Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand

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In 1965, the Thai government, through the Department of Public Welfare, launched a program of Buddhist missions to the hill tribes of North Thailand that was to be carried out by members of the Thai Buddhist clergy, the Sangha. The purpose of the program was to strengthen sentimental ties [of Thai] with the tribal people and to create loyalties [of the tribal people] to the nation through development of strong beliefs in Buddhism.¹

This policy that aims at the bringing of marginal people into the national fold of Thailand through conversion to Buddhism would seem to have its origins in policies concerning the relationship between Buddhism and national integration that were first formulated in the reign of King Culalongkorn at the end of the last century. Among Culalongkorn’s attempts to weld the territories under his rule into a unitary nation was the institution of laws designed to create a national Buddhist church. Present-day statistics on religion in Thailand suggest that these efforts were highly successful. In the 1960 census, 93.4 percent of the population of the kingdom are said to be Buddhists.² While this classification is somewhat misleading since it subsumes adherents of different forms of Buddhism, the distortion is not very significant. Less than 1 percent of the Buddhist monasteries and Buddhist clergy of the kingdom are not part of the Thai church.³ In such a context, it would appear that a policy of integrating marginal peoples into Thai national life through conversion to Buddhism would be a reasonable one.

However, despite the apparent connection between recent policies toward tribal peoples and the integrative policies of King Culalongkorn, these two are actually based on quite different assumptions. King Culalongkorn sought to negate the importance of “primordial attachments”⁴ by creating national social structures. The present policies reflect quite a different tendency, namely, the appeal to Buddhist ideology as a basis for mobilizing the populace to attain national ends. To Culalong-

³ Ibid., pp. 504-05.
korn, Buddhism as traditionally practiced outside of the core area of traditional Siam represented a potential threat to national integration because its local manifestations were articulated with autonomous polities. For the modern rulers, those who are not adherents of Buddhism or whose attachment to the faith is weak pose the potential threat to national unity. This shift of assumptions concerning the relationship between Buddhism and national integration can be clearly shown with reference to the recent history of North Thailand.

Northern Thai Society in the 19th Century

Until the end of the 19th century, that part of present-day Thailand which is usually referred to as the North was divided between the semiautonomous principalities of Chiangmai and Nan. Although these principalities had become vassals of Siam at the end of the 18th century, they experienced little direct influence from the Siamese court of Bangkok until nearly the end of the 19th century. Such autonomy was particularly marked in the religious sphere for the vast majority of the population were adherents of a variant of Theravada Buddhism which Dodd termed the “Yuan cult.” This local version of Theravada Buddhism differs from the variant found in Siam proper in the script used for the sacred literature, in the structure and content of rituals, and in the organization of the Buddhist clergy, or Sangha. While the Yuan cult is not restricted to northern Thailand, being found also among Tai-speaking peoples in the Burmese Shan State of Kengtung, in parts of northern Laos, and in southern China, it is most closely identified with North Thailand where it probably originated and where it achieved its most elaborate development in the 16th century.

The Yuan church in the 19th century was relatively unstructured. Each temple (wat) had autonomy, and its clergy was only minimally tied to clergy elsewhere. Powers to ordain monks and novices belonged to the senior monk in each temple and he in turn could pass this power on to one of his followers when he was near death. A distinction existed between those wat which were supported by local congregations and those supported by the royalty and nobility. The latter usually had important relics which also made them important as pilgrimage sites. In addition to the senior clergy of these wat, who were universally held in higher esteem than were the clergy of ordinary wat, there was another group of clergy who had

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5 This designation should not be confused with the official grouping of provinces into what is known today as the “northern region” (phak nya). This official region includes both provinces which were formerly in the semiautonomous principalities of the North and those which formed the northern provinces of the traditional Siamese kingdoms of Ayutthaya and then Bangkok. In this paper, the term “the north” will be used to refer to an area today mainly confined to the provinces of Chiangmai, Chiangrai, Lampang, Lamphun, Mae Hong Son, Nan, and Phrae.


7 By “Siam proper” I am here referring to central and north central Thailand which had comprised the “inner provinces” of the Siamese states of Ayutthaya and 19th century Siam.

8 Following conventional usage, the term “Tai” will be here used to refer to any group belonging to the Tai (or Daic) language family, while the term “Thai” will be reserved for reference only to citizens of the modern nation of Thailand.


more than a local reputation. These were the khu ba (“esteemed teachers”), monks whose reputation, often for presumed magical powers, attracted large followings. Beyond these distinctions, however, the Sangha of the Yuan tradition appears to have had little hierarchical organization.

Yuan cult Buddhism was not the only religion found in 19th-century North Thailand, and not even the only form of Buddhism. Migrants from Burma, including Burmese, Mon, and Shan, had brought their religious traditions with them. In such towns as Lampang, which were centers of the Burmese-dominated teak trade, Burmese and/or Mon Buddhist temples could be found. In areas of Shan settlement such as Mae Hong Son, Fang, and Phrae, Shan Buddhism also existed.

The largest non-Buddhist element in the 19th-century population of northern Thailand was accounted for by those people who are usually referred to as “hill tribes.” The tribal population was made up primarily of Karen and such Mon-Khmer speaking peoples as the Lua’ (Lawa), T’in, and Khamu. Only a few representatives of Miao, Yao, and such Tibeto-Burman groups as the Lahu, Akha, and Lisu had moved into Thailand by this period. All of the tribal peoples followed religious traditions which are usually subsumed under the vague term “animism,” a term which disguises some important differences in tribal religions. The Mon-Khmer groups had developed symbiotic relationships with both the Yuan, who had dominated the region since the end of the 13th century, and the Buddhist Mon, who had preceded the Yuan as the rulers of what is today North Thailand. Over this long period of time, these Mon-Khmer groups had absorbed a number of Buddhist elements and ideas into their own religions. Some, and probably many, had assimilated to Yuan culture, becoming Yuan Buddhists in the process.11

In contrast to the Mon-Khmer tribals, most of the Karen in North Thailand had developed only minimal ties with the Yuan with whom they had had contact for only about 150 to 200 years.12 What they knew of Buddhism had come from the Shan, Mon, or Burmese who live in present-day Burma13 rather than from the Yuan or other Tai-speaking peoples living in present-day Thailand.

Around the turn of the century, other tribal peoples began migrating into North Thailand. The Miao and Yao brought with them religious traditions which had been formed in their homelands in South China. While they too might be termed animists, their religions display marked Chinese influences.14 Some of the Tibeto-Burman groups, and particularly the Lahu, had assimilated elements of Shan Buddhism into their traditions while still in Burma. However, the religious traditions

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of these people show today little that would suggest any influence from Yuan Buddhism. Rather, such changes as have occurred in their traditions in recent years seem to have resulted primarily from Christian missionization.

A third religious element was introduced into the north in 1867 with the establishment of a Presbyterian mission in Chiangmai by Dr. Daniel McGilvary. By 1903, the Lao Mission had a total of 2738 members, 97 of whom were Khamu (a Mon-Khmer tribal people), and the great majority, apparently, Yuan. Some Christian influence had also been felt among the Karens through contact with Karens who had become Christians in Burma where the American Baptist Mission was working. However, the number of Christian Karen in Thailand seems to have been insignificant.

While tribal and Christian traditions did exist in North Thailand in the 19th century, Yuan cult Buddhist was obviously the most important tradition. In the eyes of the Siamese rulers in Bangkok, this tradition distinguished the north from other areas within their sphere of influence. When the attempt was first made to integrate the north into the emerging nation of Thailand, it became obvious to King Culalongkorn and his advisers that the perpetuation of Yuan Buddhism as a distinctive religious structure could not be permitted.

**Incorporation of the Yuan Sect into the Thai Church**

The political autonomy of North Thailand began to disappear in consequence of the actions of the Thai court during the last quarter of the 19th century. During this period, when the Siamese court was feeling intense pressure from British and French imperialism, King Culalongkorn formulated and implemented a program of reforms which can only be termed revolutionary. One prime aim of Culalongkorn was to construct a national state out of the fragmented domain which he had inherited as his realm. His first move in this connection was the appointment of a Siamese High Commissioner to the court of Chiangmai in 1874, resulting in what LeMay had termed a “silent revolution.” This move was but a prelude to the major provincial reorganization act of 1892 in which the administration of all parts of the kingdom were placed under direct jurisdiction of the Thai government. While the replacement of the local aristocracy by Thai government officials did not take place immediately after the promulgation of this act, owing partially to the lack of sufficient corps of trained officials, this act marks the beginning of the end of fragmented authority in the areas under Siamese domination.

The implementation of the Provincial Reorganization Act in the north was spurred by an uprising of Shan in the northern province of Phrae in 1901. This rebellion revealed to the Siamese court, as Graham has stated, “the weakness of their hold on the Lao states, the poverty of their rural administration and the inadequacy
By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the Thai government had succeeded in replacing the local aristocracy by Thai officials. The construction of a rail line to the north which reached Chiangmai in 1921 further helped to tie the region more closely to the center of centralized authority.

Concomitant with implementation of reforms designed to integrate outlying regions politically into the emergent nation-state of Thailand, King Culalongkorn also initiated policies which aimed at the incorporation of all Therevada Buddhists within the kingdom into a single national church. While previous Kings of the Cakkri dynasty, notably Rama I (1782–1809) and Rama IV or King Mongkut (1851–1868), had established many of the principles which were to form the important bases of the national religion. However, none of Culalongkorn’s predecessors had concerned themselves with the religion as it existed in the “Lao” tributaries, i.e., in the areas which are today North Thailand, Northeast Thailand, and Laos proper.

Culalongkorn codified the principles which had been developed as the bases of the Siamese church and decreed that these should be implemented throughout the kingdom. The crucial promulgation was his Sangha Administration Act of 1902. Among the most important features of this act are those which provide for (1) the incorporation of all monks into a national structure, (2) the establishment of the principle of hierarchal authority whereby monks higher in the structure could inflict punishments upon or countermand decisions of those lower in the hierarchy and (3) the establishment of a national system of clerical education. The implications of this act were clearly pointed out by Prince Wachirayan, the supreme patriarch at the time of the proclamation, in his remarks prefacing the proclamation:

Although monks are already subject to the law contained in the Vināya, they must also subject themselves to the authority which derives from the specific and general laws of the State. In addition, they should also follow local customs which are not contrary to these other two sets of laws.


20 The local aristocracy was retained in symbolic positions. In 1924 Graham reported that the indigenous northern chiefs “still hold their titles with the purely nominal status of President of Council, a body of officials appointed for each state, under the control and at the dictation of a Siamese Vice-roy located in the neighbourhood with a strong staff of assistants” (Graham, vol. II, p. 168).

21 For example, among the laws concerning the Sangha (kotmai phra song) promulgated by Rama I was the extremely important one requiring that Buddhist clergy be registered and carry identification papers. See Prince Dhaninivat, A History of Buddhism (Bangkok: Asia Foundation, 1960), p. 26. Mongkut had been a monk for 27 years before ascending to the throne. During his sojourn in the monkhood, he established a new Order, the Tham-mayutnikai which followed stricter interpretations of clerical behavior than did the dominant Mahanikai Order. During his reign, he promoted the strengthening and systematizing of Buddhist education, an effort which was even further advanced by the work of Mongkut’s son, Prince Wachirayan who was to become Prince Patriarch. On Mongkut’s relationship with the Sangha, see Prince Dhaninivat, op. cit., pp. 32–39, R. Lingat, “La vie religieuse du Roi Mongkut,” Journal of Siam Society, 20 (1926), pp. 129–148, Abbot Low Moffat, Mongkut: The King of Siam (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1951), and A. B. Griswold, “Asian Religious Reformer: King Mongkut of Thailand,” Journal of the Vietnamese-American Association, 1 (1956), pp. 13–19.


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In sum, monks must obey three types of laws: the law of the land, the Vināya and custom.

This Act is the law of the land; thus, it should be known, understood, and followed correctly.23

The Sangha Administration Act of 1902 was not applied to the north until 1910 when the king issued a separate promulgation specifying that the act be applied in certain outlying circles, the north among them.24 The implementation of the law proceeded immediately afterward, with Prince Patriarch Wachirayan taking a personal interest. He himself made a trip to the north central provinces in 1912 and in 1913 he traveled as far as Phrae in the north itself.25 His intent in all of his journeys was to make certain that the local monks were correctly following the Vināya and to bring the local orders into the emergent Thai Sangha hierarchy. He established the practice of having local monks come to Bangkok to improve their studies of the Dharma.26 He also appointed monks to local positions in the hierarchy. For example, in Tak he appointed as the senior members of local hierarchy three respected monks with the most seniority. The monk chosen to be the chief abbot of the province belonged to the Yuan tradition, while the two chosen as his assistants were followers of the Siamese tradition. This mixture of Yuan and Siamese monks appealed to the patriarch since it provided for the integration of the two traditions in one order.27

The mixing of Yuan and Siamese monks in the hierarchy of the northern church was later extended to those areas where there was no indigenous Siamese tradition. An interesting example of this is to be found in the story of Phra Ratchawirakorn (Bunma Yankhuttathera). This monk was born in the northeastern province of Ubon28 where he also studied in a local temple school. At the age of 18, he entered the Sangha as a novice in an Ubon temple and, after continuing his studies in the same temple, he entered the monkhood at the age of 21 in 1922. His biographer states that

the studies of the Vināya and Pali language were not very well-developed up-country and finding a teacher was difficult. Thus, he gained permission by his preceptor and [took leave] of his parents and moved [to a wat in Bangkok].29

In Bangkok he came under the influence of a Siamese monk who, although a Siamese monk and abbot of the Bangkok temple of Wat Bencamophit, was also abbot of the Northern Circle. This same monk later became supreme patriarch. This abbot sent Phra Ratchawirakorn first to the northern province of Phrae to supervise the Dharmic studies in a district in that province. In 1936 he was sent to Mae Sariang district in Mae Hong Son Province to take up the same responsibilities. His biographer says of this experience:

In Mae Sariang district, he undertook to perform well the duties connected with

23 Quoted in Chot Thongprayun; my translation.
24 Ibid.
28 It is worthy of note that this monk came from another area of Thailand, i.e., the northeast, which like the north had enjoyed relative autonomy prior to the reforms of Culalongkorn.
Sangha administration and assisted the District Abbot in education, propagation and public service. If he had lacked perseverance, he would not have been able to make the sacrifice to live in such a remote land as that.  

In 1942, he was raised to the status of provincial abbot of Mae Hong Son. The seat of this province is quite unique since most of the local population is Shan, rather than Yuan. In this setting, Phra Ratchawirakorn “undertook to improve and correct the different customs and mores and he gradually introduced the more popular universal standards of the central region.” In personal interviews with monks in Mae Hong Son, I discovered that the provincial abbot strictly forbade the following of Shan traditions in the local temples of the provincial town and to a lesser extent in the temples in the Shan villages around the town. Instead, the local monks were required to learn and to follow the Siamese form of Buddhism.

Phra Ratchawirakorn was particularly zealous in attempting to supplant local Buddhist traditions and replace them by the tradition which had become dominant in the Thai church. Elsewhere, in the north, however, something of a compromise was attained. This compromise arose in great part out of the resolution of a conflict between the Thai Sangha and Khru Ba Siwichai, probably the most famous monk in northern Thailand in the first decades of this century.

Born in Lamphun in 1878, Khru Ba Siwichai also had his first religious training in that province. However, he soon moved beyond being a local monk in consequence of his reputation for being endowed with supernatural powers. Shortly after the extension of the provisions of the Sanga Administration Act to the north, Khru Ba Siwichai ran into problems with the Thai Sangha owing to the fact that he had ordained monks and novices without having been officially recognized as a “preceptor” by the Thai hierarchy. The right to determine whom should be permitted to ordain monks was a particularly significant issue to the leadership of the Thai Sangha since exercise of this right by monks not sanctioned by the Sangha could lead to the development or perpetuation of sects whose existence would pose a direct threat to the unity of the Thai church. For his contravention of Sangha regulations, Khru Ba Siwichai was confined to a temple in Lamphun in about 1915 or 1916 by the viceroy of the north.

During his confinement, large numbers of people came to “make merit” with Khru Ba Siwichai since it was believed that his reputed holiness would enhance the merit of such acts. His popularity greatly troubled Thai officials in the north for it was feared that Khru Ba Siwichai was potentially a leader of a millenarian movement with revolutionary implications. Having only recently put down a millenarian revolution in northeastern Thailand in 1902, the Thai government was not about to allow a similar movement to develop in the north. In 1919 Khru Ba Siwichai was ordered to report to Bangkok to answer charges of clerical disobedience and sedition. However, a number of high Thai officials, including the viceroy of the north, Prince Boworadet, became concerned that the prosecution of Khru Ba Siwichai would have as serious repercussions as permitting him to remain free. In the end, a
committee of high ecclesiastical officials appointed by the patriarch decided that the only fault Khru Ba Siwichai had committed was the ordaining of clergy without official permission. Since he had already been punished for this wrong in his confinement in Lamphun, he was released. Recognizing his popularity, the ecclesiastical officials even "defrayed the expenses of his return journey, bidding the monks of Lampoon to look after his personal comfort on his return." However, he still remained a thorn in the side of the Thai Sangha and in 1935 he was again in Bangkok to answer charges levelled by the ecclesiastical authorities.

The charges against him were virtually the same, but this time the independent monks of the north had openly severed connections with their ecclesiastical superiors and declared Phra Sri Vijaya to be their leader. It was said that Phra Sri Vijaya had dispensed them from the need of additional learning, contrary to the church’s usual requirements. After they had refused to allow church officials to inspect their monasteries, some of these leaders were arrested.

This was the crisis point in the relationship between the Yuan sect and the Thai Sangha. In the end, Khru Ba Siwichai “signed an agreement to abide by the laws of the church, and returned home, to be welcomed back by more than eight thousand people.” On the Thai side, however, a tacit agreement to permit the northern clergy to follow Yuan customs also was apparent, for there have been no efforts since that time to suppress Yuan practices.

Today, the education of the monks in the north includes both formal training in the Thai prescribed curriculum and informal training in the traditional Yuan literature and liturgy. Local custom determines the structure of most of the rituals performed in northern temples while Thai government and Sangha law structure the realm lying beyond the local temple. What Moerman has reported for the Thai-Lue village of Ban Ping in Chienkham district, Chiangmai Province, is characteristic of most local temples in the north:

Ban Ping’s temple serves the local community which provides all its support, all its congregation, and all its clergy. But the village priest is also at the bottom of an ecclesiastical hierarchy that begins in Bangkok . . . Before Chiangkham came under the district administration of Bangkok, there were, in widely scattered temples, a few aged priests (xu ba [i.e., khu ba]) to whom a young cleric might apprentice himself to learn some special religious skill. There are still such saintly men whom the villagers revere, but now there are also certified stages of theological excellence and a national hierarchy of ecclesiastical power. These are the Buddhist aspect of the increasing centralization of Thailand.

In the temples which traditionally were, and today still are, centers of Buddhism in the north, the Yuan tradition is also taught. However, in such temples the tradition is increasingly assuming an antiquarian character as most young monks prefer to

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37 Ibid., p. 28.
39 Ibid., pp. 642–3. Sanguan does not discuss this incident, saying only that the details of the second incident were the same as the first (Sanguan Chotsisukkharat, op. cit., p. 32).
40 Thompson, op. cit., p. 643.
41 Khru Ba Siwichai died in 1939.
42 While the Thai-Lue are ethnically different from the Yuan or Northern Thai, their traditional religion is of the Yuan variety.
study in the Thai language which they have learned in schools rather than in Yuan to which they have never been exposed before entering the clergy. In short, the implementation of the religious laws formulated as part of Culalongkorn’s “integrative revolution” did not lead to the death of the Yuan tradition. However, the impress of Thai structures upon the northern Sangha did succeed in reducing the potential of the Yuan tradition as a rallying point for communal or regional dissent.

At the time of Culalongkorn’s accession to the throne, the tributary “Lao” states, including the Yuan north, were tied to the Siamese throne along only one axis, i.e., through the tributary relationships between their rulers and the king of Siam. The aim of the Culalongkorn revolution was to introduce a number of new axes which would link the people of these areas and the central Siamese government. To do so, however, necessitated the breaking down of “primordial attachments” such as those focused upon the Yuan Buddhist tradition, and to substitute attachments to the nation in their stead. Insofar as Yuan Buddhism was concerned, the actions of the Thai government working through the Thai Sangha did not lead to the replacement of Yuan customs by Siamese customs even though such an intent seemed to be present in the minds of some Sangha officials as the case of Phra Ratchawirakorn in Mae Hong Son suggests. Rather, the essential element of the integration of the Yuan sect into the Thai church lay in the incorporation of all members of the northern clergy into a single national Sangha structure and the establishment of hierarchical authority whereby Yuan clergy would be responsive to decisions made at the higher levels of the Thai Sangha. With the final submission of Khru Ba Siwichai in 1935, this end had been achieved. While the Yuan tradition has certainly been undermined by this integration of the northern clergy into the Thai Sangha and by the introduction of a national educational scheme in which the teaching of the Yuan script and literature has no place, the tradition still remains. In short, the case of the integration of the Yuan sect into the Thai church reveals that some degree of cultural pluralism can be tolerated provided that structural integration has been achieved.

Buddhism as an Instrument of National Policy

The Sangha reforms of King Culalongkorn were designed primarily as a means for undermining primordial sentiments rather than making the religious structure an instrument for the promotion of national ends. However, the very success of the integrative revolution of Culalongkorn made the Thai Sangha a national structure of such significance that the temptation to use it for such purposes has in recent years become irresistible. While not denying that some attempts were made during the period between 1902 and the early 1960’s to use the Sangha in the promotion of national policies, it would appear that no concerted effort to do so seems to have occurred until the regime of Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat (1957–1963).

Sarit was almost single-mindedly concerned with the promotion of national development as a means of strengthening the country. The existence of a strong national church recommended itself to him as an excellent tool for effecting his purposes. As Ishii has noted:

Sarit thought that national integration must be strengthened to realize national

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44 This term is borrowed from Geertz, op cit.
development. To attain this goal he planned to start with fostering the people's sentiment for national integration through the enhancement of traditional values as represented by the monarchy and Buddhism.45

For the Sangha to be a tool of national integration, it must itself be strong. While Culalongkorn's revolution had brought a strongly hierarchical national Sangha into being, a subsequent law in 1941 had somewhat diffused power among several institutions at the top—but not, significantly, at the bottom. The separation of powers established in the Sangha Administration Act of 194146 had permitted the emergence of disputes between the two orders, the numerically predominant Mahanikai and the prestigious Thammayutnikai that, owing to royal favor, had long controlled a significant proportion of the powerful positions at the upper levels of the Sangha.47 These disputes, together with the separation of powers at the upper level of the Sangha, troubled Sarit and he moved in 1950 to impress his own will upon the church.48 In 1962, a new Sangha Administration Act was promulgated which created (or recreated) a highly centralized Sangha with power concentrated in the role of the supreme patriarch.49 Among the most important elements of the law were the provisions for the disrobing of monks who had either broken Sangha (Vināya) rules or laws of the state.50

The Sangha as restructured by the 1962 law had much greater potential for being used by the government for the promotion of national goals. Sarit himself did not make much use of the Sangha, perhaps because of his death in late 1963, but his successors have done so. In the mid 1960's two important programs sponsored by the government were initiated which made possible Sangha assistance to the government in strengthening of the loyalties of the populace to the nation.

The first of these programs, called thammathut (Dhammadūta, lit. “Dharmic Ambassador”), was established by the Department of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Education, in 1965. Under this program, and the closely related community development program sponsored by Mahaculalongkorn (Buddhist) University, Buddhist monks travel out to the outlying areas during the dry season in order to strengthen the people's attachments to Buddhism and to provide some aid to people in need. The Sangha fully cooperated in the establishment of the thammathut program and took over the administration of the program from the Department of Religious Affairs in 1966.51

The underlying suppositions on which this program was built include the belief held by government officials that attachments to Buddhism provide a safeguard against the incursions of alien ideologies and that these attachments can be capitalized on in the promotion of national development. As regards the political motive, some officials believe that the peoples of the northern and northeastern re-

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46 Chot Thongprayun, op. cit.
47 I follow Kirsch in referring to the Thammayutnikai and Mahanikai as “orders” rather than the more common “sects.” See A. Thomas Kirsch, Phu Thai Religious Syncretism (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1967), p. 13. The choice of terms here is predicated upon the observation that the divisions in the Thai Sangha appear to be more similar to the divisions between religious orders in the Catholic Church than they are to the divisions between Protestant sects.
48 Ishii, op. cit., p. 869.
49 A text and explanation of the Sangha Administration Act of 1962 is given in Chot Thongprayun, op. cit. For a discussion of the significance of the act, see Ishii, op. cit., pp. 869–870.
50 See articles 24–30 and 42–44 of the act as given in Chot Thongprayun, op. cit.
gions of the country are particularly vulnerable to the propaganda of subversive elements. "To counter this threat," Mulder has stated, "specially trained monks are now sent on a kind of moral rearmament mission in those areas which are threatened by subversion." In the description of the community development program of Mahaculalongkorn University given in the catalogue of the university, the reasons for clerical involvement in rural development programs are explicitly stated:

Upcountry, the people put their trust and confidence in the monks; obedience and cooperation in any activity becomes automatic if the request comes from the monks. In an age of accelerated development, community development programs are sure to be effectively accomplished with monastic help and cooperation.

Monks from both Bangkok (including students from Mahaculalongkorn University) and from upcountry centers are involved in this program. It was headed, in 1967, by a member of the Council of Elders who resides at Wat Chetuphon in Bangkok. In the north, the local head was a former provincial abbot who had subsequently become abbot of Wat Phra Sing in Chiangmai.

The Thammathut monks, according to a handbook distributed to them in 1967, are supposed to teach villagers with whom they work about the basic tenets of Buddhism. For those villagers who have never made a commitment to the religion the Thammathut monks perform a ceremony roughly equivalent to confirmation in the Christian religion. For those who are already confirmed Buddhists, the monks are to encourage them to become lay disciples. More significantly for our purposes, the monks also teach the applications of Buddhism to everyday life, including the relevance of religious practices to the development goals of the nation. Finally, they aid local people by distributing medicines and, in the case of the clerical community development workers from Mahaculalongkorn University at least, encourage local monks to support development programs.

As a result of inquiries made into the functioning of the Thammathut program in both the north and the northeast, the two main areas covered by Thammathut monks, I would conclude that the main impact of the program has been to provide villagers in these areas with clear evidence that the Sangha approves and supports the economic development efforts of the government. Both ordinary and Thammathut monks have cooperated successfully with government officials in spurring villagers to undertake such secular projects as building schools, improving roads, and constructing bridges. Such projects are defined by the clergy as merit-making endeavors so that those who contribute labor or money toward their realization obtain merit.

Since the villagers of the north and the northeast are, overwhelmingly, practicing Buddhists who already belong to the Thai church, the goal of strengthening Buddhism in these areas would seem to be spurious. However, there is no question

53 Mahaculalongkorn, op. cit., p. 89.
55 Ibid. and Mahaculalongkorn, op. cit., pp. 89-91.
56 Research on the social action programs of the Sangha was carried out in 1967 and 1968. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Science Foundation and the University of Washington which made this research possible.
but that appeals to the religious sentiments of villagers has been an effective way to mobilize the populace to work toward secular ends of community development. Whether the Sangha, through the Thammathut or other similar programs, will play an even bigger role in promoting the development of Thailand is still uncertain. The Thammathut program does suggest, however, that the Sangha is willing to accept such a role.

The second program of social action in which the Sangha is currently engaged, known as thammacarik (Dhammacarika, lit., “wandering Dharma”), is directed specifically toward the tribal people of the country. It was initiated in 1964–1965 by Mr. Pradit Disawat, the head of the Tribal Welfare Division of the Department of Public Welfare, in consultations with a monk who is both abbot of Wat Bencaomphet in Bangkok and abbot of a region which comprises four northern provinces. The purpose of the program is to convert the tribal peoples of the country to Buddhism. According to Mr. Pradit, the propagation of Buddhism among the different tribal groups would be likely to advance administrative and development goals among the tribal people because the integration of our people into a large community depends upon the ties of custom and religion.

The program was approved by the Council of Elders of the Sangha and has been run since 1965 as a joint endeavor of the Department of Public Welfare and the Sangha.

Each dry season, monks recruited from Bangkok (including from Mahacula University) and from northern provinces have been sent in groups of 3 to 5 members to live in centers established in areas where the tribal people have already experienced some contact with Department of Public Welfare workers. The Bangkok monks spend two months in the mission stations, while the local monks spend four. In 1968, 14 novices and one monk of tribal background were also added to the mission group, ostensibly to act as interpreters. However, the effect of the addition of these clerics is somewhat doubtful owing to the fact that only 5 were posted to stations in which the tribal group being served was the same as that from which the cleric had come. Thammacarik monks have worked among Meo, Yao, Lisu, Lahu, Akha, Karen, and T’in peoples, although the heaviest emphasis has been on the Meo and the Karen (including both P’wo and S’kaw Karen). (See Table I.)

The methods utilized by the Thammacarik monks include the exposing of tribal peoples to clerical behavior, teaching them how to pay respect to the Triple Gems, teaching them to make merit by giving alms to the monks, encouraging them...
Table I—Buddhist Missions to Tribal Peoples
(Thammacarik Program)

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<th>Estimated population of tribal groups (Total in Thailand)*</th>
<th>Number of missionary stationsb</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>123,000</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meo</td>
<td>53,000</td>
<td>+ 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akha</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T'in</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisu</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lahu</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao/Akha*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao/Lisu*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yao/Meo*</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (ca. 300,000d)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

* No adequate census data for tribal populations in Thailand exist. The figures here are based on estimates given by Gordon Young in his monograph, The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand, 2nd ed. (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1962) and in the Report of the United Nations Survey Team on the Economic and Social Needs of the Opium-Producing Areas in Thailand (Bangkok: Government House Printing Office, 1967), p. 8. The latter estimates are based on official Thai estimates made in 1965/66. The highest figures given by these sources, rounded to the nearest thousand, have been used for the reason that most students of tribal society in Thailand believe published estimates of tribal populations to be understated. The figures for Karen, Meo, Yao, and Lahu are based on the U.N. estimates, while the figures for Akha, T'in, and Lisu are based on Young.

b Data for 1965, 1966, and 1967 were drawn from Thailand. Department of Public Welfare, Ministry of Interior (1967), op. cit. and from Thailand. Department of Public Welfare, Ministry of Interior (1968), op. cit. Those for 1968, 1969, and 1970 were taken from mimeographed materials distributed to missionary monks. Detailed breakdown of the figures for 1965 was unavailable. However, the data does permit indication (noted with +) of tribal groups to whom missionaries were sent.

* Three mission stations were at centers where more than one tribal group was represented.

d The estimate of 300,000, or about 1% of the total population in Thailand in the mid-1960's, subsumes all tribal groups including several to whom Buddhist missionaries have not yet been sent.

60 Interview with Phra Thammakittisophon, Abbot of Wat Bencamophit, Bangkok, February 12, 1968.
of the group ordained in 1965, while 25 novices and one monk ordained in 1966 still remained. Nineteen of those who remained were Meo, with the remaining nine being distributed among Lisu (3), T'in (3), Yao (2) and Ho Chinese (1).

The concentration on the Meo is obviously a consequence of the great concern which developed in government circles in the past few years regarding this group. Nearly half the mission stations in the three years of the program and over half of the missionaries have been in Meo areas. This concentration on the Meo is out of proportion to the relative size of the Meo population among the tribal peoples, since the Meo comprise only about 11 percent of the total tribal population. In the last two years of the program, there has been a decline in the number of missionary stations among the Meo, a reflection, perhaps, of recent fears regarding security in Meo areas. There has also been a marked increase in the number of stations among the Karen, bringing the amount of attention given this group more in accord with the relative size of the Karen population in Thailand.

The Thammacarik program is intended to accomplish quite a different purpose than simply loosening of primordial attachments of the tribal people and drawing these people into greater involvement in national life. The overall aim of the government's tribal policy is the assimilation of the tribal people into Thai culture. This policy was clearly enunciated in a speech by the director-general of the Department of Public Welfare:

In promoting the development and welfare of the hill people, the Government's main objectives may be summarized as follows:

1. To prevent the destruction of forest and sources of natural streams, by encouraging stabilized agriculture to replace the destructive shifting cultivation practised by the hill tribes.
2. To end poppy growing, by promoting other means of livelihood.
3. To develop the economic and social conditions of hill tribes so that they may contribute to the national development, by promoting community development among the hill tribes grouped in settlements.
4. To induce the hill tribes to accept the important role of helping to maintain the security of national frontiers, by instilling in them a sense of belonging and national loyalty to the nation.

To effect the latter end, it is obvious that the government looks primarily to the Buddhist missionaries.

The degree to which Thai Buddhism can play the new role which the government has cast for it is still open to question. The actual impact of the Buddhist missions upon tribal cultures has not been the success that the official reports would seem to suggest.

In a first-hand study of the Thammacarik program which I made in the Karen stations of Mae Sariang District, Mae Hong Son Province, I found that the monks were unable to communicate with the tribal peoples owing to an absence of a common language. The monks (with one exception) could not speak Karen and few of

63 Ibid., p. 23.
the Karen could speak even Northern Thai (Yuan), much less the Thai spoken by Bangkok monks. What was transmitted then was exposure to certain pieces of overt behavior (e.g., how to give alms to the monks) without any of the ideological basis upon which the behavior was predicated. With the departure of the monks, nothing appears to have changed in the beliefs of the Karens.

Even the official reports give indication that the mission program has made only a superficial impression upon the tribal peoples. For example, in the assessment of the first year of the program, it was stated that the incorporation of Buddhism into tribal culture was not at the expense of tribal beliefs since Buddhism "is not at variance with the animism of the tribal peoples" (Thailand. Department of Public Welfare, Ministry of Interior, 1967:48).

A superficial understanding of Buddhism is potentially more threatening to the aims of the government as regards the tribal peoples than no understanding at all. Recent Buddhist millenarianism among P'wo Karen in Kanchanaburi province in western Thailand64 and the attraction of tribal peoples to a charismatic defrocked follower of Khru Ba Siwichai known as the Khu Ba Khao (or Pha Khao Pi) in North Thailand65 have provided the basis for the creation of movements among tribal peoples which could possibly be turned against the government.

The superficial character of Buddhist mission efforts is a consequence also of the lack of attention given to the differences in cultures of tribal peoples by those who have constructed and administered the Thammacarik program. The program is uniform despite the fact that such groups as the T'in (and other Mon-Khmer groups such as the Lua' and Khamu which have not yet been missionized) have had long contacts with Tai-speaking lowlanders (i.e., the Yuan) while other groups such as the Meo and Yao have been amongst Tai-speaking Buddhists for only a short time. The fact that a majority of tribal clergy were sent in 1968 to groups other than those to which they themselves belonged suggests that those who control the program tend to see all tribals as basically the same.

With continued experience, the Thammacarik missionaries may become more sophisticated in their techniques, thus overcoming some of these problems. Even if this happens a more significant problem will yet remain, namely, the tying of the program to political ends. On the tribal side, resistance could appear to the program if the tribals perceive that the missionaries are working along with other governmental officials to undermine completely their traditional cultures. Tribal opposition to Buddhist missionaries could also have a detrimental effect on the good relations which many monks in the north have developed with tribals outside of the mission program.


65 Marlowe, op. cit. In another paper, Marlowe has suggested that Karen followers of the Khu Ba Khao have become assimilated to Northern Thai (Yuan) ceremonies and institutions (David Marlowe, "The S'kaw Karen of Chiang Mai" [Unpublished paper read at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, San Francisco, April 3, 1970], p. 10). While I would not dispute the Yuan character inherent in the movement led by the Khu Ba Khao, my own investigations into this movement, primarily in Mae Hong Son and Tak provinces, have revealed the facts that the movement spurns any connection with the established Sangha (except on a purely local and personalistic basis) and, in turn, is looked on with grave suspicion by members of the Sangha hierarchy. Far more investigation on this movement and upon Buddhist millenarism in general as has appeared in Thailand still needs to be done.
The use of Buddhism to serve political ends as in such programs as Thammarcarik and Thammathomt could also have unfortunate consequences for the Sangha itself. In modern Thai history, the Sangha has maintained a significant degree of freedom of action within the religious sphere. The freedom has not been threatened by the restrictions imposed by the government on the Sangha nor by the frequent involvement of monks in ceremonial activities sponsored by the state. The implicit premise underlying church-state relations during most of the 20th century seems to have been that since most Thai are Buddhists, Buddhism could provide an aura of sanctity for secular activities rather than that Buddhism should be a mechanism which could be manipulated by the State in achieving secular goals. Insofar as Buddhism becomes an instrument of national policy, freedom of action by members of the Sangha could become severely limited even in the realm of religious affairs.

Conclusions

The effect of the policies instituted under King Culalongkorn was the creation of a national church in Thailand which today numbers as adherents the overwhelming majority of the citizenry. The implementation of these policies was facilitated by the fact that while the Yuan and Lao traditions were distinctive from that of the Siamese, all three still belonged to a greater tradition, that of Theravada Buddhism. All three shared a common set of symbols which could be appealed to by the national leaders in their efforts to construct a national church. This is not to say, however, that the undermining of primordial attachments to the separate Buddhist traditions of Thailand was somehow an inevitable consequence of the creation of a national polity. The sectarian cleavages still to be found among Theravada Buddhists in Burma and Ceylon demonstrate that quite the opposite could have occurred. The ultimate success of Culalongkorn's policies is to found in the recognition that a national church depended more upon establishment of a hierarchical structure in which all members of the clergy were brought under the authority of the Thai Sangha than it did upon the impression of cultural uniformity on all of the adherents of Buddhism within the kingdom. This guiding principle was specifically recognized by Prince Wachirayan, the supreme patriarch of the Sangha at the time of the promulgation of the Sangha Administration Act of 1902, when he stated that the clergy in Thailand were bound by local custom as well as by the regulations of the great tradition (the Vinaya) and the laws of Thailand.

The emergence of a strong national church with an elaborate structure seems to have been facilitated also by the societal context in which it developed. Evers has suggested that the greater formalization of the Thai Sangha, as compared with the Singhalese Sangha, is associated with the fact that Thailand, unlike Ceylon, is "a society in which relatively few ascriptive criteria are available for the formation of social groups, and where basic rules are vaguely defined." It is certainly true that in Thailand, the Sangha is one of the few highly formalized structures which exists.

This characteristic of the Thai Sangha, together with the fact that the great proportion of Thai are Buddhists, underlie the recent government efforts to utilize the Thai church as an instrument for achieving politically defined national ends. How-

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ever, the efforts to manipulate Buddhism for political ends which are evident in the
Thammathut and particularly in the Thammacarik program could prove to be de-
leterious rather than advantageous to the attainment of national goals.

Insofar as equation of being Thai with being Buddhist is a cornerstone of Thai
official thinking, non-Buddhists could be denied access to participation in the na-
tional community. It could be predicted that such a policy would lead to increasing
alienation on the part of such minorities as the Thai-Islam who show no signs of
becoming Buddhists. A similar case could be made for the tribal peoples unless the
assimilationist programs become far more successful than they have to date.

Given the essentially other-worldly and nonmaterialist character of the Buddhist
religious life, one is also led to wonder how far the Thai Sangha could be pushed to
promote economic development without seriously undermining the credibility of
clerical roles in the eyes of both the Sangha and laity alike. This is not to argue that
Buddhism is somehow incompatible with economic development. However, the
character of the role of Buddhist monks suggests that the contribution of monks to
development lies more in the providing of spiritual advice and solace to those who
labor to bring about the transformation of Thai society than in being toilers in that
field themselves.

While the Thammathut and Thammacarik program do represent moves in the
direction of making Buddhism an instrument of national policy, that die has not
yet been irrevocably cast. These programs are too recent to be able to assess fully
their future course. The question of the role which Buddhism is to play in Thai-
land's search for modernity is still undecided. However that question is resolved,
Thailand is fortunate in being able to face the future knowing that it does not have
to overcome marked communal dissent which is rooted in local and regional Bud-
dhist traditions or in sectarianism. Such threats to national unity which might have
appeared in these guises were successfully countered nearly 70 years ago as part of the
integrative revolution wrought by King Culalongkorn.