

WOMEN IN THAILAND

— Thoughts on the Recent Anthropological Literature —

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Many western scholars and observers, mostly men, have referred to the high status of women in Thailand, ever since the early European experience in the seventeenth century up to more recent ethnographies in the sixties. At the same time, scholars from the same part of the world and of the same sex have also been responsible for the cliché that women in Theravada Buddhist societies are inferior beings, or at least, deemed to be so. For those interested in the study of women, Thailand surely presents a challenging problem.

Anthropologists have contributed substantially to, or rather, have been among the most active participants in the rising interest in women's studies. Unfortunately, the rush of ethnographers in Thailand in the post-war decades had taken leave before this trend was felt among scholars of Thailand. It was not until the 1970's that attempts to look at the other half of the population began.⁽¹⁾

Since the seventies, there have been discussions by anthropologists, both men and women, about women in Thailand. The topics and approach range from economic, social structural to cultural and ideological. The purpose of this paper is to bring together these mosaic pieces and consider them critically in an attempt to form a framework for understanding within the context of Thai culture and society, in order to seek questions, rather than to provide solutions.

The recent discussions on Thai women can be treated under two major headings: consideration of social structural features in the north in relation to ancestral spirit cults and the position of women; and implications of Buddhism for women. Let us examine these in order.

I Women, Household and the Spirit Cults

A Note on Social Structural Studies in Thailand

In looking at social structural aspects of Thailand, the early post-war ethnographers were very much influenced by two concepts: "loose-structuredness" of Thai society proposed by Embree (Embree 1950), and the all-encompassing categorization of bilateral descent in Southeast Asia by Murdock (Murdock 1960). The prevalence of nuclear families was stressed without indicating the actual history and workings of the family cycle. Most studies mentioned tendencies towards uxori-local residence, the importance of the female line, and the high status of women without sufficient clarification. Embree proposed that Thai society is loosely structured based on rather impressionistic observations in the early 1950's, and this had become the paradigm for Thai studies in spite of its many ambiguities. The concept as Embree introduced it seemed to have more to do with behavioral patterns than structural principles, yet it led to the neglect of efforts to seek structural principles governing Thai social relationships.⁽²⁾ Bilateral descent is a blanket term under which details and actual workings of non-unilineal social systems could be obscured.

More recently, since the 1970's, ethnographers have begun to fill this lacuna, and discuss family structure in more detail. In talking about social systems in Thailand, we must note that there are considerable regional differences owing to the different historical background of each region. For the purpose of this paper, we will look at northern Thailand in detail, but first, some notes on works on other regions are due.

Tambiah and Mizuno, both working in the northeast agree on finding bilateral kinship with matrilineal coloring, especially regarding residence and inheritance. The households, according to Tambiah, are the acting units in the village, and group to form compounds of married and usually female siblings. Both in the northeast and central Thailand, discussions have pointed out two paradoxical tendencies of corporate group vs. personal ties.⁽³⁾ While there are what seem like corporate groups such as the multi-household compounds, where kinsmen related mainly through

parent-child (daughter) ties live, eat, and work together and share labor and land, there exist wider ties among bilateral kinsmen which can be called forth as a one-to-one relationship for the same purposes. Along the same line, Tambiah points out that in the northeast, rather than social groupings and corporate groups, social classifications are the criteria for ritual and social action (Tambiah 1970: 15). The compounds themselves do not indicate continuity.⁽⁴⁾

In considering the northern spirit cults, it is interesting that Mizuno mentions a now obsolete northeastern belief in maternal ancestral spirits *phy sya*, who take possession of children and women, when angered by misbehavior disturbing family life. While there seems nothing normative in the stress on maternal kinsmen, nor any report on social groupings based on such a relationship, in practice, the mother-child (daughter) relationship appears to be of great significance in household-related matters.⁽⁵⁾

The detailed and valuable studies on family structure in the northeast and central Thailand now needs an additional perspective—that of women.

Northern Thai Social Structure and the Spirit Cults

In the north, while such compounds have not been reported, initial matrilocality and tendency for female ultimogeniture had also been reported (for example, Kingshill 1965; Potter, J. 1976; Potter, S. 1977; and Wijeyewardene 1967). Although as a rule, inheritance is equal among all children, in Thailand, female ultimogeniture or at least inheritance by a daughter seems to be in the majority. Especially regarding the actual household, most often the youngest daughter remains in the house after marriage, to take care of her parents and inherit the house. Even for other property, male siblings would often sell out their rights to their sisters when they married out (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984). Added to this the existence of ritual performed by matrilineally related kinsmen in the north suggested the possibility of matrilineal descent groups. How then, is the spirit cult related to the above matrilineal tendency? This has been taken up especially by Davis (1974) and Turton

(1972) and led to further discussion in an edited volume in *Mankind* (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984).

Let us first examine the features of the cult. Mougne says, the cults are rather inconspicuous and that if one did not know of their existence, one may not even come to notice them (Mougne 1984: 300). This may be due to the fact that they are household based cults in the hands of women. For men in the public sphere of life, they are rather insignificant. While Turton considers these spirits (*phii puu ngaa*) to be actual matrilineal ancestors, most agree that they are merely spirits handed down from such ancestors. An 'original house' (Davis' term)⁽⁶⁾ has a shrine in the household where rites are held annually, after curing from sickness or at marriage. Reports from different locales vary as to whether the ritual officiant is male or female, while the group head is the eldest woman in the same generation.⁽⁷⁾ The number of households in a cult group averages around ten, ranging from one to twenty-four (Turton). When descendants of an 'original house' move to other localities, they may split and start their own cult after an initiatory rite. Notably, the splitting of a cult is more according to territorial lines than lineage lines. According to Davis, aside from these 'clan-like spirits,' (his term) each household has its own house spirit (also *phii puu ngaa*), who are said to have the same spiritual essence as the 'clan spirits,' so that households sharing the same spirit essence consider themselves to be 'of the same clan.'

For women, recruitment to the cult group is by birth. A man is born into his mother's group, but may later belong to his wife's. The spirits protect the members, if they are treated politely with rites and offerings and are informed of all events and happenings among the cult members.

Like living relatives, they are offended if they discover that they were the last to know anything of interest or importance. Then they withdraw their protection and cause the offender to fall ill. The spirits are greatly concerned with the sexual behavior of daughters of the matriline. If a young woman sleeps with a man, she must tell her mother, so that a propitiatory offering can be made to the spirits. If the young woman is too shy to tell her mother, the spirits are angry, and the mother will fall ill. Then, if a spirit medium is called in to

hold a curing ceremony, the reasons for the illness will be made public in the course of the ceremony. This would be most humiliating to the daughter. Thus the spirits enforce the value of premarital chastity for women. (Potter 1977: 117)

Thus, the spirits bring control to female sexuality. When a man marries a daughter of the cult, he pays a sum to propitiate and gain the approval of the spirits. The marriage is then made public. This is the most important element in a Northern Thai marriage without which the marriage cannot be accomplished.⁽⁸⁾

The man's membership and role in the cult is ambiguous. To his wife's group, his relationship is affinal, and the spirits do not seem to have direct control over him as they do on his wife. Moreover, his attitude towards the cult seems generally to be apathetic. To the man, the cult is peripheral and secondary in his life and interests. This may account for the inconspicuousness of the cult which I mentioned before.⁽⁹⁾

Descent/Locality

Now, let us return to the question of matrilineality. Contrary to Turton's claim that these cult groups are matrilineal descent groups and ancestor worship comparable to Fortes' model in Africa, the latter model of matrilineal descent would entail so much more than the Thai case can answer for, and a comparison would bring more confusion than order. Cohen, Potter and Davis seem to agree at least that there is a matrilineal principle and descent group in operation in so far as the cult is concerned. Davis proposes the precedence of belief in female related domestic spirits to matrilocality.

The role of women as custodians of the house spirit cult is one aspect of a more general association between women and domestic spirits. Every woman possesses a certain mystic essence, . . . which derives from her house and ultimately from her clan spirit. Two women of different clans who reside in the same house create a potentially dangerous situation in which two different spiritual essences are thrown into conflict. (1984: 266-7)

Here, Davis is further suggesting that there are spiritual essences which are carried by women, through the maternal line.

Some others on the other hand have pointed out the importance of locality rather than descent in forming the cult groups. According to this view, owing to matrilocal residence and tendency for female ultimogeniture, sisters tend to reside close to each other and to their parents. Therefore, a localized group whose structural continuity is female-centered is formed, and the spirit cult is a reflection of this group. It might even be said that the spirits are inherited, not necessarily by the daughter along the maternal line, but rather with the house. As mentioned above, Davis points out that group fission is more according to territorial lines than descent, and also that it is possible to buy into a cult group for those who have moved in from far away. From all we have noted, rather than using terms that suggest descent principles and corporate groups, Delaney's term "matri-phrased group" (1977) would be less misleading. The cult group consists of a group of households related through the mother-daughter line, and living close by. Such a view would agree with the northeastern system mentioned above: the momentum that works against the dispersal of groups into wider kindred networks seems to lie in local ties, based more often on maternal relationship, or expressed in such an idiom.

Women in the Household

The discussion so far throws out into relief, the importance of women within the household in northern Thailand. Potter's work stresses this importance:

The spirits which protect the Plenitudes' [a household Potter studied] matriline live in their house because it is the 'old-established' house of the lineage. The spirits stay in the same house for generation after generation. Houses are inherited by whichever child stays to care for the parents in their old age, and this is usually the youngest daughter, while other children move away to houses of their own. . . . All the descendants of older daughters live in houses established after the original installation of the spirits in what is now the Plenitudes' house, hence their houses are not called 'old-established,' but the spirits still protect them. (1977: 116)

In spite of her emphasis on a possible lineal principle, Potter does not clarify who the members of what she calls the matriline are, outside of

the immediate compound of two households—the Plenitudes' and their married eldest daughter's. Furthermore, the entire work centers on this one family which is by no means ordinary in terms of its prestige and economic and social position in the village. Keeping these points in mind, her description points out the importance and continuity of the household (which includes inherited property and spirit worship) and the structurally central position of women in it.

There seems, in northern Thailand at least, to be a sense of continuity, although unlike that of the Japanese *ie* which accompanies a corporate group with a line of succession. The continuity of a household is secured mainly through women by residence, inheritance, and the spirits. How the households group together may vary, as recruitment and authority structure vary. This needs further investigation through detailed research on actual family cycles, residence patterns, land holdings and inheritance especially of household property.

How can we interpret this structural importance of women and spirit cults in terms of their status in northern Thailand? There have been different opinions concerning this. Wijeyewardene, while admitting the widespread domestic authority of women, considers the cult to be a form of protection and solidarity for women against the mobile men and that women are socially and ritually in a weak position (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984). Protection, solidarity and providing women with a field for expression certainly cannot be denied as important functions of the cult, yet the evaluation of women's social and ritual position needs to be qualified.

Potter and Davis stress the structural importance of women, and the ideological dominance and formal authority held by men (Potter 1977, Davis 1974). Potter describes a household where women are structurally the key figures through whom affinal relations between men are formed, yet actual authority passes through the latter relation between father-in-law and son-in-law. She repeatedly mentions the Thai proverb: "women are secondary to men just as the back legs of the elephant are secondary to the front legs of the elephant." If a little rhetoric may be allowed, is it not as true to say that the hindlegs of an elephant follow the front legs,

as to say they have a heavier responsibility in supporting the elephant? Men may lead the way in the public front and are the major figures in public, yet the household, the basic units of society, center around women. In the case in Potter's study, authority passed from father-in-law to son-in-law. Wijeyewardene argues that this is more an artefact of uxorilocal residence, rather than a rule of succession, and that such patterns were found in wealthier households (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984:288). In spite of her own assertions, after discussing the status of the husband, his avoidance relation with his father-in-law, and the mediating role of the wife or daughter of the household, Potter says:

The effect of all this is to give a woman an important voice in the management of family life, a position of power which comes from her place in the structure of the family. Thus, the specific kind of structure has the effect of increasing the importance of women, even though formal authority is vested in men. . . . The children expect that an angry wife will threaten to break up a marriage; . . . that women make most of the important decisions in a family. (1977: 101)

At least in the domestic arena, women's structural position accords them considerable power.

However, the other side of the same coin is that women's role is confined within the household. We have seen that the spirit cults, while providing an avenue of expression for women, in effect actually function to control female sexuality. Men do not take the cult seriously. Outside the domestic realm, women in traditional northern Thailand engaged in petty trading in the markets, and small enterprise. These economic activities can be seen as extensions of their domestic authority. In Buddhism, local administration, and other public matters, men dominated.

Here, we are reminded of Rosaldo's thesis of universal asymmetry and opposition between the "domestic" orientation of women and the "extra-domestic" or "public" ties available to men (Rosaldo 1974). The importance of women in northern Thailand derive from their structural position in the household, and the skewing of rights and duties towards women occurs in relation to economic and ritual matters concerning the domestic arena. On the other hand, the formal authority in northern

Thai society lies with the men, who are leaders in the village and Buddhism related matters. This is not to say that women are completely subordinate. "In those societies where domestic and public spheres are clearly differentiated, women may win power and value by stressing their differences from men." (Rosaldo 1974: 37) The seclusion of women from public matters and the higher mobility of men goes hand in hand with the prominence of the male perspective where male dominant ideology becomes the official ideology more easily available to the ethnographer (Ardener 1971). In the face of this, women have their own channels of solidarity, for example, the household, the market, and the spirit cults.

Urban Professional Mediums

Recently, however, with higher rates of mobility, especially urban migration for labor, there have been changes in the rural community, the household organization and the position of women. In many cases spirit cults are no longer continued. Irvine's report on the growth of urban professional spirit mediums is most illuminating in this respect (Irvine 1984).

The number of mediums has been on the rise in Chiangmai in the past three decades, and among them, women dominate both in number and authority. Their clients are also mostly women. Irvine considers this phenomenon as a substitute for the declining ancestral spirit cults. It has provided women with a new locus of economic and ritual power. These professional mediums have incorporated anti-communist, Buddhist and nationalist elements in their possessing rituals, and thus become involved with the public sphere. By incorporating wider ideological and political goals, they successfully avoid charges of backwardness from the modernizers. While practices of spirit mediumship trace back to more traditional forms in rural areas, this incorporation of more universal ideological elements is a characteristic of the urban mediums.

Further, the urban mediums indicate stronger identification with the possessing spirits, who in many cases are Buddhist deities or historic heroes, whereby the possessed woman becomes male. Irvine depicts

a shocking scene where Buddhist monks are prostrating before the female mediums. Many female mediums possessed by male spirits redefine even their marital status and sexuality.

In the sense that it may provide an arena for expression by women, it is the urban counterpart of the ancestor cults, yet rather than being a substitution for the declining ancestor spirit cults as Irvine points out, these urban professional mediums seem to manifest quite opposite features. First of all, it is centered on the individual rather than a kin or local group. It provides individual economic gain (the more popular the medium, the more profitable) and psychological satisfaction. Secondly, instead of women being satisfied in their domestic position, it is female incursion into the male arena as well as male sexuality. Women act like men, women become superior to monks, and women deal with political symbols and issues. Further, whereas the ancestor spirit cults were confined to the domestic realm, the professional mediums both make use of and invade Buddhist realms. Irvine estimates the percentage of mediums to be 3% in the Chiangmai municipal area in 1977 (0.45% in the 1950's). If these figures are reliable, it is not a large number, yet the increase is significant enough to suggest that radical changes are taking place in some women's lives and definitions of themselves. The changing economy, dissolution of households and higher mobility may have led to dissatisfaction towards their former domestic role and attraction towards self-satisfaction and economic gain in other modes through more individualistic means. There may be feelings of instability in the rapid change behind their more active and aggressive participation in an ambiguously defined role and religious practice.

II Women and Buddhism

Women in Canonical Buddhism

When we consider the number of wats in every town and village, the nationwide monastic organization of the sangha, and the support of the royal family, it is only natural to expect Buddhism to be a major component in the cosmology, ideology and the everyday lives of the Thai

people, including the culture of gender. What is the position of women in a Buddhist society such as Thailand? Let us first take a look at canonical Buddhism as introduced by several authors on this topic.⁶⁰

According to a Theravada canonical text, *Khuddakapatha*, where every mode of existence is put in hierarchical order; woman is lower than man, and must serve him, while house dwelling man is lower than the homeless, etc. . . . the highest on the scale being the enlightened Buddha (Tambiah 1984: 11-12). In the canonical orthodox sense, there are no ordained nuns in either of the Southeast Asian Theravaddin countries.⁶¹ There are non-ordained women who shave their heads, wear white robes, and live at the edge of the religious community practicing meditation and cooking for the monks or novices, called *mae chi* in Thailand. The view that women are the feeble sex that need to be protected, and that they can be a threat and distraction to the chastity of monks has its roots in early Buddhism. There is an account in the *Cullavagga* in the *Vinaya* texts, of how the Buddha was reluctant yet finally persuaded to allow the first nun into the order, even then as subordinate to the male monks order (Tambiah 1984: 359). Among the majority of lay Thai Buddhists, rather than attainment of nirvana, accumulation of merit through actual practices to enter into heaven, is the more accessible and desired goal. In Thai Buddhist life, men not only make merit themselves by entering the sangha, but can also bring merit or chance to make merit for women. Through ordination men bring merit to their mothers, and through daily alms-giving to the male monks, women make merit. The *mae chi* on the other hand, have no capacity to provide such merit-making opportunities for others. Moreover, as women they are less respected than a domestic mother in the household whose highly respected position will be mentioned below.

Thus, in the Buddhist view, in so far as this immediate life in the world is concerned, women are in a disadvantaged position, given circumscribed roles and having no access to ordination. However, as John van Esterik points out, if we look at the Buddhist worldview in its wider temporal and hierarchical span, we find that men and women are both on the same ladder and not too far apart. Within this cosmic hierarchy,

sex distinctions seem hardly relevant. The road to nirvana is considered to be a long one that requires many lifetimes and rebirths. Stories about female saints and monks can also be found in the canon (*Therigatha*). Canonical Buddhism, then, provides no clear-cut and uniform answer as to the position of women.

Women in Buddhist Ideals: Negative vs. Positive Interpretations

The argument between Keyes and Kirsch is focused on this topic of women's position in Buddhist Thailand. Kirsch attempts to explain the active participation of Thai women in the economic sphere in terms of worldly attachment and the inferiority of women in Buddhism, whereas Keyes denies this inferiority. While both agree upon the centrality of Buddhism in the Thai culture of gender, there is a wide discrepancy in what each understands to be the Buddhist ideal in Thailand. Upon close inspection, they appear to be arriving at similar conclusions with different ideological emphases.

Thai women participate in economic activities, yet few are active in politico-bureaucratic areas. Further, men are involved in politics and Buddhism, while women's role in these areas is severely limited. There is, as we have noted in the above section, a sex role differentiation between men in the positively valued Buddhist religion and politico-bureaucratic areas, and women in the negatively valued economic and domestic sphere. Kirsch points out that, as detachment from the world is the ultimate goal, and merit accumulation the immediate goal in Buddhist life, any attachment to worldly matters, including economic activities would be contrary to the ideal. Thus, the heavy participation of women in economic activities by no means indicates their high status. Rather, it is due to their worldly nature that they can be involved in such activities undesirable to men who are not so attached. In the Buddhist view, according to Kirsch, women are attached by nature, and farther from the ultimate goal than men, and even distract men from their goals.⁰² Monks must not come in direct physical contact with women who are feared to ruin their efforts for non-attachment. Women can only indirectly participate in merit-making in the sangha by sending

their sons to be ordained. Women's merit-making is tied to particular worldly relationships. It is precisely because women are farther from the ideal by nature, that they need more merit, and thus participate in routine merit-making activities such as daily food offerings to the monks (Kirsch 1983: 27).

Kirsch does not make clear whose interpretation he is talking about: his own, the monks' or the lay man/woman's. To be sure, it is persuasive and there are probably not a few Thai men who would agree with his views. Before considering the validity of his argument, let us first look into Keyes' work concerning the same question.

Keyes constructs the image of women in Buddhist rural Thailand through popular ritual texts and a story from the *Jataka* (Keyes 1984). He asserts that the interpretation of such texts provides a coherent notion of woman as nurturant mother, passionate lover, and demanding mistress. The central image is that of nurturer and his emphasis is contrary to Kirsch, that women are inherently good in the Buddhist view. Women are attached, but are able to make merit through and only through their attachment as mothers. Men, on the other hand are also attached but in different ways, and must overcome or abandon their attachment and be ordained into monkhood in order to make merit. While such a view would seem attractive and welcome among women, not only his choice of texts but also his interpretations of them seem arbitrary and apart from their contexts. What is of more interest in his argument is the nurturant image of women—he points out that women are primarily nurturers and supporters of the family and household, and their economic activities are extensions of this nurturant aspect.

Woman as nurturer

This view of women has been put forward by others including Kirsch. Kirsch refers to the same aspect but with a negative emphasis—to him, the nurturant role of women exemplifies the fact that their merit-making can be accomplished only indirectly, or 'relationally' through their worldly attachment as mothers.

J. Hanks was probably the first to pay attention to the importance of

motherhood for Thai women (Hanks 1963). In an earlier monograph, she colorfully described a rural Thai childbirth, how a woman goes through what becomes the most significant event in her life. Hanks does not confine herself to Buddhist ideals in this discussion. As in other parts of Southeast Asia, women spend several days after parturition in front of a fire prepared by their husbands, whereby they become cleansed and full of energy. This custom (*yuu fai*) is considered to be symbolically most important in the initiation into motherhood. Muecke also argues that motherhood has been the most significant status-marker for women (Muecke 1984).

Thus, the importance of motherhood and the nurturant role for women, is acknowledged by many. Important as Buddhist ideals are, to take for granted a one-sided interpretation of texts or to confine oneself within Buddhist doctrine and ideology would lead to a distorted image. The stress on motherhood and the nurturant image brings us back to women's position and confinement in the domestic arena. Even their economic activities can be seen as an extension of their nurturant role. This may be enough to bring out feminist anger against 'exploitation' of women. However, accounts sympathetic to women such as Hanks,' accord status and respect to women albeit within the domestic realm, rather than see *yuu fai* as symbol of confinement and subordination.

Buddhism in Context, Buddhism as Ideology

To find a clear dividing line between Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements in Thai society itself seems a futile endeavor. As has been pointed out by Tambiah regarding rural Thailand, Buddhism is one of many ritual complexes, all of which link together in a 'single total field.' In looking at religion and ideology in Theravada Buddhist societies, then, we must widen our perspectives to the entire range of beliefs and the social context in which these beliefs are held and lived out. The same can be said for an understanding of Thai culture of gender.

One way of understanding religious variability in Theravada Buddhist societies is provided by King in his work on Buddhism in Burma.⁴⁹ Here he illustrates clearly that the complex of beliefs in such societies can be

understood as a concentric circle, the center and apex of which is the Buddhist attainment of nirvana, and the periphery fade into spirit beliefs (King 1964). One must recognize that the Buddhist goal for an ascetic or monk at the apex differs from that for the layman. The layman's ideal in Thailand is, for a man, a balanced life of ordination into the sangha in youth, from which he emerges as a mature and desirable man, then enters a householder's life, and returns to more ascetic life in old age.

Thus, there are many levels of religious goals and understandings held in a Buddhist society. We can envisage King's diagram of concentric circles again—the center or apex, is the 'purest' Buddhist ideal of nirvana, which at least for immediate purposes, exclude women as inferior. The highest she can be in this life is *mae chi*. At the lay level, women make merit through male monks. Their position as mother is a counterpart of the male householder role, which is not denied in Buddhist ideals. The 'total field' of beliefs and rituals include other realms of belief where women hold special positions. The northern *phii puu ngaa* cult mentioned above is one such example. Tambiah also mentions that subsidiary mediums in village cults are usually female (1970: 282-4), who are involuntarily recruited through possession. These women mediate between humans and their guardian *phii* through unrestrained ecstatic behavior, sometimes appearing as transvestites. They are prone to alcohol and tobacco, and in spite of belief and dependence on their practices, villagers have little respect for them socially.⁴⁰

While even the apex is not so monolithic in its ideals, in terms of organization, it is recognized and supported by the sangha. The monastic order of sangha parallels the administrative structure, both of which, in spite of the end of monarchy in 1932, need and gain strong support from the King (Tambiah 1980). Thus, at the center is a male supported world, available only to men. It is their ideology that is held at the official front of Thai culture. It is within this ideological frame that Kirsch's position holds, and many of the monks in the sangha may agree. This ideology supports the superiority of men over women, and of the public over the domestic.

As we descend towards the periphery, women find more space for active participation. Interestingly, here there are striking role reversals such as the urban spirit mediums who are served by male monks, or transvestites in village cults. When we look at the roles of women in the 'total field' of religion in Thailand, including though not restricted to Buddhism, we can see Buddhist views within a wider Thai cultural perspective. To limit ourselves to doctrinal and ideological statements would blind us from the actualities of women's position in all aspects of their lives.

Within/Against the Circumscribed Role

It is nevertheless true that on one level the official Buddhist ideology is held and acknowledged.⁶⁹ Within such a frame where their role is circumscribed, how do women cope? Paying attention to how women cope and practice within their circumscribed role in Buddhism would provide the women's perspectives unattainable from looking only at ideology at the front. Penny van Esterik gives lively and illustrious case studies of three different women in a village—how in each case Buddhism operates as a reference system in their lives (Penny van Esterik 1982). Buddhism does not, in her view, devalue women. The important distinction is not that between man and woman, but between ordained/non-ordained, ascetic/sensual, and detached/attached. Male/female is merely a convenient metaphor, and women can also be detached, such as the *mae chi*. She points out rather incongruously however, that lay female householders are more respected than the anomalous and eccentric *mae chi*. The latter wish to be among monks rather than with other laywomen playing nurturant roles as mother and wife, and yet cannot but remain lay themselves, even as they live within temple grounds. Though women may wish to be detached, they are not allowed to be ordained, and thus remain anomalous and unable to join the monks. The most respected woman in her description is a mother of eleven children (five of whom are once ordained sons), active in temple village affairs, with some ritual knowledge, including Brahmanic and *phii* related cults, hard working and earning, and skillful in midwifery. Here

is the counterpart image for the male householder. In contrast, those who try to invade the male sector at the male dominated apex become anomalous beings, unable to belong either to lay society or to the sangha.

Most interesting in this respect, John van Esterik presents a case study of a recent phenomenon of popular lay women meditation leaders (John van Esterik 1982). They are respected lay women outside the household, within a Buddhist role. Since the 1920's, in Burma, lay meditation had been a rising practice, acknowledged by the leaders to be a short cut and rational way to salvation, providing solution for men and women dissatisfied with the routines and unattainability of nirvana for the lay in monastic Buddhism (King 1964). These movements have had influence in Thailand. Van Esterik describes two such movements which are led by women in Thailand. Both women have successfully gained a nationwide following including monks, by knowledge and sophisticated interpretation of the canon. Here is another role reversal. These women, according to Van Esterik are considered to transcend any such worldly category as sex.

Van Esterik explains this in political terms that while male meditation leaders may be threatening to the political order, women can get by without any political accusations. This may explain why they have continued to succeed but not why they could begin to. It seems rather that the rise of lay meditation has added a new dimension in the concentric circle of Buddhism and religion. This has provided women with a new arena of activity where they can remain lay, and still attain a central role by use of education and leadership.

As long as women remained in the domestic realm, and the domestic realm was held in tact, there existed a subtle balance or complementarity between man and woman. While Buddhism in and of itself may remain neutral, an ideological use of Buddhism reads 'inferiority' into it and justifies women's role and position. Certainly, in many respects women were confined and circumscribed from areas available to men. However, women have not remained in the domestic realm, and the clear demarcation between the two realms seems to be breaking down. Changes

in the economy and education have brought a new era.

III Conclusion

As Muecke argues, whereas motherhood was the major status marker for women in Thailand, today education and wealth are increasingly important (Muecke 1984). Urban migration (Suwanlee 1984), increase of nuclear family and the lessening of women's control of the household together with population control and desirability of lesser number of children have brought the decline of the former, while the latter goes hand in hand with class stratification in Thai society. Education brings prestigious jobs for elite women, while less educated urban migrants fall for low wage factory work or service sector work. While the strength of women in the economic sector may be an extension of their traditional roles, the clear demarcation of roles and distinction between the domestic/extradomestic realms fades as women enter into new ventures. The subtle balance of power and respect gives way, so that in place of the loss of their firm foothold in the household, some women find success in enterprise, while others fall in degradation.

Three points emerge from this discussion. First, Buddhism must be seen within its wider socio-cultural context. Buddhism is not in and of itself the simple cause for sexual asymmetry and division of labor, although it may justify it. The economic importance of women must be seen in light of their position in the household and the total cultural construction of gender. What we see in Thailand is a dynamic interaction between Thai social structure and culture including Buddhism in its various manifestations.

Secondly, where the domestic realm maintains its autonomy and significance, women hold authority in the domestic sphere as exemplified both in such structural tendencies as illustrated from the north, and the cultural image of the nurturant mother. Men at the public and official front, however, have more access to ideological manoeuver, and more often it is men's ideas that come to be written down in the anthropologists' fieldnotes. As Ardener points out, men are more often the

weavers, holders and emanators of the official public model. Women's muted models appear in the cultural and social periphery, in many cases accompanying striking reversals.

Thirdly, we need to look more into women in Thailand today. If in the past, the nurturant image and structural position supported their participation in economic activities, does the same hold for the modern female workers? Kirsch gives striking evidence as to the involvement of women in the economic sphere, and their absence in the administrative sector (1982). On the other hand, there are reports of appalling conditions of women factory workers and high rates of prostitution. As the domestic sphere loses its autonomy, and women either willingly or inevitably involve themselves deeper into extra-domestic economic activities, what happens to the balance between male official ideology and female domestic position and economic role? Theoretically, women may lose ground for their domestic authority, yet there is reason to suspect that the Thai culture of gender is more adaptive, and Thai women, more full of spirit.

Notes

- (1) Jane R. Hanks' monograph on maternity rituals in Bang Chan is a valuable exception (Hanks 1963).
- (2) For critique of Embree, see Evers (ed.) 1969.
- (3) Following Mizuno, there have been Japanese scholars both in the northeast and central Thailand, studying family structure, especially multi-household compounds (see Kitahara 1985 for a short summary of such works).
- (4) Once the compound expands enough that its household property and nearby land can no longer support its population, members begin to disperse. This mobility, death of the leading figure and the development of private (personal) ownership of land lead to discontinuity of the compound as a corporate group. In central Thailand, where private ownership of land is widespread, the compound becomes one short and rare phase in the family cycle. For a description of the historical changes in the compound structure owing to increased private ownership, see Kitahara (1985).
- (5) In northern Thailand, Cohen and Wijeyewardene mention *nya* as an elaboration of the domestic cult of *phii puu ngaa*. "The

- slightest elaboration of the cult . . . involves a shrine in the compound . . . and the practice begins to look more like the rituals associated with locality shrines' (Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984: 251).
- (6) Potter, S. refers to it as the 'old established house' (Potter 1977), and Turton, as 'the stem house' (Turton 1972). The Thai term is *hyan kaw*.
 - (7) Davis who worked in Nan province reports of male officiants.
 - (8) Some have argued that the man's payment is for him to gain admission and membership into the cult group (Turton). However, if an offering is made in the event of an extramarital relationship as above noted, it seems the payment at marriage can be viewed as an offering to the ancestors in the same sense, that is, to gain access to a female member of the cult.
 - (9) Interestingly, there are cases of overt male aggression towards the cults such as "Throwing the shrine into a river, smashing it, firing gunshots into it, and ordering the spirits to leave" (McMorran 1984: 311).
 - (10) Since I can claim no direct knowledge of the Buddhist texts, I must rely on secondary sources and interpretations.
 - (11) In India and Sri Lanka, Bhikunni (nuns) existed.
 - (12) Tambiah introduces the biography of Acharn Mun, a great meditation master and exemplary monk in Thailand (1870-1949). "For all disciples an occasion for 'injurious sense impressions arousing lust' . . . was when they went into a village for alms food and encountered girls and women . . . The fear of women . . . seems to have been a common preoccupation . . . the welfare, safety, and restraint of female devotees and white robed "nuns" (*mae chi*) in forest hermitages were considered a burden to the meditation masters". (Tambiah 1984: 94-5.)
 - (13) Other such models are provided, for example, in Kirsch, A. Thomas, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation" in *Journal of Asian Studies* 36:2:241-66, 1977; and Terwiel, B.J., "A Model for the Study of Thai Buddhism" in *Journal of Asian Studies* 35:3:391-403, 1976.
 - (14) Spiro gives a detailed description and analysis of a similar female possession phenomenon in Burma (Spiro 1967).
 - (15) Spiro points out similarly for Burma, that the widely believed high status of Burmese women is "not in principle but in fact" (Spiro 1972: 432).

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タイの女性

〈要 約〉

速 水 洋 子

一般に、タイの女性の地位は高いとされてきた。それはどの様な尺度によって、又どの様な根拠に基づき、更にはどの様に変化を遂げつつあるのか、最近のタイの人類学研究を検討しながら考えてみたい。

最近のタイの女性研究は、北タイの祖先カルトと社会構造に関するものと、仏教文化に関するものに分けることができよう。北タイの母系親族による祖先カルトの研究は、世帯における女性の権利・役割・地位にも注目する。北タイにおいて世帯は基本的な社会単位と言えるが、経済・儀礼活動も含めて世帯の維持の為に女性は重要な役割を担う。しかし世帯外の公的な場や仏教儀礼に目を転ずると、そこは男性の占める世界である。都市の産業地域でも、経済・経営面で活躍のめざましいタイ女性も、政治・仏教においては表に出ない。これを仏教の教えによって説明づける試みもある。しかし、性の文化を論ずるには仏教教典にのみ頼るよりも、その仏教を取り入れたタイの社会・文化的基盤から検討する必要がある。女性は男性よりも徳の低いものであるから世俗にまみれた商売に従事するに適すると言う説明は、仏教界の頂点、つまり男性の世界には説得力をもって保持されるものだが、それをそのままのみにすることはできない。むしろ、女性の世帯や経済面での活躍は、仏教を取り入れたタイ社会・文化の基底にある要因がそうさせたと考えの方が自然である。出産儀礼、伝承、日常の分業を通して母性・養い手としての女性のイメージが浮かび上がってくる。仏教的価値観が女性の地位・役割を枠づけるとするよりも、この様に社会文化的に位置づけられイメ

ージづけられた女性が、それでは仏教にどのように関わり得るかを見る方が実態を把握するのに有効なのではないか。

世帯と公の場での男女のバランスは、世帯の自立性・完結性の変化、移動性の増加などにより変化しつつあり、動的に捉える必要がある。