

to as the large “Abbentak” necessarily refers to Wat Chai Watthanaram. Heeck does not specify that this place was situated by the river, outside the city walls (9-12 September entry, pp. 61-62). The description could therefore easily apply to Wat Mahathat, Wat Phutthaisawan or any other large royal monastery with a presiding *stupa* of the *prang* type and surrounding galleries filled with Buddha images. A couple more minor points: “ammerac” (pp. 66, 113) was probably a misspelling or scribal error for “namrack”, a type of lacquer and a regular VOC export from Siam. It was used to make Japanese lacquer ware. Also, contrary to the claim made in the Introduction, the Heeck journal has been used by historians other than George Vinal Smith and Han ten Brummelhuis, although those two scholars were certainly the pioneers.²

Annotations are learned, detailed and at times intriguing in their speculative nature. The careful editing by Han ten Brummelhuis contributes to the finished product, a publication and translation of one of the best western sources on seventeenth century Siam. The original Dutch text of these extracts, transcribed from the original seventeenth century handwriting by Renée Hoogenraad, forms the last part of the book.

The inclusion of several well-chosen illustrations and maps, several in colour, add much visual appeal to this little book. The exquisitely drawn VOC manuscript maps of Ayutthaya and the Chao Phraya River are particularly welcome, as is the long Valentijn map showing the course of the Chao Phraya (and much beyond), with a very useful key to the place names shown on the map provided too. In sum, this is a publication which should prove to be of great value to anyone interested in Thai history, the Ayutthaya period or European “travel literature”.

Dhiravat na Pombejra

Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today by Pattana Kitiarsa. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012.) ISBN: 978-616-215-049-4 (soft)

Sensationalistic accounts of Buddhist monks’ involvement in magic, fortune telling, spirit worship, protective amulets, lottery number selection, and other practices aimed at bringing worldly rewards appear daily in the Thai media. Many Thai social commentators contend that these practices are not “real Buddhism”, but examples of the degeneration of Buddhist morality in a modern, globalized

² See for example Remco Raben and Dhiravat na Pombejra (eds.). *In the King’s Trail*. Bangkok: Royal Netherlands Embassy, 1997, p.85; Alfons van der Kraan. “On Company Business: The Rijckloff van Goens Mission to Siam, 1650” in *Itinerario* Vol.XXII (2/1998), pp.59-61; Bhawan Ruangsilp. *Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayyutthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, c.1604-1765*. Leiden: Brill, 2007, pp. 37, 42.

environment. To such critics, Pattana Kitiarsa's *Mediums, Monks, & Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* is a thoughtful, informed response.

Pattana brings his unique perspective as one who is both a follower of the beliefs and practices he is studying and "an ethnographer observing [his] own participation in them." This is apparent right from the preface where he shares aspects of his brief term as a monk. One particularly poignant moment is his spiritually transcendent experience of communicating with his deceased mother. Another eye-opening one is the abbot's urging of the monks, "to find some tricks (*ubai*) to attract devotees." The abbot explains, "We cannot survive without patronage from laypeople. Magic is not encouraged in Buddhist teachings...., but sometimes it is quite necessary when we have to deal with popular expectation" (pp. xviii-xix).

Following the book's preface, the first two chapters are devoted to the theoretical concepts underpinning Pattana's approach. The first is agency, with the "agents" of Thai popular Buddhism identified as the monks, mediums and laypeople who consider themselves Buddhists. It is these people, rather than texts or institutions, who are the focus of this book. The second concept is hybridization, a term from postcolonial discourse, used here to refer to the new amalgamation of diverse beliefs, processes, agents, deities, and practices that have cropped up in recent decades in Thailand's religious landscape. The old model of syncretism, with popular religion seen as existing "under the umbrella of a dominant, mainstream, institutional Buddhism" (p. 13), is rejected as no longer valid.

The chapters that follow are vivid accounts of specific practitioners, their circumstances, practices, and followers. "Magic Monks and Spirit Mediums" (Chapter 3) juxtaposes the personal and professional lives of two types of popular religious specialists: a financially successful forest-dwelling magic monk and a strapped-for-cash urban female spirit medium. Despite differences in their present circumstances, the backgrounds of these two agents are not too dissimilar. Both came from poor rural backgrounds and endured periods of hardship on their respective paths toward their current positions.

The process of creating a new deity is described in Chapter 4, "Phumphuang: a Singer's Spirit and Lottery Luck," which relates the rags-to-riches tale of a talented, hard-working girl, who became one of the country's most beloved superstar singers. The events following her untimely death at the age of 31 were even more remarkable than those of her life. After being granted the rare honor of a royal funeral attended by a record-breaking number of mourners, the media promoted a cult connecting her spirit with winning lottery numbers, and fortune seekers began presenting donations of gold and money to wax statues of her at the wat where she had been cremated.

"Luang Pho Khun: A Postmodern Monk" (Chapter 5) features Thailand's most famous superstar magic monk, seen in photographs as a wizened, skinny figure squatting with bank notes in his hands. His amulets and blessings are sought by devotees ranging from poor villagers to the nobility. Ironically, while magic

monks are sought after for their perceived ability to bring wealth to their devotees, these very powers are believed to have been acquired during extended periods of asceticism wandering alone in the forest. It might come as a surprise to some readers that temples affiliated with the Thammayut sect, known for its adherence to strict practices, are no less likely to be the venue of magic and commercial practices than are Mahanikai temples. In fact, the three monasteries mentioned in the book are affiliated with the Thammayut sect.

Chapter 6, “The Rise and Fall of the Chatukham-Rammathep Amulet”, follows the saga of efforts beginning in 1987 to deal with the oversupply of an unusually large and unattractive amulet that transformed it into a mega-commodity. A decade later over 80 million were in circulation. There is no easily understood connection between the amulet’s symbolism, the circumstances surrounding its role in raising funds to erect a protective city pillar, and the bizarre campaigns used to market it, including making a batch of the amulets on a commercial plane flying over a sacred stupa and including bits of human flesh and ash in their composition. Pattana’s analysis of the craze is multifaceted and includes the changing character of Thai Buddhist piety as well as anxiety arising out of political and economic circumstances.

Chapter 7, “Mediumship in Focus”, explores the authenticity of mediums and describes the efforts of certain rationalist thinkers to discredit them. Curiously, one of the persons who exposed spirit possession as a sham was the chief practitioner of a Sino-Thai cult who revealed the secret of his act on a TV talk show. Nevertheless, many highly educated people regularly consult mediums and fortune tellers, and as Pattana points out, question the ability of the particular medium rather than the credibility of mediumship itself.

The final chapter, “Concluding Remarks,” sums up the changes in Thailand’s religious landscape as a consequence of the country’s rapid transformation from a predominantly rural society to one that is significantly urbanized. In this new society that is ever evolving of modern highways, high-tech communications, urbanization, and changing concepts of female gender, people are able to travel to religious sites, be in touch with new religious trends and technologies, and invest in experimenting with new practices. What they seek is financial, personal, professional success as well as emotional well being. The practices they engage in often demand no more than a belief in luck and in the ability of the agent or object to tap into the powers that can grant these desires. While the specific techniques might be new, similar approaches to dealing with uncertainty have long existed alongside canonical Buddhism, as can be seen in laws dating from the Ayutthaya Period, and reiterated by King Mongkut. One of the main differences is that the range and number of practices has increased exponentially, which to Pattana, is evidence of “the health and wealth of popular Buddhism in Thailand today” (p. 149). Critics dismayed by this conclusion may find solace in remembering that Pattana is limiting his analysis to “popular” Buddhism, and that orthodox Buddhism is still strong.

Despite the book's brevity, assimilating it requires more than a single reading because of the complexity that emerges in Pattana's examination of the sources of cults and their relationship to earlier beliefs, royal ceremonies, prophetic movements, ethnic assimilation, and social change, and the emerging religious piety of Thai Buddhists. The reader may find fault with the book's organization into what seems a progression of separate articles rather than an integrated whole, and in fact, earlier versions of some of the chapters can be found on the Internet. Nevertheless, the integration of these rich ethnographic sources under one cover makes this book a valuable resource for anyone interested in the ever-changing nature of Buddhism in Thailand.

Tragically, Pattana, an Isan village-born anthropologist with a doctorate from the University of Washington, died of cancer at the age of 45 shortly after the publication of this book. His unique perspective and ability to engage in diverse facets of Thai popular culture will be deeply missed as will the energy and enthusiasm he devoted to his work.

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