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MERIT, HIERARCHY AND ROYAL GIFT-GIVING IN TRADITIONAL THAI SOCIETY

Festivals, rites and processions, already the subject of extensive comment in the reports of early travellers and ethnologists, have retained their great importance in the analysis of traditional states. Anthropologists in search of manifestations of political power have continued to focus on "religious" rites, cremations and festivals, i.e., on phenomena which ostensibly have nothing much to do with administration and politics. Though Geertz has complained that in their concern for these matters anthropologists are "like theologians firmly dedicated to proving the indubitable",¹ he himself also emphasizes that it is in ritual that we can find "the public dramatization of ruling obsessions",² inter alia the obsession with specific "secular" social ties.

To study "obsessions" or, in different terms, "value systems" via ritual has an obvious advantage: the strength of the obsession, as Norbert Elias has hinted, can be correlated with the length, frequency and elaborateness of the ritual.³

When one looks at the numerous festivals which occurred in traditional Thai society with these considerations in mind, an obvious target for analysis springs to the fore, viz. the *Thot Khatin* festival. *Thot Khatin* means literally the "laying down of the holy cloth", or the presentation of monastic robes. As its name indicates, the main point of this was the presentation, via an enormously elaborate river procession lasting several days, of yellow cloth and other gifts to royal temples. Pomp and circumstance here served to clearly emphasize one fact: the king was bestowing gifts and showering bounty upon monks in temples which had often been built thanks to his royal munificence in the first place.

¹ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System", in M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London 1968, p. 2.

² C. Geertz, "Politics Past, Politics Present", in *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol. VIII, 1967, no. 1, p. 8.

³ Compare Elias' remark that each society "immer die für sie lebensnotwendigste Sphäre am sorgfältigsten und ausgiebigsten durchdifferenziert und nuanciert...", in *Die höfische Gesellschaft*, Neuwied/Berlin 1969, p. 154.

A number of observers have commented on the grandeur, pomp and elaborateness of this royal procession, past the royal Buddhist temples. Chevillard speaks of "la plus belle fête . . . fête qui a un cachet oriental, grandiose, féérique"⁴ and Bock, the 19th century Norwegian traveller, states, after a rapturous description of this dazzling royal display, that the impression it made on him could never be erased from his mind.⁵ The cautious civil servant style of Graham, who was for many years an adviser to Chulalongkorn and who published a handbook on Thailand at the beginning of this century, does not admit of such enthusiastic descriptions. Nevertheless he, too, states that the *Thot Kathin* "is the most prominent, if not the most important Buddhist festival observed in Siam".⁶

Yet, however abundant the information on this topic, the early (and not so early) observers of these rites took their "exotic" character so much for granted that they forgot to ask in their comments one simple but quite vital question, viz. what impelled the king to direct this continuous flow of goods to the Buddhist monkhood? One perceives in the accounts of these observers a conviction that the participants in these rites were, after all, incomprehensible and that the traveller engaged in such serious pursuits as trade or diplomacy should not bother about the reasons these strange foreigners had for doing the things they did.

It has been said that the difference between the social scientist and the layman-observer is not that the former invariably knows more about the social scene than the latter, but that he asks different questions about it. Problems of motivation, of the "logic of the situation" for the participants involved in certain social events are not brushed aside with an impatient gesture here (as they were by many of the early observers, who were too preoccupied with the logic of their own, not always enviable situation), but constitute the very core of one's professional concern.

It is in order to answer questions such as these that we will first take a closer look at what the king actually bestowed on the monkhood, then go on to discuss the various theories which have been put forward by social scientists to explain similar phenomena occurring elsewhere, and, finally, advance an alternative theory of our own.

⁴ l'Abbé Similien Chevillard, *Siam et les Siamois*, Paris 1889, p. 257.

⁵ Carl Bock, *Temples and Elephants: The Narrative of a Journey of Exploration through Upper Siam and Lao*, London 1884, p. 237.

⁶ A. W. Graham, *Siam: A Handbook of Practical, Commercial and Political Information*, London 1912, p. 507.

The King donated to the monkhood: temples, pagodas, statues, land, rice storehouses, slaves, money, cloth, food and various kinds of utensils.

There is ample evidence, both from early inscriptions and from the accounts of travellers, some of whom had lived in the Siamese Kingdom for long periods, testifying to the temple-building activities of Siamese Kings. The Sukothai inscriptions translated by Fournereau are a case in point,⁷ as are likewise the inscriptions dating from the Ayuthaya period published by Pavie.⁸ Seventeenth century Dutch and French sources comment at great length on royal temple-building activities,⁹ while such early nineteenth century travellers as Crawford and Finlayson have pointed out the niggardly amounts spent on projects other than those relating to the monkhood. Crawford comments rather sourly on the attitude of the Siamese court:

"Certainly not a vestige is to be found among the Siamese of the munificent liberality or prodigality which is so frequently met with among the chiefs and princes of Western Asia. All their bounty appears to be bestowed upon the Talapoins, and it seems as if they had no room for the exercise of liberality or charity in any other form".¹⁰

Elsewhere in his book Crawford approvingly quotes Knox, the main Western source on 17th century Ceylon, whose remarks about the primary orientation of Ceylonese culture seemed to Crawford to be "not less applicable to the monarchs of Siam": "it appeared", says Knox, that "they spared not for pains and labour to build temples and high monuments to the honour of this god, as if they had been born only to hew rocks and great stones, and lay them up in heaps".¹¹

Crawford was certainly wrong in excluding other kinds of royal gift-

⁷ Lucien Fournereau, "Le Siam Ancien", in *Annales du Musée Guimet*, Paris 1895, tome 27, p. 173, passim.

⁸ Auguste Pavie, *Recherches sur l'histoire du Cambodge du Laos et du Siam, contenant la transcription et la traduction des inscriptions par M. Schmitt, Mission Pavie, Etudes diverses*, Paris 1898, Tome II, esp. pp. 334, 349, 360, 366, 391-94, 387, 447. Some of these inscriptions are of a later date than the Ayuthaya period (cf. p. 349).

⁹ Cp. J. J. Struys, *Drie aanmerkelijke en seer voorspoedige Reysen door Italien, Griekenlandt, Lyflandt, Tartarijen, Meden, Persiën, Oost-Indiën, Japan en verscheyden andere Gewesten*, Amsterdam 1676, p. 36; see below for comments by Van Vliet, Tachard, De Choisy, Bouvet and others.

¹⁰ John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China; Exhibiting a View of the actual State of those Kingdoms*, London 1829, Vol. II, p. 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25/26.

giving — e.g., the royal distribution of goods during ceremonial “burials” — but he was right in emphasizing the importance the Siamese court and people attached to gifts bestowed on the monkhood.¹²

Yet the information available on the actual number of temples built and the amount of money spent on them is disappointingly fragmentary and usually concerns only 19th century Bangkok. However, the 17th century French missionary Bouvet said that he believed, with several others, that the number of temples in Ayuthaya “dans les camps & dans la ville . . . est bien égal à celui des églises & chapelles, qui sont dans Paris”.¹³ The total number of temples in the capital around the middle of the 19th century has been variously estimated at between one and two hundred.¹⁴ These, however, were not all built or financed by Kings.

¹² Not long after Crawford made this remark Bradley, an American missionary who arrived in Siam in the early 1830's and remained there for the next forty years, commented in his diary (17th June 1836) on the sudden imprisonment of two high-ranking royal ministers, who had given passports to a pair of Chinese junks loaded with rice. Rice was an export commodity on which little duty was normally paid. The King (Rama III), however, had thought that it was loaded with sapanwood, on which a large amount of duty was payable, and became furious on finding out that his expectations were disappointed. Bradley then goes on to say:

“The current report is . . . that the chief cause of the King's rage is the great disappointment of his avaricious desires. Strange as it may seem the great excitement of this passion is an ambition to ‘tum boon’ (do good). He craves money that he may build wats which is the most meritorious work in the estimation of the Siamese that can be done”.

(D. B. Bradley, *Abstract of the Journal of the Rev. Dan Beach Bradley, M.D. Medical Missionary in Siam, 1835-1873*, ed. by G. H. Feltus, New York 1930, p. 32).

¹³ Père Bouvet, *Voiage de Siam*, Leiden 1963, p. 108. At the end of the 18th century Paris had about 140 “églises et chapelles” (cp. G. Nieuwenhuis, *Algemeen Woordenboek van Kunsten en Wetenschappen*, Zutphen 1825, vol. 7, p. 330).

¹⁴ Loudon, a Dutch foreign envoy who lived in Bangkok for a short period in the early 1860's, speaks of “at least one hundred” (A. Loudon, “Aanteekeningen gehouden op eene zending naar Siam”, in *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Vol. 12, 1862); an anonymous report by American missionaries, published in 1884, mentions “between one and two hundred” (Anonymous, *Siam and Laos, as seen by Our American Missionaries*, Philadelphia 1884, p. 281); Malcom states in his “Travels . . .” published in 1840, “more than one hundred” (H. Malcom, *Travels in Hindustan and China*, Edinburgh 1849, p. 39); Pallegoix gave a rather different estimate around 1850, saying “dans la capitale seulement, on compte environ douze cent monastères” (Mgr. Pallegoix, *Description du Royaume Thai ou Siam*, Paris 1854, Vol. II, p. 317).

McDonald stated around 1870: “there are in the city of Bangkok alone about one hundred and seventy temples” (N. A. McDonald, *Siam, its Government, Manners and Customs*, etc., 1871, p. 72).

During the reign of Rama III (1824-1851), five new temples were built and thirty-five were repaired;¹⁵ exactly the same figures are given for the reign of Rama IV (King Mongkut, 1851-1868).¹⁶ If we assume that royal temple-building activity took place on roughly the same scale during the reigns of Kings Rama I (1782-1809) and Rama II (1809-1824), then we would arrive at a total of twenty to thirty royal *wats* in 1870, at the end of Mongkut's reign, and fifteen to twenty at the end of Rama III's reign. Yet, from a remark in an entry in Bradley's journal dated 25th March, 1851, it would appear that there were about 70 royal temples "in and about" Bangkok at that time.¹⁷ Pallegoix, writing in the same period, thought there were 31,¹⁸ as did Gréhan in his 1868 publication; but he, more likely than not, had his information from Pallegoix.¹⁹ Another missionary, Abeel, says that during the year 1832 or 1833 "between twenty and thirty temples" were "built and supplied from the King's treasury".²⁰ As mentioned above (note 14) it was estimated in 1850 that there were at that time already between one and two hundred temples in Bangkok. If we take into account the fact that Bangkok became the capital only during Rama I's reign,²¹ and that the construction of temples began seriously only then, two conclusions seem to follow: (1) probably more than half of all the temples of Bangkok were non-royal temples; (2) sometimes royal temples were not built by the King but "transferred" to him after being founded by others.²² This practice of transference fits in with Siamese conceptions of merit and temple "ownership", which are treated later in the present paper.

¹⁵ W. F. Vella, *Siam under Rama III, 1824-1851*, New York 1957, p. 46.

¹⁶ Chadin Flood (transl. & ed.), *Dynastic Chronicles*, 1965, Vol. II, p. 531.

¹⁷ D. B. Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁸ Quoted in John Bowring, *The Kingdom of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855*, London 1855, Vol. I, p. 418.

¹⁹ M. A. Gréhan, *Le Royaume de Siam*, Paris 1868.

²⁰ D. Abeel, *Journal of a Residence in China and the Neighbouring Countries from 1830 to 1833*, London 1835, p. 218. Abeel was in Bangkok for only a short period of time, but most of his information was obtained from people who had lived there for many years — such as, for instance, merchants like Hunter and MacDonald.

²¹ During the reign of his predecessor, King Taksin (1767-1782), Dhonburi, now a "Suburb" of Bangkok on the other side of the Menam Chao Phraya river, was made the capital (after the sacking of Ayuthaya by the Burmese). Not much building went on during the reign of this warrior king, however.

²² There is no exact information on the temple-building activities of people other than the king. Vella states that during the reign of Rama III four temples were built by "other members of the royalty and nobles" (as compared to five built by the king), and twenty-five temples were repaired (as compared to a total of 35 on behalf of the king) (Vella, *op. cit.*, p. 46).

In discussing the data on the amounts of money and labour spent on temple-building etc., it is relevant to look at some of the estimates of the number of monks in the Siamese capital. Reliable estimates vary between five and fifteen thousand for the 19th century capital, and thirty to one hundred thousand for the kingdom as a whole.²³ There was, as Crawford rightly points out, a seasonal fluctuation in this number, as certain periods of the year were (and are) more suitable for entering the monkhood (and remaining in it for a short time) than others (Crawford's information about these periods, however, is misleading).²⁴

There are various 19th century estimates of the actual costs of building a temple.²⁵ The validity of these estimates is very doubtful. Obviously

Information contained in the *Dynastic Chronicles* (*op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 531) implies that during the reign of Rama IV only two temples were constructed and repaired by people other than the king. If all the other data are taken into account, this seems a very low number. My guess is that in these Siamese chronicles (Vella also took his information from one of these) non-royal enterprise in the field of temple-building is played down.

²³ According to Crawford (*op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 228), 5,000 in the capital, 50,000 in the whole kingdom; D. E. Malloch (*Siam, Some General Remarks on its Productions, and Particularly On its Imports and Exports and the Mode of Transacting Business with the People*, Calcutta 1852, p. 21): 15,000 in Bangkok, 30,000 in the kingdom; Bowring (*op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 320): more than 10,000 in Bangkok, more than 100,000 in the country.

²⁴ Crawford, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 69. According to Crawford the season for entering the priesthood was from the sixth to the eighth month of the year, that for leaving it the eleventh month. Hence from the eleventh month of one year to the sixth month of the next the number might be smaller than for the remainder of the year. However, according to the modern lunar calendar of central rural Thailand, "Buddhist lent" or the "Vassa" period, which runs from the ninth month until about the twelfth, is the favourite period for a short entry into the monkhood, and there is no reason to assume that this was different in Crawford's time ($\pm$ 1825). An anonymous article in the *Siam Repository* of Jan. 1872 (p. 36) gives the same dates as those current today.

²⁵ Anonymous, *Siam and Laos, as seen by our American Missionaries*, Philadelphia 1884, p. 280. The same missionary remarks: "The kings and nobles of Siam spend large sums on their temples and idols... Several cost one hundred thousand dollars..." (p. 281). For further data, also concerning the 17th century, see Frank Vincent, *The land of the White Elephant*, London 1873, p. 166. Loudon, *op. cit.*, p. 27; N. A. McDonald, *Siam, its Government, Manners, Customs etc.*, London 1871, p. 72; Malloch, *op. cit.*, p. 22; Bowring, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 418; Struys, *op. cit.*, p. 36; l'Abbé de Choisy, *Journal du Voyage de Siam fait en 1685 & 1686*, Paris 1930, p. 169; G. E. Gerini, *Siam and its Productions, Arts and Manufactures*, Hertford 1912, p. 238; finally, the *Dynastic Chronicles* concerning the reign of Rama IV contain a detailed statement on the costs of enlarging and repairing a temple. According to this information, the king's own contribution was: two hundred and sixty-five *chân*, ten *tamlyn*, one *bàad* and two *salyn*. Public contributions

the amount of corvée labour involved could only have been guessed at, let alone that it was capable of quantification in dollars or pounds sterling. Nevertheless, nineteenth century Western observers, coming as they did from a culture in which so many things could be expressed in terms of money, were on the whole quite eager to hazard a guess.

These guesses vary from one hundred thousand dollars per temple to, in one particular case, one million dollars. The latter sum was allegedly spent on the famous Bangkok temple which is officially named Wat Sri Ratana Sasasaram, and unofficially Wat Phra Kaeo, or "Temple of the Emerald Buddha".

In his study of the reign of Rama III Walter Vella states that a temple, "although dedicated to general use, was considered the personal possession of the person who financed its building", and adds that princes and nobles often presented their private temples to the King.²⁶ He does not elaborate on this, however, and we are left rather in the dark as to what he actually means by "personal possession". Fournereau, for instance, talking on the same subject, refers to those financing the building as "les protecteurs ou pseudo-propriétaires".²⁷ It is the word "protecteur" which hints in the right direction. *What was actually possessed was not so much the temple per se as an established means of acquiring merit by maintaining the temple and providing the monks with food and other necessities.* The monks of the principal royal temples received their daily food from the King's hands. In Pallegoix' time ($\pm$ 1850) this was still true of about three hundred of them.²⁸

amounted to sixteen *chân*, sixteen *tamlyn* and one *salyn*; ...". Of this total sum forty-eight *chân* and four *tamlyn* was spent on labour, whereas two hundred and sixty *chân*, two *tamlyn*, one *bàd*, one *solyn* and one *fyân* was spent on materials". The chronicler adds: "In figuring the cost of the materials, none of the materials obtained from the government's supplies were counted". These numbers give some idea of the relative insignificance of labour costs in comparison with expenditure on materials, even at Mongkut's time, when corvée labour was being replaced by paid (mainly Chinese) labour (Flood, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 489). The following note gives some idea of the money values mentioned above: 1 *chân* = 20 *tamlyn*, 1 *tamlyn* = 4 *bàd*, 1 *bàd* = 4 *salyn*, 1 *salyn* = 2 *fyân*. The *chân* was often called a "catty" by European authors. King Mongkut fixed the official value of the *tamlyn* at two dollars and forty cents (see L. Bazangeon, *Pohnsga - Vadan; les annales officielles Siamois*, Rochefort-Sur-Mer 1892, p. 113).

²⁶ Vella, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

²⁷ Fournereau, *op. cit.*, Vol. 27, p. 100.

²⁸ See Pallegoix, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 40; l'Abbé Chevillard, *op. cit.*, p. 14; Bowring, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 298.

The financing of the construction of a temple apparently entailed the right of appointing the abbot. La Loubère, who has been praised by Coedès as an eminently reliable source, says of 17th century Ayutthaya: "Si un particulier fait bâtir un Temple, il convient avec quelque vieux Talapoin à son choix, pour venir estre le Supérieur du Convent, qui se bâtit autour de ce Temple, à mesure que d'autres Talapoins y veulent venir habiter car on ne bâtit point de loge de Talapoin par avance".²⁹

The type of proprietary right indicated here also explains why nobles went out of their way to build a temple only to subsequently present it to the king.³⁰ The construction of the edifice gained them merit, as distinct from the merit gained by the King as "protecteur" of the temple. An important point here, to be elaborated further below, is that no-one outside the monkhood was allowed to attain a position which would enable him to accumulate more merit than the King. Pavie, in his comments on the contents of inscriptions collected and published by him, pays insufficient attention to this. In principle, however, he is right in stating that "les pagodes et les objets offerts restaient la propriété des donateurs. Ceux-ci se réservaient seuls le soin de réparer ou d'embellir ces pagodes et ces objets"³¹ (by "donateurs" Pavie is referring here not to the King but to the persons who had donated temples to the monkhood).

An instance of the strength of this proprietary right (as well as of the possibility of violating it) can be found in Lingat's article on the history of the Mahādhātu temple. According to Lingat, during Rama I's reign the "second King" (i.e. the person next to the King in the secular hierarchy) put as it were an a priori curse on anyone who, after his death, should dare to touch a temple he had financed and so violate the rights of his descendants. After his death, which occurred in 1803, people therefore preferred to let the temple fall into ruins rather than restore it. It was only in the late 1840's that the then King, at the

²⁹ S. de la Loubère, *Description du Royaume de Siam*, Amsterdam 1700, p. 356.

³⁰ See on this point also A. Bastian, *Reisen im Siam im Jahre 1863*, Jena 1867, p. 120, and MacDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 72. From one Xieng Sën (northern Siam) inscription published by Fournereau it appears that this act of relinquishing the "rights" to a temple was sometimes performed by order: "Dès lors, le prince de Xieng sën nommé khâm - lãn donna ses ordres au prince Hmin - phem - khon - nũ de rendre auprès des princes Hmin - sãn - lãn. Hmin - theb, Thao - muang - sri - mangala pour leur recommander d'offrir la pagode Vât prāsād à leurs majestés les deux rois" (according to Fournereau the two "kings" of Xieng Sën are meant here. *Op. cit.*, Vol. 27, p. 145).

³¹ Pavie, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

emphatic request of the monks concerned and taking into account the fact that, being old, the curse could not do him much harm anyway, found the courage to begin restoring the temple.³²

Many of the inscriptions concerning gifts of lands and slaves to temples³³ are (1) from the early Ayuthaya period, and (2) not from

³² R. Lingat, "History of Wat Mahādhātu", in *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. XXIV, pt. 1, 1930, pp. 10, 23.

Temples built by "public subscription" and kept up by the same means were called *wat ratsadon* and distinguished from royal temples, which were named *wat hluang*. The 19th century German ethnologist Adolf Bastian mentions a category of temples built by nobles, which he refers to as *vat - Khunnang*. The most elaborate classification has been given by Fournereau. He distinguishes between: (1) *Vât Luàng*: royal temples constructed by order of the King and kept up by him; (2) *Vât chǎo*: temples of princes and princesses; (3) *Vât Khunnang*: temples of nobles, of mandarins; (4) *Vât rātsāddōn*: temples belonging to the people (Bastian, *op. cit.*, p. 120; Fournereau, *op. cit.*, p. 99).

³³ In the old Thai inscriptions collected and published by Fournereau (1895) and Pavie (1898), royal and non-royal gifts of land, gardens, rice storehouses and slaves are repeatedly mentioned. A Thai inscription found in Luang Phrabang (Laos) and dating from the beginning of the 16th century contains the following passage:

"Le sixième mois, le dixième jour de la lune croissante, au septième nakçatra: le chef Krai-Khyr et sa femme Çri - bua - thong invitèrent les bonzes (here five names follow), les princes Phakhao - Svarga et Phamchit, suivi de tous les fidèles, à venir prendre place dans la nef de l'uposatha du Vât gri-uposatha situé au nord. Ensuite on engagea le chef, Krai-Khyr et sa femme Çri - bua - thong à se conformer à la règle et à offrir leur fille Mē - deva et leur fils Pho-hon comme esclaves au service de cet uposatha" (Fournereau, *op. cit.*, p. 154).

In the same inscription is found the following reference to temple estates: "le bonze mahā thera Rāhula-deva enregistra cinq immenses terrains sur les bords de la rivière kam en tout 6250 coudées pour en faire un parc appartenant à la pagode" (*ibid.*, p. 151).

In an inscription dating from culla-çaka 864 (A.D. 1502), found near Xieng-Rai by M. Pavie and issued there by the King or governor of Pâ-Pao, Chao phayâ Hlua-nāna-vilāra-yot, the following passage is found:

"Le Chao phayâ Hlua-nāna-Vilāra-yot fit construire ce mahā-vihāra, en y consacrant ses femmes et ses enfants comme esclaves des phra, sous le titre de serviteurs de Chao. Ce jour-là il consacra, en même temps que ses femmes et ses enfants, d'autres esclaves, en tout six familles, dont 16 hommes et 5 femmes; puis une famille, ses neveux, en tout 4 personnes" (here follows a long list of slaves bestowed by others) (Pavie, *op. cit.*, p. 452).

Most inscriptions mention "ordinary" slaves (Kha). (See Fournereau, *op. cit.*, pp. 145, 213; Pavie, *op. cit.*, pp. 334, 378, 391 ff., 452-453, 460.) We cannot enter into a discussion of the extremely complex Thai institution of slavery here. The appropriate source for this is R. Lingat, *L'Esclavage privé dans le vieux droit Siamois*, Paris 1931. My translation of the Thai word *khā* in the

Ayuthaya itself. However, lands and slaves were also bestowed on temples in the Central Plain. Van Vliet ($\pm$ 1635) referred to "grounds which belong to the church",³⁴ while an even earlier Portuguese account states that whenever a King ascended the throne he would commence work on a new temple and endow it with lands and income.³⁵ Fournereau, writing in 1895, states that by then the custom of bestowing lands and slaves on temples had entirely disappeared. He also states, however, that the descendants of slaves given to temples in earlier periods still continued to pay annual taxes of about 18 to 20 *bath*. According to him this provided certain pagodas with considerable revenues.³⁶

inscriptions published by Pavie and Fournereau with "slave" does not mean to suggest that this category of slaves was similar to that found under the 18th and 19th century Afro-American form of slavery — see Lingat's classification of the traditional Thai slave categories (*op. cit.*, p. 25).

³⁴ J. van Vliet, "Description of the Kingdom of Siam", transl. by L. F. van Ravenswaay, in *Journal of the Siam Society*, pt. 1, 1910, p. 77.

³⁵ J. de Campos, "Early Portuguese Accounts of Thailand", in *Journal of the Thailand Research Society*, Vol. XXXII, 1940, p. 12.

³⁶ Fournereau, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

Pavie also claims (in 1898) "Aujourd'hui, cet usage de faire des dons à perpétuité aux vats est abandonné. Le talapoine pourvoit par l'aumône de tous les jours à son entretien quotidien" (*op. cit.*, p. 378), and elsewhere makes a remark concerning taxes on descendants of temple slaves that is virtually identical to that of Fournereau (*ibid.*, p. 387).

We cannot conclude from the remarks of Pavie and Fournereau, however, that (a) the practice of bestowing land and slaves on temples had long since disappeared, and (b) the bulk of the income of the monkhood derived from "l'aumône de tous les jours". Pallegoix describes the situation as regards the Phra-Bat temple near Saraburi (where allegedly a footprint of the Buddha's is preserved), which he visited around 1850, as follows:

"Le prince-abbé est établi seigneur absolu de toute la montagne et de ses environs; a huit lieus à la ronde; il a quatre ou cinq mille hommes sous ses ordres, et il peut les employer comme il lui plaît au service de son monastère... Je remarquai que la cuisine était faite par une vingtaine de jeunes filles, et on appelait pages la troupe de jeunes gens qui nous servaient" and adds to this latter revelation: "ce qui se rencontre nulle part dans les autres monastères" (*op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 111).

It should be mentioned here that Alabaster, who visited the same monastery about 18 years later, was noticeably less exuberant in his description. He wrote: "We find the monastery well kept, several slaves being attached to it in order to sweep it, cut the grass & C. There seem to be no residents in the neighbourhood except the monks, and servants of the temple. Of monks only ten are now in the residence, others have gone off travelling" (H. Alabaster, *The Wheel of the Law. Buddhism, Illustrated from Siamese Sources by the Modern Buddhist, A Life of Buddha, and an Account of the Phrabat*, London 1871, pp. 281-282).

Yet in the *Dynastic Chronicles*, concerning the reign of Mongkut (1851-1868), gifts of revenues and "attendants" to monasteries are explicitly mentioned (Flood, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 505).

For centuries the possession of land certainly remained an important feature of the monkhood. I referred above to Van Vliet's and Barros' statements on this point. In 1868 Alabaster, travelling from Bangkok to Saraburi, found in Ayuthaya many overgrown and neglected temples: "These temples . . . endowed with extensive lands which cannot be re-granted for secular purposes, are necessarily, many of them, deserted and covered with dense jungle".³⁷ Child, who lived in Siam for five years and wrote a book about it in 1892, stated: "many broad acres of the very best are held by the priests for religious purposes, the what grounds being considered the choicest in the Kingdom and are to be found in every available spot".³⁸ Graham, adviser to the Thai government for many years, still referred in circa 1902 to the "considerable income" from lands "the church" enjoyed. He distinguished between two main categories, viz. (1) *Ti Torani Sông*: land granted by way of endowments, and (2) *Tikalpana*: land, the income from which was reserved by the owners for a particular temple.³⁹ A few years later, however, the Thai prince Dilock baldly stated in his Tübingen Ph. D. thesis of 1907 that the amount of land possessed by "churches and temples" was very insignificant.⁴⁰ It is not impossible that Prince Dilock's statement was slightly "pour cause", however, as he might have felt that a modern state ought not to allow churches to own large estates.

The historical background of these economic practices in connection with Buddhism is obscure and has not yet been fully analysed, not even in Bareau's otherwise enlightening article.⁴¹ The oldest data are contained in the *Vinayapitaka*, Buddhist canonical texts compiled some time between 100 B.C. and 100 A.D. Some of these describe a situation whereby monks were indeed virtually dependent on the proceeds from their daily begging; others again allude to economic conditions in which monastic communities possessed lands, fields, and treasures in gold and

³⁷ Alabaster, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

³⁸ Jacob T. Child, *The Pearl of Asia; Reminiscences of the Court of a Supreme Monarch or Five Years in Siam*, Chicago 1892, p. 10.

³⁹ A. W. Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 495.

⁴⁰ Prince Dilock states: "Die Kirchen und Tempel haben auch Anteil am Grundbesitz, sogenannte 'Na Torani Song', d.h. solche Grundstücke, die das Volk ihnen geschenkt hat. Dieser Anteil aber ist ganz unbedeutend", *Die Landwirtschaft in Siam*, Ph.D. Thesis, Tübingen 1907, p. 97.

⁴¹ André Bareau, "Indian and Ancient Chinese Buddhism: Institutions Analogous to the Jisa", in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. III, 1960-'61.

silver — “all of them inalienable property leased or lent to laymen who turn over the product to the Samgha in kind”.⁴² Some of the *Vinaya-pitaka* (viz. the *Mahāsāṅghika* and the *Mūlasarvāstivādin*) refer to a situation in which even the management of these possessions was entrusted to monks rather than laymen.

Indian inscriptions found in the region east of Bombay and dating as far back as the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. refer to gifts of fields and villages.⁴³ Yi-tsing, the Chinese pilgrim who visited India and Southeast Asia between 671 and 695, has left detailed notes on the economic practices of Buddhist monasteries. According to these notes, it was normal at that time for Buddhist communities to be in possession of fields and gardens, “cattle and sheep, sums of money, deeds and contracts, and of precious articles”.⁴⁴

W. Rāhula has provided evidence of the existence of a similar situation in Ceylon during the period extending from the middle of the third century B.C. to the tenth century A.D., in which “the monasteries of Ceylon were in possession of vast lands worked by serfs and other Samgha servants...”.⁴⁵ The larger monasteries had four different sources of revenue: “first, the grant of lands and fields and villages; second, tanks and canals; third, the deposit of paddy and other grains and moneys to be held in trust for the monastery; fourth, the levying of taxes and the collecting of fines”.⁴⁶ An interesting fact disclosed by Rāhula is that from the fourth century A.D. onwards we see, in addition to grants of lands, villages etc., increasingly more gifts in money form. According to Bareau this was due to increased foreign trade, especially with the Roman empire.⁴⁷

Pieris' work on Singhalese social organisation contains a number of statements concerning similar economic features of the Buddhist monkhood in later periods of Ceylonese history. According to Pieris the “granting of lands and villages by the King to individuals and temples was a common occurrence”. He also states that the “jurisdiction of the crown impinged lightly on the inhabitants of temple villages and... estates granted to chiefs”, though we are not told how lightly. Ames

⁴² Bareau, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

⁴⁶ W. Rāhula, *A History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, p. 161, quoted in Bareau, *op. cit.*, p. 449.

⁴⁷ Bareau, *op. cit.*, p. 449.

claims that temple estates were not subject to royal taxes.⁴⁸

Rather similar data are given for China: "Here also monasteries clearly drew on productive and inalienable property, lands and villages where families of serfs worked, a variety of industrial workshops, and sums of money lent at interest".⁴⁹ Cady has provided us with details on the traditional Burmese bureaucratic organisation from which it appears that this organisation had to a certain extent come to grips with the phenomenon of a Buddhist monastic economy, as is clear from the occurrence of the offices of "commissioner of ecclesiastical lands" (*Wutmye-wun*) and "ecclesiastical censor" (*Mahadan-wun*). The former kept records of lands and slaves owned by pagodas and supervised the royal revenues earmarked for the upkeep of monasteries and pagodas. The latter had to guard "against possible overextension of religious property claims".⁵⁰ Burmese society apparently was also acquainted with the category of people which Cady indicates with the term "pagoda-slaves".⁵¹

Once again the question arises how it came to be that the economic life of the early Buddhist communities, which is pictured as one of rural simplicity and in which "the laity met the material needs of the Sangha by providing woodlands for the monks to live in and presenting them with cloth at the end of the rainy season, and with needles, razors, and other necessities, and begging bowls"⁵² underwent such a radical change.

The extensive passage from Grenet's work on Chinese Buddhist monasticism quoted by Bareau clearly describes the phenomenon without, however, providing an explanation:

"There is a particular moment in the history of Buddhist communities which marks the point of departure for the immense economic development to come. It is perhaps not . . . the accession of the first Samgha woodland, but the turning to a new procedure of giving, indirect rather than direct. Instead of alms in food, the

⁴⁸ Ralph Pieris, *Sinhalese Social Organization: the Kandyan Period*, Colombo 1956, p. 44; Michael M. Ames, "Magical Animism and Buddhism: A Structural Analysis of the Sinhalese Religious System", in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1964, no. 23, p. 44; neither was there, according to Prince Dilock, any royal land tax levied on fields given to the monkhood in Siam. This situation was changed by royal edict in the year 1900, however (Dilock, *op. cit.*, p. 83).

⁴⁹ Bareau, *op. cit.*, pp. 450/451.

⁵⁰ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, Cornell 1960, p. 55.

⁵¹ Cady, *op. cit.*, p. 57. Astonishingly enough, as late as 1955 an "All-Burma Beggars Conference" was held in Minbu, at which the continuation of the status of pagoda slaves was denounced (*ibid.*).

⁵² Bareau, *op. cit.*, pp. 450/451.

offer of clothing or the gift of a place to rest to satisfy the immediate needs of the bhikṣu, there is the gift of property producing rent or interest to maintain the religious and to meet the needs of the cult. This constitutes the great innovation in the practice of the Buddhist donation. It is the introduction of commerce into the ambit of the gift which makes a community of mendicant monks into a great economic power".⁵³

In his discussion of the transformation of ancient Buddhism, Weber similarly does not center on an explanation of the phenomenon so clearly stated by Grenet, although he does make some remarks which point in the direction of an explanation. He points out that in both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism the old prohibition against money possession was finally circumvented in the same way as in the case of the Franciscans: ecclesiastic moneys were collected and managed by lay representatives. Even in the old orthodox church of Ceylon, says Weber, the alms bag finally predominated ("herrschte schliesslich der Klingelbeutelbetrieb").⁵⁴

Unfortunately, as far as Buddhism is concerned, Weber does not follow up his own information with the obvious question of why the laity insisted on making cash donations to the monkhood, and what specific interests they were serving by this.

In his remarks concerning the unattainability of salvation for Buddhist laymen Weber hints at an answer to this problem, however. According to him one of the important differences between ancient Buddhism and Jainism was that the former included a form of monastic piety which was totally "ausserweltlich" and hence excluded any rites in which the laity could share (Weber speaks here of "Kultlosigkeit") and any form of planned influence on their conduct. Therefore the piety of the laity was necessarily channelled into a kind of "Hagiolatrie" and "Idolatrie". Weber does not in this context mention the giving of alms to the monkhood, but it does seem plausible that very much the same explanation would hold also for this.⁵⁵

⁵³ J. Grenet, *Les aspects économiques du Bouddhisme dans la société du Ve au Xe siècle*, E.F.E.O., Saigon 1956, pp. 73/74, quoted in Bareau, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

⁵⁴ Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen 1922, Vol. II, p. 241.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

In an article on Tibetan monasticism published in 1960, Miller refers to the wonder "many have expressed at the generosity with which lamaist laymen will give, sometimes impoverishing themselves, to support their religion". This astonishment, says Miller, is due to an ignorance of the conception of merit

Michael Ames, in an article on Sinhalese Buddhism written in 1964, follows very much the same line of explanation as Weber.⁵⁶ Yet, from this same article by Ames it becomes clear that "merit-making", especially royal merit-making, provided the Sangha with an economic basis which far surpassed the needs engendered by its aim to survive as an organized community. Monastic landlordism led to

"states of scandalous corruption... the wealthier the temple estates became through gifts of merit, the more people were motivated to plunder and exploit these properties... As a consequence, monks came back into the world as monastic landlords and formed political pressure groups to guard those institutions that made possible their status position and style of life".⁵⁷

Hence the phenomenon which is so clearly outlined by Grenet still remains unexplained. Even if we recognize (a) the need for laymen to gain access to the path leading to salvation, and (b) the necessity for the Sangha to survive as an organized community, it is still not clear why such gifts took the form of property yielding rent or interest instead of alms in the form of food, clothing and small utensils.

We have here, of course, a different phenomenon from the paradox

underlying this pattern of behaviour. According to him, too little attention has been paid to "the mechanism of translation" by which gifts to the monkhood are transformed into religious merit for the donors. But it is exactly this mechanism, says Miller, which makes comprehensible "the universal economic success" of Buddhist monasticism.

In his attempt to explain the motivation of the donors, Miller draws attention to the very same fact as Weber, i.e., that for Buddhist laymen the direct road to salvation was blocked. As long as a layman remained a layman he was unable to pursue enlightenment directly; hence the *Sangha*, the Buddhist monkhood, had to find a way by which he could pursue it indirectly (R. J. Miller, "Buddhist Monastic Economy: the Jisa Mechanism", in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. III, 1960-'61).

⁵⁶ Ames emphasizes the fact that it is "precisely because the nirvanaya ideal is distant, difficult and world negating" that merit-making (and magic) have acquired such importance for the layman. Merit-making does not bring him ultimate salvation (*nirvanaya*), to be sure, but it will help him to secure a better position in the cycle of rebirths. Merit-making thus provided the Sangha with an economic basis and the layman with an opportunity to draw on the "inexhaustible stock of merit" possessed by the Sangha. Moreover, alms often led to the giving of sermons, and sermons again provided the monks with an opportunity to acquire merit.

(Michael M. Ames, "Magical Animism and Buddhism: A Structural Analysis of the Sinhalese Religious System", in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1964, no. 23, Suppl.)

⁵⁷ Ames, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

indicated by Weber with regard to so many Western monastic orders (which became prosperous because of their very desire to live ascetically). The question I am trying to answer here may be formulated as follows: preponderant among the gifts which the "merit-making" Kings bestowed on the Sangha were temple buildings, lands and money — the latter two being rent-producing. *Why did royal merit-making take these forms?*

Although Ames has tried to answer this question, to my mind he has done so in an unsatisfactory way. He emphasizes two functions of the monastic estate system, viz. (a) its economic function for the monkhood, and (b) its political function for the King. The estates provided the temples with labour, land and material goods. For the King they constituted a network of fiefdoms, and (together with the *nindagama* or royal officials) an integral part of his administrative apparatus. "The state", says Ames, "supplied political and legal protection to religious status groups . . . who, in return, 'supplied' labor power in the form of domesticated and pacified peasants".⁵⁸ Ames then goes on to emphasize the double exchange relationship in which "the King defended the faith while the faith legitimated the King".⁵⁹

What remains unclear in Ames' interpretation is why the King preferred a "network" of fiefdoms partly dominated by the clergy to a system entirely controlled by his own bureaucratic apparatus. Ames himself agrees with Wijewardene et. al. when they state for Ceylon: "In relation to Vihare lands", (= lands granted to temples) "however, the king's powers to deal with them were restrained by the sacred character which attached to them as well as by the terms of the grants by which they were dedicated to the Vihare".⁶⁰ For these temple lands, moreover, which ceased to be liable for any kind of service to the King, often the most fertile regions of Ceylon were pre-empted. Spencer Hardy, the best 19th century source on Sinhalese monachism (Weber called

⁵⁸ This view is also found in Weber, viz.: "Für die weltliche Gewalt bestand das Interesse, die Mönche als Domestikationsmittel der Massen zu gebrauchen. Denn wenn auch die 'Massen' nie die aktiven Träger der buddhistischen Religiosität waren, so haben sie doch selbstverständlich, als Objekt der Beherrschung durch die Mittel des religiösen Glaubens, hier wie bei allen religiösen Stellungnahmen der Herrschichten eine ganz entscheidende Rolle gespielt" (Weber, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 265); further on he refers to this priestly "Domestikation der Bevölkerung" especially with reference to Ceylon (*ibid.*, p. 280).

⁵⁹ Ames, *op. cit.*, pp. 44/45.

⁶⁰ E. A. L. Wijewardene et. al., *Report of the Commission on Tenure of Lands of Vihagaram, Dewalagam and Nindagam*, Sessional Paper I - 1956, Colombo 1956, p. 6-7, quoted in Ames, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

his work "indispensable") especially remarked upon the fact that during his travels through the interior of Ceylon he almost invariably found the most fertile lands to be the property of the clergy. Robert Knox, a well-known 17th century source on Ceylon, made a similar observation.⁶¹

If it was the desire of the Kings to transform the clergy, via land grants, into a manipulable administrative instrument, then this desire was certainly never fulfilled. Heinz Bechert has pointed out in a study on political factors in the development of the Theravāda Buddhist Sangha, that in Ceylon (a) the function of head of a monastery developed gradually into almost absolute proprietorship of the monastery; (b) the head of a monastery could freely appoint one of his underlings as successor; (c) over the years royal land grants to temples "created property interests of influential groups of the population", and that these "were strong enough to prevent the reform movement from succeeding with the reestablishment of a public and central control over the monastic unity . . .".⁶²

Weber also commented on the "almost limitless clerical domination" of laymen in orthodox Hinayana Buddhism in Ceylon and Burma, "against which the worldly authority of the Ruler was often totally impotent . . .".⁶³ The case Ames tries to make for the hypothesis that this kind of temple estate system strengthened the sovereign's control over his subjects, therefore, is very weak indeed.

It may be instructive to take a quick look at the situation in medieval Europe in this connection. We know, of course, that medieval European kings used the clergy for certain administrative purposes. Weber stated in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* that kings and barons, despite canonical prohibitions, time and again managed to lay hold of ecclesiastical prebends. This was especially so in the case of English kings from about the 13th century onwards. According to Weber it was for politico-administrative reasons that these kings were so eager to seize the control over church lands — or if they granted land to third persons, to grant this to clerics. Childless clerics provided cheaper servants than secular

⁶¹ Quoted in J. Barthelemy Saint-Hilaire, *The Buddha and his religion*, London (no date), p. 334.

⁶² H. Bechert, "Theravāda Buddhist Sangha: Some General Observations on Historical and Political Factors in its Development", in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1968, p. 768.

⁶³ M. Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

ministeriales, and, moreover, were not likely to try and make their prebends inheritable.⁶⁴

Thus in the West royal land grants to the church were indeed prompted by administrative expediency — as Ames claimed they were in Ceylon — but there were some important differences between the medieval situation in Europe and the situation in Buddhist South-east Asia. Firstly, in the West the administrative alternatives presenting themselves to rulers were neither the employment of an Asian-type patrimonial bureaucracy (whereby officials did not in principle inherit their offices, and had only a tenuous link with the land) nor the utilization of a land-owning clergy — but only the use of either the clergy or a status group of hereditary feudal lords. Secondly, occidental kings were not confronted with a national church without overt ambitions for secular power, but with a church constituting a supra-national body, a “*corpus permixtum*” which combined “*regnum*” with “*sacerdotium*”. In short, in the medieval occidental context the administrative expediency of making land grants and bestowing prebends so as to be able to control the clergy was far more obvious than in countries like traditional Ceylon or, for that matter, Thailand. Moreover, even if one accepts administrative expediency as a possible motive for granting lands to the Buddhist monkhood, the question of lavish royal spending on *temple buildings* still remains unanswered.

There is, of course, another possible line of argument in this matter. So it might be argued that although the original motivation behind royal “generosity” towards the monkhood may have initially been provided by administrative expediency, the kings’ own measures gradually “turned sour” on them in an unforeseeable way. To follow this line of argument, however, would be making a very feeble case indeed. After all, rulers continued to make land grants for centuries⁶⁵ — in other words, they went on doing so even after it had become perfectly clear that this policy had negative results in terms of the (alleged) original motivation behind it.

There is yet another theory on this subject which, as far as traditional Thai society is concerned, is equally unconvincing. According to this

⁶⁴ M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen 1954, p. 608.

⁶⁵ It is interesting to note that in India also royal land grants to Brahmans, Buddhist monasteries and Saiva temples resulted in these groups enjoying “administrative rights at the expense of the king”, see R. S. Sharma, “Feudal elements in Pala and Pratihara Polity A.D. (750-1000)”, in K. S. Lal (ed.), *Studies in Asian History*, London 1969.

theory, kings "bought" their legitimation from the monkhood with the lasting and prodigious merit they accumulated through gift-giving. Kingship, being an essentially "secular" function (as opposed to that of "chief priest", as Dhani Nivat emphatically pointed out to Quaritch Wales),⁶⁶ this way retained something of its magico-religious aspect. As we saw above, Ames emphasized for Ceylon the dual exchange relationship in which "the king defended the faith while the faith legitimated the king" (see n. 59).

Louis Dumont has stated that in India the Brahmans guaranteed spiritual reward for acts which were materially profitable to themselves. The prototype of such acts was the *gift*. "To give to Brahmans is basically to exchange material goods against a spiritual good, merits".⁶⁷ The accumulation of merit, according to this view, can be regarded as a harmonious exchange between the realm of power and material interest and advantage (*artha*) and the realm of spiritual values (*dharma*).

Aside from the fact that Dumont has been criticized by both Heesterman and Beteille⁶⁸ for picturing the relationship between Brahmans and the King as exaggeratedly harmonious, difficulties arise *when applying this exchange theory to Buddhist S.E. Asia, because of the thoroughgoing syncretism of kingship concepts in this area*. As Schrieke has pointed out for early Java, in Prapanca's *Nāgarakṛtāgama* "it was the Buddha who by incarnation as a Dhyānibuddha or Bodhisattwa in certain rulers . . . fulfilled the function which the Hinduists ascribed to Wisnu as the slayer of demons and the restorer of order in the *Kali-yuga*".⁶⁹ Schrieke quotes a passage from the old Javanese *Sutasoma* which points in the same direction: "In days of yore, in the *dwāpara*, *Kṛta*, and *treta yugas*, Buddha, the protector of the world order, who is none other than the god Brahmā-Wiṣṇu-Īṣwara manifested himself in kings in the world of men".⁷⁰

Lawrence Briggs, in a general discussion of Southeast Asian history, has remarked that the syncretization of Sivaism and Mahāyāna Buddh-

⁶⁶ Dhani Nivat, "The Old Siamese Conception of the Monarchy", in *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 36, pt. 2, Sept. 1946.

⁶⁷ Louis Dumont, "The Conception of Kingship in Ancient India", in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, No. VI, 1962, pp. 55/56.

⁶⁸ See André Beteille, "The Politics of 'Non Antagonistic Strata'", in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 3, 1969, and J. C. Heesterman, *Spel der Tegenstellingen*, Inaugural Oration, Leiden 1964.

⁶⁹ B. Schrieke, "Ruler and Realm in Early Java", in *Indonesian Sociological Studies*, The Hague/Bandung 1955/57, Vol. II, p. 86.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

ism which took place at a certain period constitutes "one of the most engaging facts" of this history. Briggs sees the culmination of this trend, as far as the ancient Khmer empire is concerned, in the reign of Jayavarman VII, when the cult of the *devarāja* was transformed into that of the *Buddharāja*.⁷¹ The state cult of the worship of the royal linga *Mahésvara* (= the great Isvara = Siva) existed in Cambodia until the introduction of Singhalese Hīnayānism via the Thai capital of Lopburi (which Briggs calls Louvo, in imitation of earlier French authors).⁷² But, says Briggs, even today "in Hīnayānist Cambodia, the Bakō to whom is entrusted the care of the Sacred Sword — the Preah Khan, palladium of the Kingdom — who help to choose a king, in case of a disputed succession, and who have charge of certain rites and ceremonies, are Brahmans, . . .".⁷³

Thai "concepts of Kingship" were very much influenced by the Khmer. At Thai coronations the new king is given the trident of Siva and the discus of Vishnu as regalia, and Hindu deities are invoked "to pervade the anointed monarch . . .". One of the King's epithets is *Dibyadebāvatār*, according to Dhani's translation the "Incarnation of the celestial gods".⁷⁴ The king is not entitled to issue any royal command (*omkāra*) until the High priest of Siva has invoked the god "to come down" and "merge into the King's person".⁷⁵ Among the kingly virtues quoted in old Thai literature are *sassamedha* (knowledge of the organization of food supplies), *purisamedha* (knowledge of men), *sammā-pāsa* (the ability to win his subjects' hearts) and *vācāpeyya* (gentle speech). Dhani remarks that with

"just a little imagination one easily detects under the Pali veneers of these ethical terms the names of Brahman sacrifices of old as laid down for Brahman monarchs in the *Sāthapatha Brāhmaṇa*. Nothing can be more unbuddhistic than some of these sacrifices and the way they have been transformed is a clever piece of linguistic juggling to reach a compromise".⁷⁶

The point of this brief digression, then, is that, since Thai "con-

⁷¹ Lawrence Palmer Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society at Philadelphia, 1951, Vol. 41, Part 1, p. 194.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷⁴ Dhani Nivat, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁷⁵ Dhani Nivat, Review of Kenglian Sibunrūang, *The Life of Hiuen Ysian* (Thai publication), in *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 35, pt. 2, pp. 220/221.

⁷⁶ Dhani Nivat, "The Old Siamese Conception of the Monarchy", *op. cit.*, p. 95.

ceptions of the legitimation of kingship" were largely non-Buddhistic and since the Court Brahmans played a far more vital role in legitimization rites (such as coronations) than Buddhist priests, it is hard to understand why the king should try to obtain legitimation by showing continuous munificence to the Buddhist monkhood.

It seems to me that for a more plausible explanation of the extravagance of royal spending on the monkhood we should consult Mauss' classic essay on gift-giving, in particular the following passage: "to give is to show one's superiority, to show that one is something more and higher, that one is *magister*. To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient, to become *minister*".⁷⁷

Although Mauss' statement contains a great deal of truth, it does not apply to the exchange of goods in general. Clearly in the exchange of goods between a landlord and his rural followers, more goods went from the socially inferior to the superior than vice-versa — obviously, if the reverse had been the case, the landlord would not have maintained his superior social position for long. As Weber has pointed out, though superiority of position with respect to the distribution of material goods and superiority of position as regards the distribution of status are analytically distinct, the latter cannot be maintained without the former.

Nevertheless, Mauss' statement on the link between social status and gift-giving, though not applicable to the exchange of goods in general, has, in my opinion, great relevance for *ritual* gift-giving in S.E. Asia. The monkhood here was regularly presented with gifts not only because the direct road to salvation was blocked to all Buddhist laymen, as, among others, Weber, Miller and Ames have pointed out, but also because *the overall hierarchy of Buddhist societies was strengthened and confirmed by this ritual gift-giving*. The amount of merit gained by gift-giving was not dependent on purity of motivation strictly (a Christian notion!) but on the size of the gift. The confirmation of relations of social superiority and inferiority was not direct but rather indirect: a monk did not become inferior to a layman by accepting a gift from him and not giving one in exchange, but *the social superiority of one layman over another was established and confirmed by the relative size of their gifts to the monkhood*.

⁷⁷ M. Mauss, *The Gift - Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London 1966, p. 72.

As far as Thai society is concerned there is clear evidence for this thesis, as set out below:

1. *Merit could not be accumulated unrestrictedly, but had to be confined within the bounds imposed by social rank.* In Bradley's diary we find the following note, dated Sept. 1835:

"The Phra klang told Mr. Hunter that a very serious objection to our living where we do is the unusual amount of good works. That it is against the laws of Siam to 'tam boon' (do good) every day; that there were certain days designated by government when all might give as much as they please, but to the priests chiefly. He assigned as a reason for this objection that we should get more merit than the people generally and would equal if not outstrip the greatest and best in the nation".⁷⁸

Ruschenberger, who was in Siam with an American embassy in 1836, relates how the residence of the American missionaries had to be moved because allegedly it was too near to the residence of the king, who passed that way once a year. He then continues: "Besides the missionaries were doing good every day, and thereby obtaining too much merit, which was contrary to law; . . .".⁷⁹ Ruschenberger probably has his information on this point from conversations with Bradley, which shows that the latter believed the Phra Klang's remark to be true.

2. *Merit-making characterized by "individual excess", i.e. by actions not commensurate with social status, was publicly disapproved of by at least one king (see below), even though the pattern for this kind of merit-making had been set by the alleged behaviour of the Buddha himself.*

Henry Alabaster's 19th century translation of the Thai version of the "Life of the Buddha" contains the following passage:

"He cut off portions of his flesh and gave them in alms so vast a number of times, that, if collected, the mass would be greater than this world. He poured out his blood in alms, more than there is water in the great ocean. He gave his head so many times that the heaps would be higher than the mightiest of mountains, Meru. He gave his eyes, more than there are stars in the sky".⁸⁰

⁷⁸ D. B. Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁷⁹ W. S. W. Ruschenberger, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World During the Years 1835, 36 and 37; including a Narrative of an Embassy to the Sultan of Muscat and the King of Siam*, London 1838, p. 22.

⁸⁰ Alabaster, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

Famous, of course, is the story of the Buddha who sacrificed himself to a starving tiger.⁸¹ Yet, in spite of his illustrious example, suicidal religious tendencies were far from widespread in Thailand. Bowring referred in 1855 to an incident which allegedly took place as far back as 1821, whereby someone who had announced his intention to kill himself ran out of the burning pile and jumped into the river.⁸² In Lingat's "History of Wat Mahādhātu" we are told that a "second king" was prevented with some difficulty from putting himself to death in front of a Buddha statue.⁸³ La Loubère's report on the custom of religious suicide in the 17th century, in the 19th drew the comment from Captain Low, who was something of an orientalist in his own right, that he was in error "at least in so far as he inferred that it is usual".⁸⁴

Although some instances of this occurred in king Mongkut's reign, this king (who had himself been in the monkhood for several decades) reacted to this by a royal proclamation denouncing the practice in no uncertain terms:

"Some persons do commit acts which are inconsistent with policy, although such acts may appear to be praise-worthy in the eye of those who are about to lose their mind, having been led to believe in the merit of such acts by reports and hearsay or by the scatter-brain and aberring sermon of some priests unlearned in the Holy Tripitaka, whose mind is about to go as well. Such for instance as the acts of committing oneself to the fire in worship of the Triple Gems, of presenting one's severed head as token of veneration to the Buddha, of offering one's blood collected from self inflicted wounds as burning oil for the temple lamp and others are oft performed to the surprise and consternation of the government".⁸⁵

If my thesis that it was important for attempts at merit-making to remain within the framework of the "secular" social hierarchy (being aimed at reinforcing that hierarchy rather than cutting across it) is correct, one would indeed expect "excessively zealous" acts to be encouraged by monks and frowned upon by kings: monks, after all,

⁸¹ Cf. Fournereau, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

⁸² Bowring, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 334.

⁸³ R. Lingat, Wat Mahādhātu, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁸⁴ Cf. James Low, "On the Laws of Mu'ung Thai or Siam", in *Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia*, 1847.

⁸⁵ Quoted in M. R. Seni Pramoj, "King Mongkut as a Legislator", in *Selected Articles from the Siam Society Journal*, Bangkok 1959, Vol. IV, p. 215.

were not interested in maintaining the secular hierarchy, whereas kings were.

The question then arises why the above-mentioned "second king" was so eager to perform the same kind of sacrifice. If a motive that agrees with my interpretation of the facts must be found for him, this will not prove difficult: Lingat tells us that "he never ceased to aspire to the succession and at one time was even in open rebellion against his brother". So although he did not have the necessary material resources and power to outdo his brother in the kind of merit-making constituted by gift-giving, he in his turn could hardly be outdone in this final gift of his life.

3. *The emphasis on the giving of goods (buildings, land, food, money) whose value could be expressed in a single standard cannot be explained from Buddhist ethics as propounded in Buddhist canonical scriptures.*

Chao Phya Thipakon (often referred to in contemporary Western writings as Chao Phya Phra Klang), a 19th century royal official who conducted the foreign affairs of the Siamese Kingdom over a period of many years and whose intelligence and sophistication were praised by a long series of foreign envoys, at the end of the 1860's wrote a book entitled *Kitchanukit* in which he set out to provide an outline (and apology) of Buddhism. An extensive summary of this book, in Alabaster's translation, was published in 1870 under the title *The Modern Buddhist*.⁸⁶ The Thai author, after a long discourse on the results of merit-making, states that the following virtues are in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha: Kindness, compassion, pleasure in the general happiness of all creatures, freedom from love for or dislike of individuals, and alms-giving.

It is instructive to see what acts of gift-giving were singled out by our modern Buddhist as being especially meritorious. Most excellent among the various kinds of alms-giving, says Chao Phya Thipakon, was the erection of temples, monasteries, spires and preaching houses; the digging of canals and pools, the construction of roads and bridges, the erection of rest-houses and drinking-fountains, etc.⁸⁷ The only relatively modest acts included in this enumeration are the giving of food and clothes to the poor.

It is obvious that the merit accumulated through gift-giving is

⁸⁶ H. Alabaster, *The Modern Buddhist, Being the views of a Siamese Minister of State on his Own and Other Religions*, London 1870.

⁸⁷ Alabaster, *op. cit.*, p. 68 ff.

measurable, whereas that acquired by the display of kindness is not. Hence, if the accumulation of merit had to be commensurate with the social position of the person trying to attain merit, gift-giving was a far more easily practicable virtue than kindness. Buddhist scriptures state that the motive is more important than the act, so that from that point of view the amount given would be less important than the motive behind the gift (this being the Buddhist equivalent of the moral of Christ's remarks concerning the poor widow's offering to the temple treasury, cf. Luke 21 : 1-4). This does not, however, rhyme with the fact that in *The Modern Buddhist* an especially meritorious form of almsgiving is stated to be, virtually without exception, that involving lavish spending, or in other words, acts indicative of high social status rather than noble motives. It is further interesting to note that these expensive practices also included some which did not directly benefit the monkhood. This accords with my thesis that merit-making served (among other things) a "secular" interest, viz. the expression and confirmation of social status.

4. *Merit-making was not a private matter but, on the contrary, was brought out into the open as much as possible, as one would expect of any kind of behaviour symbolizing social status.*

Not only kings drew attention to their merit-making activities. Even humble people would "from time to time invite two or three monks to receive some trumpery presents at their houses, and (would) proclaim the fact by beating a drum for several hours".⁸⁸

We have personally observed how in modern Thailand collections for temples are often held with the aid of cars fitted with powerful loudspeakers. The names of the donors are hereby loudly proclaimed together with the amount of money they have donated.

We will now return to the theme broached at the beginning of this article. In connection with the Thai Thot Kathin procession — the festival by which the King made his position as gift-giver vis à vis the monkhood abundantly clear — I used Geertz's phrase about "the public dramatization of ruling obsessions".

The "ruling obsession" here, as I have suggested above, is the Thai concern with social hierarchy and social status. The King, occupying a position at the apex of a social hierarchy in which everyone was

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

precisely graded according to the principles of the "*sakti na*" system, was the only person not to be graded in this hierarchy, "his dignity being beyond all computation".⁸⁹ No wonder, then, that even with the relatively ample means the King had at his disposal, he could hardly express his exalted social status.

There is another point worth noting here. Though I have drawn in the above on Mauss' work, we must go beyond Mauss if we are to achieve a correct interpretation of Thai royal gift-giving. Walter Goldschmidt, in his review of the English translation of Mauss' work, has remarked that the latter was too much inclined to regard gift-giving as "an act of collective solidarity; as demonstrations of mutual obligation". Therefore, says Goldschmidt, "he cannot really appreciate the role of gifts in power aggrandizement and economic chicanery".⁹⁰ It was in fact precisely this "power aggrandizement" which played an important role in the King's feverish lavishing of gifts on the monkhood: the "balance of prestige" between the king and the yellow-robed inhabitants of Thailand's numerous temples had to be continuously restored.

The Sāṅgharāja, as one 18th century Spanish account points out, "shows deference to none, not even to the king himself".⁹¹ And a nineteenth century observer, commenting on the "obeisances" the king had to perform towards the monkhood during the Thot Kathin, remarks that the king was "cautious of exhibiting such humility oftener than custom prescribes — and waves it when he can".⁹² The last words of this quotation indicate what was involved here: custom did not entirely regulate the prestige relation between the King and the monkhood; it was gift-giving which, as far as the king was concerned, constituted the dynamic element here.

Looking at Thai society as a whole we may point to the "system maintenance" aspect as well as to the dynamic elements of merit-making. Merit-making provided a constant reference to the social hierarchy, or to the *sakti na* system, i.e., the system by which the actual unity of Thai society was expressed. Merit-making rituals therefore had a direct

⁸⁹ H. G. Quaritch Wales, *Ancient Siamese Government and Administration*, New York 1965, p. 30.

⁹⁰ W. Goldschmidt, Review of Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, in *American Anthropologist*, 1955, Vol. 57, pp. 1299/1300.

⁹¹ *Cronicas de la Apostolica Provincia de Sam Gregoria, Manilla 1738*, quoted in Bowring, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 110.

⁹² James Low, "On the Government of Siam", in *Asiatic Researches*, Calcutta 1839, Vol. XX, p. 258.

political significance — a fact to which we alluded at the beginning of this article. Merit-making also constituted *a means of gaining prestige that was not delimited by the rigid sakti na hierarchy*, however, just as in a military organization (to which Lucien Hanks has compared the Thai social order)⁹³ persons who are equal in rank may attain different degrees of prestige by the display of military virtues. It is this fact which constituted the dynamic element in merit-making activities.

To regard merit-making activities in the manner described above does not necessarily invalidate other interpretations, such as, for instance, Weber's view concerning the unattainability of salvation for Buddhist laymen and Ames' conclusion that merit-making provided a compensatory mechanism here. What I set out to explain in this article was the extravagance of Thai royalty and the historical change in Thai gift-giving which was observed by Grenet.

It is only by also taking into account the "potlatch" aspect of gift-giving and its constant reference to an elaborate social hierarchy, that one will be able to understand both this extravagance and the historical change. Gifts of food and shelter for the night no longer sufficed as an expression of social status in a differentiated society, counting a population of millions and possessing elaborate gradations of rank. Just as in the West, though for different reasons, the monkhood in Thailand became a "a great economic power" (to use Grenet's words) almost *à contre coeur*. The scope of this tremendous change can only be understood if one considers the non-religious aspects of gift-giving.

⁹³ Lucien Hanks, "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order", in *American Anthropologist*, 1962, Vol. 64, p. 1252.