CHAPTER 9

RELIGION AND RITUAL

The Spirit of the Institution of the Talapoins, is, to keep themselves from the Sins of the People, to Lead a penitent Life for the Sins of those that bestow Alms upon them, and to live on Alms.
Simon de la Loubère 1693: 114.

The syncretism that is Thai religion offers the villager a wide range of ritual activities and a variety of types of interaction with both the supernatural and social universes. Facets of all three of the sub-systems usually distinguished as constituting Thai religion are found in Hua Kok. The general form of the overall system is now fairly well known, having been studied in urban as well as rural locations. [1] There has also been some detailed description and analysis of the ideology of making merit (*tham bun*) and of the importance of this and other religious ideas and values for social behaviour. [2] Consequently my intention is to avoid duplication where possible and examine selectively those aspects which have direct bearing on the preceding discussion of social organisation.

In Hua Kok beliefs and rituals which are usually distinguished by observers as being Buddhist, animist or brahminical in origin, seemingly exist in harmony side by side. One reason is that they are all incorporated into, and are manifestations of, a general Thai cosmology which, though only very fragmentarily and unequally known in Hua Kok, does nevertheless provide a degree of overall coherence (cf. Tambiah 1970: Ch. 3). At the level of practice, oppositions, contradictions and conflicts do not become explicit because of the different spheres in which these various elements of Thai religion exist and are resorted to. One must also note the villagers' practical concern with religious phenomena, with what to do in specific circumstances rather than with the niceties of theological explanation or logical consistency. [3] Taken together these factors offer a means of explaining that which, if approached solely through observers' models of the 'pure

doctrines' of Buddhism, animism and brahminism, is seemingly disparate and contradictory. Hence the *ĉhao khana amphŏe*, the most senior bikkhu in the district, has the reputation of being skilled as a *mā dū*, seeing doctor, a term used to describe astrologers and those employing various other oracular techniques. Similarly, when I purchased a large wooden post to be used in the reconstruction of the *sālā* (the pavilion at the *wat* in which services involving the monks and laity are normally held) at *wat* Wang Phom, I was told that not only had I made merit but after death when I was in *mūang phī*, the land of spirits, my ghost would be able shelter there from rain or the heat of the sun. This right was considered valuable because spirits are not normally permitted to enter houses by the house spirits (*phī rŭan*) which protect them. Nor are they given access to temples by the other spirits residing there unless help has been given in either the erection of, or repairs to, the temple buildings.

A conventional interpretation of this type of syncretism of disparate elements is phrased in terms of a specialisation of functions. Thus the goals of the Buddhist component are viewed as being 'other worldly' while those of the animist and brahminical sub-systems are characterised as 'this worldly'. Such a distinction is analytically flawed if used with reference to participants' categories in that it does not reflect Buddhist canonical principles. [4] The heavens and hells and their varied inhabitants to which villagers look belong to the Kama Loka, the "plane of bodily form and sensual feelings" (Tambiah 1970: 36) on which man exists. Even so, the distinction is of some use operationally in that the function of a religion in facilitating manipulation of the 'real' world about one, that is the world of human beings, through direct resort to the supernatural is not developed in 'pure' doctrinal Buddhism. The resultant vacuum is filled by astrology and other magical event interpreting and manipulatory techniques, plus attempts to influence the actions of many different spirits. Some of these may in turn be identified as brahiminical in origin whereas the rest belong to the residual category of animism.

At one level one is concerned with contradictory sets of ideas; in this instance with the doctrine of Karma and belief that frequently capricious spirits can and do interfere in the lives of men and may in turn be manipulated by them. [5] At the same time, however, one is also dealing with a set of beliefs and practices which, at a higher level, do display an important degree of coherence and integration. Thus it is essential to understand that although there is a categorical opposition between Karma and *phī*, it operates within "a total field that expresses other relations as well as complementarity and hierarchical ordering between Buddhism and the spirit cults" (ibid: 41).

However, caution is necessary with respect to Tambiah's structuralist perspective in the extent to which a local cosmology reflects the wider Thai cosmology. In Hua Kok there was less information available than in Baan Phraan Muan. Furthermore, this cosmology, even in its local manifestations, is differentially known and understood. In Baan Phraan Muan it is preserved in the hands of certain ritual experts and little is stated about the knowledge of the ordinary man or woman. For the purposes of structural analysis these questions are irrelevant. What matters most is being able to establish the existence of the cosmological system and analyse the "fragments of and allusions to the traditional cosmology [which] appear in many myths and rituals" (ibid: 35).

Given my interest in the practices and beliefs of the people of Hua Kok insofar as they relate to patterns of social organisation and their maintenance by the processes of social control, the above approach appears unduly restrictive. Inevitably one perceives the mutual distinctiveness of the various aspects of village ritual expression, the different functions they manifest and the extent to which ritual activities mirror more general patterns of social organisation such as in the definition of age and sex roles. Where, in the present study of Hua Kok, Tambiah's contribution is useful is as an antidote to the supposition that the extent to which village practices differ doctrinally necessitates an analysis in terms of the 'religions' of Thailand or, as in the case of Spiro's study of a parallel situation in Burma (1967), commitment to the idea of a basic inconsistency and concentration on one aspect at the expense of the total field.

Buddhism and Hua Kok

Any discussion of Thai religion invariably commences with the topic of Buddhism if only because of the obvious paramountcy of its formal organisation. Thailand is popularly described as a Buddhist country and neither of the other two sub-systems possess the equivalent of the Sangha, that is, a formally constituted organisation protected and supported by the state. It is the Sangha above all else which articulates the religious world of the peasant's little community with that of the state. The importance of this articulation for social control has long been recognised by Thai governments. The first king of the present dynasty (Rama I) sought to revitalise and ensure the orthodoxy of Thai Buddhism as part of the policy of reconstruction in the early part of the Bangkok period and many of his successors maintained a similar interest in both supporting and controlling the Sangha. In his discussion of the relationship of church to state Yoneo Ishii demonstrates that major changes in secular administration and government were usually followed by parallel reforms in the Sangha (1968: 864-871). More recently,

Keyes (1971: 551-67) has described how the Thai government in its attempt to build a modern nation state successfully destroyed the independence of the northern Thai Sangha, thereby undermining one of the major bases upon which claims for a greater degree of regional autonomy might be sought.

Given the close parallel that exists between secular and religious administrative hierarchies - the provincial, district and *tambon* divisions are duplicated - it would be surprising if a close association between the local community and individual temple was not also assumed to exist. To a certain extent it does but the assumption is an oversimplification. It can often distort what is the actual position and importance of the temple, its bikkhus and congregation in the overall system of social organisation existing within a given locality.

As noted in the preliminary description of Hua Kok and the surrounding neighbourhood, the two temples in the immediate locality are situated in Bang Saphan and Wang Phom. This, plus the general pattern of temple attendance, has the effect of both dividing the population of Hua Kok and fostering contact and interaction with people from other settlements. The congregation at *wat* Wang Phom normally consists of people from Wang Phom, Wang Ya Nang and part of Hua Kok. Those living in the northern part of Hua Kok tend to frequent *wat* Bang Saphan along with the residents of Wang Khut and Bang Saphan itself. The division, though explicit and of some importance for the analysis of social interaction and boundaries, is by no means absolute. When there are special festivals lasting a number of days or when particular temple ceremonies are scheduled for different days, people in Hua Kok tend to visit the other *wat* or may even go to *wat* Wang Thong and the main temple in Phitsanulok. [6] Perhaps more important, though, is the fact that *wat* Bang Saphan has facilities which enable it to provide services not available in Wang Phom, nor, for that matter, at most of the rural temples in the surrounding area.

No ordinations can be held at *wat* Wang Phom. Not only is there no suitable qualified bikkhu in residence, Wang Phom does not possess a *bōt*, the building in which the rite of ordination must be held. In normal circumstances, ordinations automatically take place at Bang Saphan, with the newly ordained bikkhu returning either immediately or shortly afterwards to reside in Wang Phom for the duration of his time in the order. In fact, most ordinations in the district are held at Bang Saphan because the *ĉhao khana amphōe* who lives there is the only monk who is an *upachā*, that is, authorised by the Department of Religious Affairs to confer ordination. As he is now an old man he is understandably reluctant to travel to those *wat* in the district which do have a *bōt*.

Within Hua Kok, the division between those who support Wang Phom and Bang Saphan temples is blurred in other respects. Every morning other than *wan phra*, lunar holy days, in the couple of months preceding *phansā*, the Buddhist Lent or rainy season retreat, and during that period bikkhus from *wat* Bang Saphan walk directly to the southern end of Hua Kok and then return, collecting offerings from those who gather at the side of the track (*sāi bāt phra dōen hon*). The offerings always consist of freshly cooked rice which is spooned directly into the brass bowl carried by each bikkhu. Any additional items such as curry or sweetmeats are placed in one of the pintoes carried by the boys accompanying them. Bikkhus from Wang Phom never reach Hua Kok on their collecting round because they are able to gather more than enough to support their small numbers, four or five at most. At other times of the year, when there are far fewer than the twenty or so bikkhus plus a small number of novices resident at Bang Saphan immediately prior to and during *phansā*, no collecting round reaches Hua Kok. At Wang Phom there have been periods in the recent past when no bikkhu was resident and those from Bang Saphan have walked to Wang Phom for the service on holy days. In 1966 five bikkhus spent the retreat at Wang Phom.

Given this situation, the division in *wat* affiliation in Hua Kok may initially appear a little surprising. Both temples are approximately equidistant from Hua Kok and one might have expected everyone from Hua Kok to go to Bang Saphan because of its facilities and importance as a religious centre. Reasons, or rather justifications, for the existing pattern are varied. In 1966 informants in the northern part of the hamlet claimed that the condition of the track to Wang Phom was particularly bad in the rainy season, during *phansā*, when villagers attend the temple on holy days most regularly. On the other hand this was of no consequence for those living in the southern part of the hamlet. From my own observations it did appear that the Wang Phom track was muddier than the one to Bang Saphan but not strikingly so. Before the road to Bang Saphan was improved a few years prior to fieldwork, reputedly nearly everyone from Hua Kok frequented *wat* Wang Phom. As it happened a new route to Wang Phom was constructed during 1966 but had no immediate effect on temple attendance.

The availability of choice emphasises the importance of eliciting the factors which affect villagers' decisions about going to *wat* rituals. Why, as a general matter of course or for specific occasions, do villagers decide that it is better to visit one temple rather than the other? What do people gain from going to temple rituals? Why, on some *wan phra* in *phansā*, does one see many people setting off from Hua Kok for the temple early in the morning to feed the monks (*sāi bāt*) while the following week few if any make the trip? The more general question underlying all of these is, of course, why

do people go to the *wat*? The simple, conventional response is that villagers do so as a means of making merit (*tham bun*). Despite a certain validity this answer is inadequate; it refers only to the specific act of merit-making, a cultural goal which everyone is supposed to share. It ignores the disproportionate numbers of elderly people and women who attend services. It is also inadequate because it ignores the importance of other, non-religious factors influencing particular decisions about when and where one actually makes merit.

The individual and his destiny is an aspect of Buddhism which is often emphasised to the neglect of the social importance of collective activities. It has also been used to support the loose structure perspective. In Phillips' opinion "a major source of the villagers' loose relationships is the Buddhist emphasis on primacy of individual action and responsibility" (1967: 363-4). On the other hand, Bunnag suggests that "Buddhism as it is implemented on the ground, as distinct from doctrinal Buddhism, serves to promote social cooperation" (1971: 17). Apart from this cooperative aspect, which is also readily observable in Hua Kok where people help one another in arranging and funding ceremonies, one must draw attention to what is easily overlooked, namely that temple attendance is a social event as well as an occasion of individual merit-making.

A useful illustration of this dimension to temple attendance was provided during *phansā* when the two women in the headman's house spent several hours the day before *wan phra* making a special *khanom*, sweetmeat. One of them even went to the market in Wang Thong to buy meat to cook a *kāeng*, curry. Then, the next morning neither bothered to go even though preparations were complete and the food placed in a basket. When questioned the women said that nobody else was going because they were not free. None of the neighbours had prepared to go to *wat* Bang Saphan, and any from other parts of the hamlet who made merit that morning went to Wang Phom and so did not pass the headman's house. Certainly, as far as I was aware, there was no practical reason why at least one of the women did not go to *wat* Bang Saphan on her own. It was the neighbours who were busy and the absence of their company was sufficient for the preparations of the previous day to be ignored. [7]

It was also my impression that on occasion people held back about their plans for *wan phra* or some festival until another made a definite statement of intent whereupon they would agree to go along as well. Going to the *wat* is a social event, a potentially enjoyable and worthwhile activity irrespective of any merit that might be made. This is especially so at the times of major festivals when large numbers of young people attend; outside of *phansā*

relatively few go regularly. Questions about my willingness to accompany others to the temple to feed the bikkhus on *wan phra* were often followed by queries about where I wanted to go and statements that we could go where I chose. Irrespective of the diversion of having a resident anthropologist, groups of neighbours, regardless of whether or not they are close kin, tend to set off together. When passing other houses they also call out to see if anyone else is going and whether they are ready to leave. Such evidence suggests that patterns of attendance depend not on any notion of belonging to a particular congregation but instead on local considerations. Indeed, one can argue that attendance patterns reflect the distribution of kin and friends. Those originally from Wang Khut and Bang Saphan, for example, should they go to a *wat*, are likely to choose Bang Saphan and visit their kin afterwards. Within Hua Kok itself the actions of friends and neighbours in terms of where they prefer to go and whether, on particular occasions, they decide to go or stay at home constitutes a factor which complements or even sometimes counters an individual's expressed general wish to make merit.

Further evidence on the fluidity of the situation and relevant factors influencing temple attendance was provided by the headman's younger wife on my return visit in 1968. During the first period of fieldwork she declared that she much preferred going to Bang Saphan because there were more bikkhus there and hence greater opportunities for making merit. However, the point she frequently emphasised when decisions were to be made about which temple we should attend was that the Bang Saphan congregation was far larger and that going there was more fun (*sanuk kwā*). Indeed, people in the northern part of the hamlet tend to make disparaging comments about the small numbers involved in special events and festivals which they have attended at Wang Phom or heard of from others. In contrast, the comparatively large numbers attending any ceremony at Bang Saphan are spoken of favourably. Certainly, major festivals at Bang Saphan are attended by people from a wide area who normally go to their local *wat* and, where possible, care is taken to ensure that major merit-making festivals are arranged to avoid clashes with those at neighbouring temples. This favourable attitude towards large congregations exists even though people from Hua Kok are greatly outnumbered and familiar with a comparatively small proportion of those who attend. This differs markedly from the situation in Wang Phom where even at the major festivals most of those there are well- known to one another.

In the light of what had been said previously by the headman's junior wife, I was somewhat surprised to discover that in the 1968 lenten period she was attending *wat* Wang Phom. The reason arose from her desire to make more merit than is obtained by just feeding the monks on holy days.

During Lent the more devout *thū sin*, respect the precepts on lunar holy days. They make merit in the usual way in the early morning and then stay on for the rest of day and night at the temple. During this period they observe eight precepts instead of the five which laymen should ordinarily respect. The third of the five, "I undertake the rule of training to refrain from wrong-doing in sexual desires" (Khantipalo 1968: 89) is converted to "refraining from breaking celibacy". The additional rules specify refraining from eating after noon, from entertainments and bodily ornamentation, and from sleeping on a soft or luxurious bed (ibid: 96). [7] The headman's wife preferred to do this at Wang Phom because all doing likewise were well known, if not actual friends and affines, and she found it more enjoyable to spend that length of time in their company than be a member of the larger, more impersonal throng at Bang Saphan.

Although at other times the headman's household tends to frequent *wat* Bang Saphan it is more involved with *wat* Wang Phom than is normal for those whose members usually go to Bang Saphan. This is because of the formal association between village and temple so that Teng sees it as his duty to attend *wat* Wang Phom on at least special occasions. The temple committee should be elected every four years by the heads of households which normally make merit there and live in the village within whose boundaries the temple is located. Consequently, those from Hua Kok who attend *wat* Bang Saphan play no part in electing the committee there. The association between local administration and the *wat* is further strengthened by the practice of the *kamnan* (who is also *phū yāi bān* of the village comprised of Bang Saphan and Wang Khut) using the opportunity of addressing a large number of people to make public announcements. On the 13 April 1966, the first day of *songkrān*, the traditional New Year festival, food was presented to the monks in the *sālā* at Bang Saphan. While they were eating, the *kamnan* stood up and proceeded to make a series of public announcements. There had been a couple of fires in Wang Thong and so everyone was warned of the danger of fire at that time of the year. A second warning concerned the large number of thieves said to be active in the area. He also announced a ceremony at *wat* Wang Thong the following day and gave notice of a *song nam* rite on the fifteenth to be held for the District Officer who was being transferred to Nakhon Sawan. Anyone who wished to do so was invited to come and pour water. Teng occasionally makes announcements in a similar fashion at *wat* Wang Phom and these are the only occasions when he communicates publicly with people from Wang Ya Nang and Wang Phom, village meetings at his house in practice being attended only by those from Hua Kok itself.

Within Hua Kok Buddhist ceremonies are normally sponsored by a single household though closely related households may cooperate for events associated with ordinations or death. The only observed occasion which seemed beforehand as if it was going to be a collective hamlet ceremony was actually organised by two men from Bang Saphan. It was described initially by one informant as being *tham bun klāng bān*, making merit at the hamlet centre, but really it should be referred to in the way it was spoken of generally, *tham bun rot nāk*, irrigation truck merit-making. At that time the government water-pump used to irrigate the paddies on the west bank of the river at the end of the rainy season was still in Hua Kok. The organisers arranged for five monks from Bang Saphan to come and be fed in a small temporary shelter (*sālā*) which had been used by those manning the pump. Over thirty people from Bang Saphan, Wang Khut and Hua Kok attended. After the meal the senior bikkhu present, the *ĉhao khana tambon*, blessed and annointed the vehicle.

Other than when bikkhus are asked to chant on behalf of an ailing person (*sangkathān*) the main occasions on which they are invited to the hamlet to be fed, give the precepts, chant or perhaps read a sermon, are associated with rites of passage in the life cycle of the individual. However, birth rituals do not involve the participation of monks and the rite of shaving the top knot of a child is no longer practised in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, the formal *khā kan* marriage with its large scale feasting and merit-making is increasingly unusual in the face of the popularity of elopement (cf. Ch 4: Marriage Ceremonies). It is thus with the transition to adulthood by males and the death of both sexes that bikkhus are most frequently involved with the life of the hamlet.

On death, bikkhus are invited to chant (*sūat*) at the house of the dead person in the evening. They return the following morning for kin, friends and neighbours to *sāi bāt nā sop*, to fill the bowls before the corpse, and so make merit for the deceased. Death is usually followed within a day or so by cremation (*phao sop*) at the small crematorium situated in fields near *wat* Bang Saphan. Cremations are occasionally delayed while resources for merit-making are accumulated, in which case the corpse is buried in the cemetery behind the *wat* before cremation of the bones in the temple compound. Those who die violently (*tāi hōng*), by murder or drowning, or when a woman dies in childbirth, are buried. Children who die before they have developed any teeth are also buried in the cemetery or near the crematorium. To cremate them was described as being evil (*ĉhanrai*).

The Buddhist ideology underlying the rituals surrounding death is to make as much merit as possible for the deceased, though all so doing also

make merit form themselves. In addition to the house rituals immediately following death, the evening *sūat* and morning *sāi bāt*, there may be major *tham bun* ceremonies on the seventh, fiftieth and hundredth day anniversaries of the death. Finally, some aspire to one final burst of merit-making on behalf of the deceased which is spoken of as a *cāeng*. The extent to which these rituals are performed bears a close relation to the standing of the dead person in the local community and to the resources and status of those immediately responsible for their organisation.

It is already evident from what has been written of the nature of collective merit-making rituals in general that *tham bun* rites for the dead can be very important social occasions in the life of the hamlet. In one such case, on the eve of the seventh day after the death of an old and highly respected woman in Wang Khut, over one hundred and fifty people assembled at the house in which she had lived to hear eighteen bikkhus chant (*sūat*) for about forty minutes. While this took place several women continued with preparations in the kitchen area and food was passed around to all the guests as soon as the chants were completed. On this occasion a generator was rented to provide lighting and power a record player and powerful amplifier. A musician had also been hired and, after people had eaten, the festivities continued with dancing, drinking rice beer and conversation until late into the night. The evening was notable for the number of men who came, and also for the young people of both sexes who stayed on to watch and join in the dancing.

The following morning nearly two hundred people turned up to *sai bāt* at about seven thirty. On this occasion there was a higher proportion of old people and far more women than men. After the bikkhus were presented with food all the assembled laity ate what, by village standards, was an elaborate meal consisting of five main dishes plus rice. Taken together these two events involved a significant proportion of the population of Wang Khut plus a liberal smattering of kin and acquaintances of the dead woman from neighbouring settlements. Subsequently other *tham bun* rituals were held on her behalf.

As with many other aspects of social organisation in the area studied it is difficult to assess the exact importance of the part played by kinship in mortuary rituals. Kinship, or the language of kinship, is of general significance in the articulation of relations not just in the sphere of ritual practice. It is clear, though, that Kaufman's claim that members of the 'spatially extended family', that is those who once shared a common household in their youth, "function as one household during the various rites of passage which take place within any one of these scattered households" (1960: 23) is not necessarily true even with respect to death, the occasion when such joint

activities are most likely. The instance noted earlier where only a brother-in-law and none of her siblings came to Hua Kok on the death of a Nakhon Thai woman is a suitable illustration. Where siblings do maintain a close relationship with one another they sometimes cooperate very closely in jointly arranging and financing large scale ceremonies for their parents. Such a level of cooperation seems less likely when a sibling dies, though the assistance given may still be considerable. It is pertinent to note, though, that where large scale merit-making ceremonies are held they involve the participation of most households in the hamlet and many others in the immediate neighbourhood. Furthermore, those who provide help with the major tasks of preparing and cooking the food are by no means restricted to close kin though many of the friends and neighbours who provide this assistance will, of course, also be kin and affines of the organising household.

Approximately 75% of the males eligible to do so have spent between fifteen days and three years in the *wat*. As of 1969, to my knowledge, no-one from Hua Kok had been a *nēn*, novice, either before or in place of full ordination. The majority of bikkhus stay one full Lent in the order. Those who reside for less are ordained and leave before the start of *phansā*. The rituals of shaving the head, bathing and robing the ordinand (*nāk*), and the actual ordination itself take place at the temple. The *tham khwan nāk*, *chalāng phra*, and the sermon (*thēt*) which every bikkhu should read to his parents, are held in the hamlet normally in the secular home of the monk. The *chalāng*, a merit heaping festival (*kāng bun*) may be held immediately following ordination or sometime later, either before or after the Lent retreat. For some it is a major festival on an even larger scale than *tham bun* rites for the deceased. The headman went so far as to extend his house to accommodate more people, hired a folk opera troupe, and arranged through a Peace Corps Volunteer acquaintance of mine for some films to be shown.

Whereas there is no simple correlation between the hamlet as a local community and Buddhist institutions, merit-making activities form an integral part of the overall social organisation of the area. Buddhism constitutes an arena for the accumulation of prestige and the demonstration of one's standing in village society. It represents one of the few traditional means of social differentiation within the rural sphere other than through sex, kinship and age. The importance of this aspect of religious organisation has understandably declined with the development of the cash economy and pressures associated with it which have generated an unprecedented degree of inequality within village society. Nonetheless, the distinction between those who have been ordained as bikkhus and those who have not continues to be made in everyday conversations. Men who have been ordained are both addressed and referred to by the prefix *thit*, sometimes in conjunction

with a kin term as in *phī thit* x. [9] However, the convention that only men who have been in the Sangha may sit cross-legged is no longer observed, if it really ever was. Similarly, though the terms *dip*, raw (not yet ordained), and *suk*, ripe (one who has been a bikkhu), are sometimes used, the designation *suk*, while implying maturity and fitness for adult roles does not actually allocate any right to participate in adult affairs.

For a few, generally late middle-aged and elderly men, a certain knowledge of Pali, and an ability to read enables them to lead the temple congregation in its responses and officiate at ceremonies, activities which grant them some degree of importance in the local community. Such men often have other types of magical and ritual knowledge which allows them to practise as curers, officiate at *tham khwan* rites and so forth. However, by no means all who are ordained gain much knowledge, partly at least because of the short time that they remain in the *wat*. As noted earlier, a reputation as a practising Buddhist is one of the factors likely to be considered by villagers in the election of headmen. Certainly the present headman viewed it as one of his duties as *phū yāi bān* to play a conspicuous part in *wat* activities. Similar considerations may well have also played a part in the kamnan's sponsorship of the *kathin* ceremony at Bang Saphan in 1966.

It is necessary to emphasise that for these prominent men, as well as for adults in general, making merit is part of a system of social obligations as well as a means of accumulating prestige. The amounts of cash given are often publicly recorded. The inner walls of the *bōt* at Bang Saphan are decorated not with religious murals but with the names of the major donors and the sums contributed towards the cost of its construction. Similarly, it was planned to write the name of the purchaser on each of the new posts used in the reconstruction of the *sālā* at Wang Phom.

Sponsors of ceremonies held in Hua Kok sometimes keep a book in which all contributions are recorded and entries may be read aloud at some stage in the proceedings. When the headman held the *chalōng phra* for his bikkhus son, an attempt was made to register all gifts though as the evening progressed the friend who was helping joined in the festivities himself. All told some 700 baht were registered out of a total of 1,500. In fact, the headman's family knew of the source of much of the remainder which had come in larger sums from close kin (and the resident anthropologist). In a place like Hua Kok it is evident that the formalities of merit-making are less important than they sometimes are in Bang Saphan. In the latter, probably on account of its size, the wealth of some residents and proximity to the district headquarters and urban influences, the secular importance of merit-making as a prestige-gaining activity appears more pronounced. Nonetheless the

residents of a relatively egalitarian settlement like Hua Kok are very conscious of the command of resources required for financing a large event with feasting and entertainments even though donations may eventually cover a large proportion of the total expenditure.

Helping a household with its rituals, whether it be a *chalāng phra*, a *khā kan* wedding, or any of the ceremonies associated with death, places an obligation on the recipient to return help when so requested from the donor. Indeed, so far as financial contributions are concerned, this type of exchange in merit-making is referred to as *khun rāeng kan*, increasing strength, because a donor is supposed to receive more in a return offering than that originally given. Informants spoke of the return being double the original gift but in practice this is not so, though some do make a point of returning more than was received. Whereas there is nothing like 'fighting with merit', generosity in giving does earn people a good name and, as a corollary of this, those who do not provide well for a ceremony and receive more than they spend may be soundly criticised for their meanness.

It is frequently noted in the literature on Buddhism that the individual's capacity to make merit depends on the resources commanded, a rich man being able to accumulate far more than the proverbial poor widow because of the scale of his activities. Another aspect requiring mention is that merit-making is an activity of those who have the requisite knowledge as well as resources. Children who know little do not make much merit. A further point is that merit is made not just by the person who, for example, spoons out the food into the bikkhus' bowls when they make their morning rounds. It accrues to the whole household in so far as its members have in some way contributed towards the presentation. Finally, there is the belief that merit itself is something which can be transferred to others. The *kūatnam* rite, whereby the pouring of water transfers merit to the dead, and the ordination of monks on behalf of the dead, are two well-known cases of this. What is often overlooked is that merit can be transferred between living persons. For example, the headman's elder half-sister returned from the *wat* one *wan phra* when one of the wives had not been free to go herself and gave her some of the merit she had just made by simply saying "I have brought merit to share" (*ao bun mā phrāe*). This was accepted by the wife who gave a *wai* and the appropriate *pali* response. [10]

Given the general pattern of social organisation of Hua Kok, Buddhist activities neither create nor consolidate a narrow, well defined community. In terms of temple attendance, residents of Hua Kok are divided and incorporated into larger groupings. For local events the basis upon which they are organised is the individual sponsoring a ceremony, though usually in such a

way that one may speak of them as household rites. These rituals on some occasions involve very large numbers of people with a disproportionate number coming from the settlement of the organiser. Such events are major social occasions in the life of the hamlet. They also, by their nature which can involve lavish expenditure on food and entertainment, reflect and possibly consolidate social differentiation between individuals and households.

Finally, one may note a frequently voiced complaint that Buddhist festivals used to be a lot more fun in the old days. In 1967 the *songkrān* festivities were spoken of disparagingly because of the low numbers who attended. People also speak of the old river *kathin* presentations, of boat racing and of games between young people who are now said to be too shy to join in. Apart from being the complaints of an older generation it does seem that there is a decline in the importance of the recreational and social functions of Buddhist ceremonies. There are various possible explanations, one being the relative absence of the old isolation from urban and external influences in general which formerly marked rural life. Not only do villagers possess radios, they can also catch the bus and go to Phitsanulok for the day. Another is that with some events such as *khā kan* weddings, the existence of many varied opportunities for expenditure makes villagers less likely to invest in this type of social interaction than formerly.

Manipulating the Supernatural

As outlined above, the non-specifically Buddhist doctrinal elements of Thai religion can be classified as brahminical or animist in origin. For present purposes it is sufficient to consider them together: both provide explanations of phenomena in the absence of 'scientific' explanations and an inadequate technological ability to control the environment. Both also offer a solution to the problem of chance and provide a means of manipulating events to ensure good fortune and health. In so far as many of these practices are localistic and outside the supervision of any formal regional or national organisation, one might expect them to reflect local conditions more closely than is possible with supra-local institutions like the Sangha.

The supernatural intrudes into village life in a great variety of ways. Events such as marriage and raising a new house are often timed to occur on auspicious days. Almost all stages of rice cultivation can be marked by some simple ritual designed to ensure success. Sickness may be explained and treated in terms of the actions of spirits (*phī*), the withdrawal of the gods' (*thēwadā*) protective influence, or loss of a spirit of the body (*khwan*). Further treatments include the use of magical herbal medicines and other techniques practised by ritual specialists. There is also a whole host of

protective charms varying from privately recited formulas to tattoos and many types of amulet which make one invulnerable to bullets or knife wounds, or which ensure success in such ventures as winning the love of another.

In terms of the relation of all these beliefs and practices to the analysis of the social organisation of the area, it is important to note that none manifest any general communal characteristics in either Hua Kok or any of the neighbouring hamlets. Instead they involve the individual, household, productive group, or an informal set of friends and kin plus, in some cases, a ritual specialist whose services are being utilised. This does not, on the surface, appear at all unusual. Most of the communal collective rituals recorded by anthropologists in Thailand have a distinct regional or ethnic minority association. Hence Moerman has recorded the ritual closing off of the village to outsiders among the Thai Lue of Ban Ping (1969: 536) and several authors have remarked upon the major rain festivals in the northeast at which giant rockets are set off (Klausner 1974; Tambiah 1970).

However, belief in spirits is general to all Thai peoples and one may usefully inquire as to the circumstances in which this belief manifests itself in large-scale collective activities. The question is of particular significance in this case because in the neighbouring district of Wat Bot a number of settlements along the Kwae Noi, a tributary of the river Nan, do have such communal festivals. Moreover, so far as ethnic identity is concerned these hamlets are Thai in much the same way as the people of Hua Kok are and they inhabit a very similar ecological position in being riverine settlements backing on to rice fields.

According to Clark Cunningham, in all three villages which form a common temple congregation there is a shrine for the village spirit. In each there is an annual collective ceremony at the shrine as well as a yearly *tham bun klāng bān*. In Lao Khwan West (*mū thī* 3), the latter is held one morning in mid-May and the village spirit ceremony in the afternoon of the same day.

Just why such a ritual complex should occur in this area of Wat Bot and not Wang Thong is beyond the scope of my analysis. Nonetheless it does seem relevant that the settlements in this neighbourhood of Wat Bot district are major social units in a way in which they are clearly not in Hua Kok and its adjoining hamlets. In view of what I have written in preceding chapters of the different spheres of action in which Hua Kok residents participate and the varied sets of people involved, it is relevant to quote Cunningham at some length on the equivalent situation in Lao Khwan and its neighbours.

> Each of the three villages mentioned above is a discrete territorial entity; each is marked by a feeling of unity as 'neighbours' (*phūan*

> *bān*) in respect to other villages; each has a separately defined area of rice fields behind the village, each marks the limit for the formation of co-operative groups for aspects of rice-farming; each exhibits much intermarriage, though intra-villager kinship ties exist particularly between Lao Khwan East and West, and between Lao Khwan West and Tong Teh (*mū* 5) (Many settlers of the former village originated from the latter). Each village marks the limit of most 'close kinsmen' (*phī nâng chit*) who co-operate economically or in life-cycle ceremonies ...
>
> Each village, in many respects, represents a residential extension of the rice fields that lie behind it. Villagers, in the main, live where they do because they have had (or have made) a claim to a sufficient amount of rice land behind the village. Those who hold such a claim are tightly bound to the village and take part in the Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious rites which are devoted explicitly to the well-being of the village - its people, animals and fields (1966: 10-11).

In Hua Kok there is no hamlet shrine to a spirit though spirit houses (*sān*) are scattered about the countryside in the general vicinity. In other words, the basic conditions with respect to the existence of belief in spirits of places (*ĉhao thī*) and the practice of erecting houses or shrines for them in which offerings are placed do exist in Hua Kok. What has not happened is for one of these spirits of places to become identified with the place and people of Hua Kok. The immediate explanation for this could well be that none of the spirit mediums (*khon song*) through whom these spirits (*phī*) and their demands became known to men have indicated the existence of a powerful and troublesome spirit in the immediate neighbourhood who demonstrates his displeasure by attacking many different people. [11] Underlying this explanation, however, is the contrast between the settlements studied by Cunningham and Hua Kok and its neighbours in terms of the interlocking mesh of economic, political, familial and religious ties which, in the former settlements, result in relatively well-developed and discrete local communities. In so far as ritual may be interpreted as being a symbolic statement about social relations (cf. Leach 1965: 14) it seems plausible to argue for some close relationship between the existence or absence of collective rites at spirit shrines and the extent to which the social boundaries of the different spheres of action overlap and interlock.

As for the household, its significance as a social grouping is reflected in, and possibly strengthened by, rituals and beliefs associated with the erection of a house and the lives of its members. Where the household is also the

production group, rituals associated with rice cultivation reinforce further the household's identity. Nevertheless it is readily apparent that the general fluidity of domestic and familial organisation in Hua Kok is reflected in the relatively minor importance of these rituals in comparison with, for example, northeastern beliefs and practices.

Whenever a new house is erected offerings are automatically made to the spirits who (may) live on the house site. These spirits are referred to as *phra phum ĉhao thī*. The offering may take the form of a house (*sān*) or consist merely of a tray on a post onto which various items of food are placed. Unlike the practice in Phitsanulok, and to a lesser extent Wang Thong, the householder does not invite bikkhus to come and be fed and chant a blessing. Nor are the offerings made at the time of building to the *phra phum ĉhao thī* followed by others unless, in the course of investigating the causes of illness, a medium indicates that the spirit requires further gifts. [12]

A number of practices reflect the discreteness of the household as a social grouping despite its generally non-corporate nature. Spirits living there, the *phī rūan*, are likely to attack any stranger staying there causing him illness unless told by the normal residents that a guest will reside with them. Informants also suggested that these spirits are far more powerful among the Lao than among the Thai and that it is consequently dangerous to stay in a Lao household. Some of the spirits may be the ghosts of children of residents: one afternoon children's clothes were set out on the floor of the headman' house as an offering to some of his children's ghosts. One of the surviving children had been ill and in a seance to discover the reason these spirits had requested clothes. After a couple of hours the items were picked up and put away in their normal place.

The household is also involved in another curing technique termed *khao kam* which is a prohibition placed upon anyone entering a house other than those who normally live there. It is resorted to in cases of chronic sickness and is to be an attempt to ward off malevolent influences. Sometimes it is imposed on those coming from a particular direction. It is marked by a sign of platted bamboo placed at the entrance of the house. Should any stranger enter during the period of isolation then the condition of the sick person will deteriorate again unless the taboo is re-imposed afresh.

The place of rice in Thai culture is well recognised. In theory each stage of its production is marked by at least some simple ritual observance if only choosing a lucky day on which to commence some new phase of cultivation. These rituals are common to lowland Thai and the more important, those concerned with the spirit of the rice, have been recorded by many (cf. Tambiah 1970: 351-66 on *nāng phrakosop*, the female spirit of rice; also

Kaufman 1960: 201, 204-6). What should perhaps be stressed is that only rice agriculture is marked by this type of ritualisation. The cultivation of maize is pursued without any such observances. The rituals surrounding rice reveal a great deal about the Thai peasant's relationship with his staple foodstuff and at the same time mark the social discreteness of the production group which performs the rituals independently. Even when rice is stored jointly in a single granary (*yung*) each production unit invites the spirit of its rice to reside there.

Whereas the household is marked by ritual observances as in other regions, albeit less so than in some parts of the country, there are no wider kin-based rituals which link separate households of the kind noted by Klausner and Turton. Klausner writing of the northeast describes closely related (matrilaterally?) families having a guardian spirit which is told of the marriage plans of member families and which is presented with offerings after the completion of the marriage (1974: 23). Here, as in the matrilineal spirit cults among the Thai Yuan discussed by Turton (1972) we have a corporate identity among certain sets of kin, which far exceeds that found in Hua Kok or in the central region generally, being parallelled in the development of a system of spirit cults.

As indicated earlier, there is wide range of curing techniques which contain some magico-religious element. Among them is the belief that spirits causing illness can be communicated with by the use of spirit mediums (*khon song*) and persuaded to withdraw their troublesome influence. Seances (*tham yāi thāo*) are held to discover which spirits are responsible for the affliction and what they require in the way of food, liquor and other gifts. Later, if the person recovers, a second seance is held at which the spirits are feasted and presented with their demands. Sometimes offerings have to be made in specific places, for example at the cemetery at Bang Saphan, in which case the donor makes the presentation without the use of a medium.

All mediums in the area are late middle-aged or elderly women. They are said to have been chosen for the role by the spirits themselves, that is the familiar spirits, the *phī long*. Some women are known to seek to achieve the status of medium though not all who do so are successful. One who tried by feeding the spirits but failed to be accepted, was said to be insufficiently *čhai ān*, soft hearted (easily influenced, yielding, easily touched, Haas 1964: 128), for the spirits to use her. Biab, a widow (house 7) was the only medium living in Hua Kok though a couple of women from Wang Phom are also used. After Biab's death early in 1968, people were left wondering who the spirits might select to use in succession to her. It was expected that they would eventually choose some kinswoman whose calling would initially be

revealed by illness caused by the spirits. Until then Biab's spirit shelf, upon which she used to place offerings to her spirit familiars whose task it was to bring other spirits to seances, was left in her old home until such time as any successor would start to feed them again. [13]

Other methods of curing include the use of herbal medicines prepared by ritual specialists plus various techniques such as spitting sacred water over a painful part of the body and then stroking the area to draw out the pain. One farmer who had learnt a variety of magical herbal medicines from his father (which is the usual way in which this knowledge is transmitted) would also cover the sole of his foot with sacred oil, stand on a red hot plough-share, and then walk over the afflicted part of the patient, usually the legs. All these specialists who are referred to as *mā*, doctor, are men. The only women *mā* are midwives (*mā tham yāe*), but there are none resident in Hua Kok.

Men practising curing techniques are said to have *wichā*, knowledge, a word which implies a special ritual or magical knowledge in place of more secular types (*khwām rū*). It is also used for the incantations which grant protection from gunshot wounds or which make women fall irresistably in love with one. These various types of *wichā* incantation are passed on between kinsmen and close friends. Their effectiveness is to some extent dependent on the user's ritual state. It was said of the headman who had many *wichā* that he would not eat *tīn phī*, the food left over from spirit seances. [14] He had *wichā* for dealing with guns, knives, women and injections. The inclusion of the latter, modern innovation on this list is interesting though in a sense incorrect. He had learnt to give injections and select medicines by reading medical manuals prepared by the main drug companies. Consequently he practised as an injection doctor without the normal ritual observance of saluting the teacher (*wai khrū*) which precedes the pronouncement of magical incantations in curing and the practice of certain other skills such as playing musical instruments.

Sanctions

In spite of its prominence mediumship covers only one aspect of belief in spirits and their intrusion into the lives of villagers. Whereas there is some variation in the way in which individuals describe and discuss spirits and gods, belief in *phī* and *thēwadā* is common to all villagers. In other words, belief in supernatural beings in so far as it is general and compulsory for all villagers has the requisite characteristics for constituting the basis for religious sanctions (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 206). Certainly it appears that, given the weakness of many other types of sanction in Thai society, the

contribution of the belief in *phĩ* and *thēwadā* to the processes of social control is worth some consideration.

In so far as people require the services of bikkhus one might assume that this also shows a potential for the exercise of social sanctions. However, the potential does not appear to be expressed. A man may be refused entry into the Sangha but I heard of no such instances, nor had there been any other occasion on which bikkhus brought this kind of pressure to bear on any non-bikkhu individuals. However, some monks who had been found guilty of drinking liquor and in one instance of smoking opium, had been expelled by the *čhao khana amphōe*. The concepts of *bun* and *bāp*, merit and sin or demerit, plus belief in heaven (*sawan*) and hell play their part in social control but they are primarily of relevance in terms of the individual, his own particular fund of merit and the law of karma. In contrast, there is the immediacy of the threats associated with *phĩ* and *thēwadā* and it is this which seems to be of potentially considerable significance. Life continues with the protection of the *thēwadā* and the avoidance or countering of attacks by *phĩ*. As discussed with reference to mediumship, the attacks of *phĩ* may be due to their hunger or the absence of a place to live, their general capriciousness and malevolence, or it may be due to their anger at some wrong action.

The latter is clearly significant as a type of direct sanction, albeit as an *ex post facto* explanation. It can also be argued that fear of malevolent spirits sometimes reinforces the morality of correct behaviour by leading to conscious avoidance of situations of attack by dangerous spirits. In a somewhat involved discussion about the trickster spirits (*phĩ lāk*) that might be encountered when out alone at night it was said that a man could scare them away by exposing his genitals, that is, men have an effective means of avoiding harm. The question as to what women would do in such circumstances met with the response that women do not go out alone at night. In other words, here is a set of beliefs about spirit attack which reinforces a moral code concerning the more circumspect behaviour required of women.

As for attacks by spirits as a direct response to misbehaviour, a child's illness was explained as due to his having played about at school. In so doing he annoyed the spirit of a tree that was now part of a boat stored nearby. The anger of the spirit with the lazy child was eventually revealed in a seance held to discover which spirits were causing his illness.

To villagers the importance of *thēwadā* lies mainly in the belief that they provide care and protection but cease to exercise their benevolent influence when annoyed. Thus the frequently cited penalty for incest is that the *thēwadā mai raksā*, the gods do not take care of one, the consequences

of this withdrawal being misfortune and death. The same phrase is used with respect to a variety of social wrongs among which is dirtiness. I was told that *thēwadā* come and look around the house at night and are displeased by dirt. My attention was then drawn to a somewhat sluttish young woman who had an unusually grubby child whose unhealthiness was linked to the displeasure of *thēwadā*.

The penalty for misdeeds is frequently expressed in terms of merit or demerit and consequent suffering after death. The idea of one's rebirth being affected by good or evil acts is not used by villagers to reinforce morality and, indeed, it is a subject with which they are hardly concerned and of which they are very unsure. Whether one goes to heaven or hell and what this entails is, in contrast, a subject of general concern. The general reaction of neighbours to the man who attacked his father with a knife was that it was *bāp māk*, very sinful, and that he would surely go to hell. One informant also added that bikkhus taught that anyone who struck his parents would, after death, become a spirit with grotesquely huge hands, *mū̧ yāi bai yān*, hands as large as *yān* leaves, while one who cursed his parents would have a mouth like the eye of a needle.

One might cite numerous other examples of supernatural sanctions: what is worth stressing here is their importance as part of the process of social control. In the absence of dominating secular economic and political reasons for abiding by the ideal norms of, for example, the family, one finds that misdeeds are described and gossiped about in terms of the supernatural sanctions that befall offenders. So an informant explained that in sermons monks emphasise that it is a sin (*bāp*) for an unmarried woman to have a child and on another occasion others spoke in similar terms of a mentally retarded girl who had been impregnated. Sometimes, what may be legally sanctioned is not permissible according to villagers' own beliefs. The marriage of first cousins is legally permitted but incestuous according to local norms. The supernatural sanction of the withdrawal of the protection of *thēwadā* was, in this instance, thought to be very effective in Hua Kok at the time of fieldwork, the child of a guilty couple having died at birth and the mother soon afterwards (cf. Chapter 2: Marriage Rules).

Reference is frequently made to villagers' fatalistic attitude and the way in which this is linked to ideas of karma (cf. Ingersoll 1966). In the light of the examples cited above it seems a little surprising that more emphasis has not been placed on the way and extent to which villagers resort to the supernatural to explain misfortune and, where possible, counter it. Villagers may well be fatalistic in many respects but the belief in spirits apart from constituting a system of social sanctions also provides the villager with a means of

ameliorating his condition.

Notes

1. Bunnag (1973); Kaufman (1960); Kingshill (1965); Quaritch Wales (1931); Tambiah (1970).

2. Mulder (1969); Tambiah (1968); Mole (1973).

3. Cf. Evans-Pritchard's discussion of the inheritance of witchcraft substance among the Azande (1937: 24-5) for what is in many ways a comparable situation.

4. Other wordliness does not simply mean concerns which transcend the present existence, or rebirth, or existence in the heavens of *devas*, but a liberation from sentient existence (Tambiah 1970: 40).

5. The propitiation of spirits often amounts to little more than a crude bribe of food and liquor to cause a spirit to withdraw its malevolent influence.

6. By no means every temple has an annual fair. Those usually attended by Hua Kok people are at Wang Thong, Samo Kheng which is located not far from Wang Thong just off the road to Phitsanulok, and at *wat yāi*, the main temple in Phitsanulok which holds the largest fair in the province if not the north-central region.

7. The preparations were not wasted in the sense that all the food was eaten and enjoyed. Many of the special dishes prepared by villagers are supposedly for making merit though much of that which is cooked is consumed by household members and friends.

8. The enumeration of precepts is a little different from that normally cited, as for example in Humphries (ed.)(1956) which specifies them in the form they take for novices, that is, those observing the Ten Precepts. The "former Eight are made into nine by splitting the precept on shows and ornaments and one other is added; to refrain from handling gold and silver" (Khantipalo 1968: 96).

9. By way of contrast Bunnag notes that in Ayuthaya, where there are many other criteria of differentiation available for categorising individuals, the term *thit* is not used (1971: 10).

10. This act can be interpreted as a non-economic return by the sister who was poor and often received help from the headman's household, especially from the wife to whom she transferred merit.

11. Normally these spirits only attack those who own the area immediately around where they live. The role of the medium in the adoption of a spirit as being of the local community and not a particular plot of land appears crucial in that it is through her that a spirit takes responsibility for causing illness. As an informant said when discussing spirit attack, *thā khon pūai kọ thū, thā mai pūai mai thū*, "If a person is ill then he believes in/respects (the spirits), if he is well he does not".

12. The spirit house at which incense is burned and small offerings, made is a prominent feature of urban domestic (and often commercial) architecture. In contrast, the only prominent *sân* of a *phra phum ĉhao thî* in Hua Kok belonged to a man who had suffered an extended period of illness.

13. It is my impression that women in Hua Kok and the surrounding settlements are not especially prone to possession and other hysterical or trance-like states. In this they differ markedly from those studied by Stephen Piker in Banoi, Ayuthaya. Piker associated the high level there with two factors, orality and female sexual frustration. A more sociological interpretation would be in terms of the relative social deprivation of women (cf. I.M. Lewis 1971).

14. Some *wichā* are known to women though their use appears to be an essentially male role.