists have not drawn upon this research as a tool in mapping the multiplicity of contextualised Thai cultural logics. There is a task for future ethnographic research to take the insights of Thai linguists as a basis for systematically mapping the distinctive cultural norms and modes of habitus that are intimately bound to each first personal pronoun and associated *kala-thesa* context.

Kala-thesa Contextualisation as a Mode of Power Over "Others" and the Foreign

To summarise, a significant Thai strategy for dealing with external cultural influences -- exemplified by the borrowing of English personal pronouns -- is to incorporate yet also limit the impact of those influences by localising and containing them within an expanding, hierarchical structure of semi-hermetic contexts. As the number of foreign influences has increased in an increasingly complex and globally connected society, so too the number of *kala-thesa* contexts of interaction has also expanded as part of this cultural strategy of cooptation and containment. A characteristic Thai relationship to the culturally foreign is to neutralise its potential threat by preserving its difference within delimited contexts or containment zones. Discursive multiplicity and contextualisation are thus modalities of power in relation to the foreign. This contrasts with the historically typical Western pattern of dealing with cultural difference, which emerging out of an historical religious context of Judeo-Christian monotheism, has been to neutralise its potential threat by assimilating it to a totalising norm. In contrast, Thai power – emerging from an historical setting of intense religious and ethno-cultural diversity -- seeks to neutralise the challenges presented by the foreign by preserving its difference but insisting that it accept a delimited place within the Thai cultural hierarchy, and that this difference only be expressed within the limited *kala-thesa* domain allotted to it.

While emerging from the negotiation of religious diversity, the contextualised multiplicity of Thai cultural and religious life has impacts beyond the fields studied by anthropology and religious studies. Soraj Hongladarom presents a view of the enterprise of philosophy in Thailand in, "situations where visions of what constitute the good life and so on collide, a conception that changes the aim of philosophy from establishing truth to seeing what good could come out of … unfinalisable arguments" (Soraj, 1996: 6). In effect,

Soraj describes the enterprise of philosophy in Thailand as an intellectual negotiation of the incommensurable discourses that make up the amalgamated multiplicity that is Thai culture,

> Philosophy in this conception is not a state where one is at one with Reality, nor a movement toward that Reality, but a contested, conflicting condition where parties agree on some very basic condition needed for arguments to get going, such as the use and rules of logic, but disagree on almost everything else. (Soraj, 1996)

Soraj positions his view of Thai philosophy as being radically different from Western philosophy's aim to find universals. In contrast, Thai philosophising is an anti-universalist form of thought that emerges from the context of multiple incommensurable discourses.

Conclusion: Hybridity and Contextualisation as Distinct Strategies of Managing Religious and Cultural Diversity

The lack of agreement on how to describe and theorise Thai religion detailed at the beginning of this article does not result only from the complex, multi-cultural mix of traditions and ritual. It also emerges from the fact that distinct processes of mixing of these diverse traditions take place. Accounts of cultural blending do not always clearly differentiate among the various hybridising and contextualising processes that are at work in conditions of complex mixing. In some situations in Thailand, the boundaries between different traditions are dissolved and there is indeed hybridisation into a distinct new "third space" form. For example, the *khatha* or formulaic incantation that the famous *keji ajan* magic monk *Luang Phor Khoon* used to sacralise amulets (*pluk sek phra khreuang*) was a hybrid of Brahmanical and Buddhist terms. As reported by the *The Nation*,

> [*Luang Phor Khoon*] said that although the *ma-a-u* chant he uses during the [amulet sacralisation] rite was reminiscent of the Vedic *a-u-m* chant to invoke the Hindu gods, it was comprised

of the initials of the *Maha Moggalana*, a Buddhist saint, and two of Buddha's noted disciples: Ananda and Upali.[1]

Luang Phor Khoon's blessing chant shows the hybrid form of his ritualism and can be seen as a Buddhification of an originally Brahmanical ritual, reversing the Hindu mystical sound of creation, *aum*.

In some situations in the Thai religious amalgam one tradition is incorporated within another in a subordinate form by being reinterpreted, such as when Hindu deities are incorporated into Thai Buddhism not as creators or masters of the cosmos but rather as protectors of Buddhism. However, in yet other settings, such as Nidhi describes in time and place contextualisation, the boundaries between traditions are preserved and there is tension about boundary preservation and maintenance. The contextualised, additive logic of Thai popular religion preserves and does not obscure the visual and other forms of distinctiveness of its diverse cultural sources. Contemporary professional spirit mediums may be possessed by a wide range of Thai, Chinese and Hindu deities (*thep*) and lords (*jao*), but these spiritual figures from different cultural and religious sources are not merged into a single undifferentiated hybrid form. Thai, Hindu and Chinese gods are not merged into a single hybrid deity, but rather their respective images are placed side-by-side on spirit medium ritual altars, and the different Thai, Chinese and Hindu spirits possess mediums in sequence, one at a time.

It also needs to be emphasised that the different hybridising and *kala-thesa* contextualising processes of mixing are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They may both take place within the same ritual event and individual religious practitioners negotiate multiple traditions by drawing upon multiple processes and strategies that variously relate or differentiate. In the multiplicity of premodern Siam as well as in the complexity of modern Thailand there have

been and still are multiple strategies and distinct processes of engaging and living across cultural, ethnic and religious plurality. While there are spaces of contextualised *kala-thesa* differentiation, in other locales we also find hybridised third spaces. Only careful empirical research informed by an expanded conceptual vocabulary and theoretical repertoire of cultural and religious mixing will allow us to fully appreciate the character and forms of the polyontological religious amalgams and multiple gender statuses, subject positions and epistemologies that are found in modern Thailand.

Footnote

[1] *The Nation*, 21 September 1995, "Those Not-so-Magic Charms of *Luang Phor* Khoon", p. A5.

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