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Interpreting a Cosmology: Guardian Spirits in Thai Buddhism

Abstract. — *This paper argues that the Thai hierarchy of guardian spirits can and should be incorporated in a Buddhist conceptual order. Reasons for intra-cultural diversity in the labelling of and behavior toward guardian spirits in a Central Thai village may be traced to canonical sources and cosmological structure. A set of principles underlying the villagers' classification of supernatural beings are proposed demonstrating how ambiguities permit alternate orderings of spirits. Ethnographic and textual evidence are combined in this argument. Finally, this argument raises questions of broader theoretical interest in cultural anthropology regarding the relation between cognition and action, and the use of folk taxonomies. [Thailand, Buddhism, Cosmology, Supernatural Beings]*

No anthropologist who has worked in Thailand would underestimate the importance of guardian spirits in Thai religion. From the elaborate shrines northeast of the Grand Palace, and the Erawan Hotel in Bangkok, to the makeshift stands in most rural compounds, these spirits are well housed. Western interpreters of Thai religion, however, are not agreed on the nature of these spirits. In a recent monograph on Thai Buddhism Terwiel argues that the "basic magico-animism which characterizes tribal T'ai also underlies the religion of the farmers in lowland Thailand" (1975: 21). The theory arguing that Buddhism is only a thin veneer over a more pervasive animism is not dead. Building on earlier similar arguments, Terwiel, in his analysis of religious ceremonies in central Thailand, has returned to this position. This essay will argue that guardian spirits can and should be incorporated in a

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Buddhist conceptual order. In fact, spirits, and specifically guardian spirits, are referred to in the Buddhist canon, a fact that argues against "vener" theory of Buddhism in Thailand. Secondly, this study suggests that guardian spirits may be the vehicle by which nature and locality spirits and Hindu deities were integrated into a single Buddhist world view. This should in no way obscure the fact that spirits are an integral part of the belief system of Theravada Buddhism today. The study was prompted by recognition of extensive intra-cultural diversity (Pelto and Pelto 1975) in the labelling of and behavior toward spirits, particularly guardian spirits, in a Thai community. I will propose some of the principles which underlie the villager's classification of supernatural beings, showing where the ambiguities exist. But the guardian spirit "problem" also raises of broader theoretical interest regarding the relation between cognition and action and the use of folk taxonomies.

The problem of how to understand the system of categorization of supernatural beings came to my attention while studying the rituals installing guardian spirits.¹ I was unable to discover whether these guardian spirits were *phī* (ghosts) or *thēwadā* (deities).² My initial problem, then, was to define the extent and composition of the important domain of spirits. I attempted to define the guardian spirits spatially in a cosmological framework and to determine whether they were "good" or "bad." Clearly, moral attributes and spatial location of these spirits were important characteristics to my informants, but they did not provide the basis for a hierarchical ordering of spirits (cf. Endicott 1970: 98-100 for similar difficulties ordering the Malay spirit pantheon). Eventually, I realized that this category of guardian spirits were *phī* to some people, and *thēwadā* to others, and my attempts to anchor guardian spirits in one category or another world would distort and oversimplify the interpretations given me by the villagers. There was no consensus on the labelling of guardian spirits and conflicting criteria for establishing attributes defining the categories of *phī* and *thēwadā*.

Thus, I faced an immediate problem in the interpretation of guardian spirits. Before looking at how other scholars have resolved this difficulty, I consider briefly the Hindu-Buddhist cosmological structure. The boundaries and levels of the world of sensuous desires (*kāmaloka*) appear very clearly

¹ Fieldwork in Thailand was conducted in a large village in Uthong district, Suphanburi province, from June 1971 to January 1972 under the auspices of the National Research Council of Thailand. Funds were provided by a training grant from the Department of Anthropology, and a fellowship from the Center for Asian Studies, University of Illinois. My husband continued study of village religion in 1973-74, while I was involved in another research project elsewhere. Much of my work has benefitted from his criticism and from the opportunity to revisit the village while he worked there. I wish to thank F. K. Lehman, who stimulated the theoretical approach used here, and also advised me while I was in the village.

² Transcription of Thai words is based on the form standardized in Skinner and Kirsch (eds.) 1975. However, I have, at times, followed conventional usage or forms used by authors I am quoting, at the expense of consistency.

defined. The upper six worlds are inhabited by *thēwadā* (deities) residing on the upper slopes of Mount Meru and above. Beneath the world of humans, animals, suffering ghosts (*peta*), and demons (*asura*), is located an increasingly hideous series of eight hells (cf. Tambiah 1970: 36-9; King 1964: 113). This cosmology, described in the fourteenth century Thai text, *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang* (*Trai Phūm Phra Ruang*; Reynolds and Reynolds n.d.), is widely known in rural Thai villages. Guardian spirits are not anchored in this structure, although in another sense, they can be located at several levels in this cosmology. In their relatively undefined position, they fill the interstices of cosmological and political space, linking the two systems metaphorically.

1. The Supernatural World and Its Interpreters

The wide variety of interpretations of the spirit world given by Thai villagers is reflected in the difficulty scholars have recognized in defining *phī*, *thēwadā*, and guardian spirits. B.C. Law concluded his *Buddhist Conception of Spirits* with the observation that there is a continuous grading of goodness and evil in the spirits, with *thēwadā* “having a preponderance of good and meritorious deeds in their favour, though they are tainted, at least in the lower ranks, with some stain of evil which they have got to work out” (1936: 107f.). Between the lowest of the *thēwadā* and the highest of the *peta* there is “hardly any line of cleavage” (108). Tambiah (1970) notes that spirits addressed as *chao phā* (respected father) are a mixture of *phī* and *thēwadā* since the border between the two is vague. Yet he still opposes *phī* and *thēwadā*. He simplifies the analysis by admitting that *phī* are differentiated into good and bad, but *thēwadā* are treated as a single class. He does not deal with the fact that guardian spirits may be treated as respected deities. Kaufman (1960), too, notes that the villagers of Bangkhuaed could not explain the distinction between *phī* and *thēwadā*, and gives the guardian spirit of the house compound as an example, making no attempt to account for the ambiguity. Kirsch (1967) uses a syncretic approach that distinguishes animistic, Brahmanistic, and Buddhist subsystems. He suggests that animistic locality spirits are being up-graded to Brahman deities. These, in turn, are transformed and given Buddhist meaning. By this “upgrading” of spirits (or Buddhization; Kirsch 1967), a *phī* may be transformed into a *thēwadā*.

Attagara (1967), approaching the question as a Thai, recognizes that villagers find it difficult to distinguish ghosts from deities and concludes that the people solve the problem by lumping all supernatural agents together as *phī*. She gives historical evidence to suggest that in its earliest usage, *phī* referred to both *phī* and *thēwadā*. Her example is the powerful *Phra Khaphung*, the guardian spirit of the fourteenth century Thai kingdom of Sukhothai. Her evidence suggests that since the earliest Thai kingdoms guardian spirits have been an ambiguous category capable of interpretation either as *phī* or *thēwadā*.

Attagara's work supports the views of the authority on supernatural entities, as on so many aspects of Thai traditions, Phya Anuman Rajadhon, who writes (1954: 154) that "the dividing line between gods and devils, like men, is a thin one which is a matter of varying degree." He bases this ambiguity on the historical development of Buddhism replacing an earlier animism. He writes: "It followed that all the good *phī* of the Thai had by now become *thēwadā* or gods in their popular use of the language. The generic word '*phī*' therefore, degenerated into a restricted meaning of bad *phī* (1954: 153). Clearly, the spirit hierarchy is relevant to an understanding of Thai religion and world view, but there is little agreement in the literature about the nature of the spirit hierarchy or how guardian spirits should be classified. In our concern with classifying and defining *phī* and *thēwadā*, perhaps we have missed the most significant point about guardian spirits. By their ambiguous position, guardian spirits are capable of interpretation in more than one way.

2. Guardian Spirits as *phī*

Guardian spirits are interpreted by some Thai as *phī* (ghosts). This statement alone conveys very little information, since *phī* itself is an ambiguous category, as the following examples illustrate. Great ambiguity surrounds the spirits known as *phī prēt* (Pali: *peta*). These spirits have been reborn in the realm of suffering ghosts between the realms of the animals and the *asura* (demons) in the *kāmaloka* world, the world of sensuous desire. In the villagers' terms, these spirits do not have enough demerit to cause them to be reborn in one of the lower hells nor enough merit to be reborn in the human or heavenly levels. Even though they inhabit another realm in the *kāmaloka* world, they may wander into the realm of humans where villagers occasionally claim to encounter them. In fact, the *phī prēt* wander into the human realm for the express purpose of gaining merit. According to the villagers, they cannot gain merit for themselves by listening to the words of the Buddha, but must rely on humans to share their merit with them. These villagers attending a temple service do, by means of a ritual known as *kruat nām* whereby Buddhists share merit with all living beings (cf. Wells 1960: 118). Their interaction with *phī prēt* is in a Buddhist context.

Phī prēt are terrifying beings, gruesomely described in the sermons and illustrated in pictures in the preaching hall. One villager explained that you do not need to feed *phī prēt* and you cannot bribe them with food, but if you meet one, you can say, "please don't scare me—I will make merit and transfer it to you." These *phī*, then, only need a small amount of merit to be reborn in a higher realm. They are ambiguous transitional category of spirits, fixed in a level between the hells and the human realm. They are labelled *phī* but not treated as other *phī*. A Thai villager learns that *phī prēt* are cruel ghosts but no personal incidents suggested reasons to fear *phī prēt*, as one would fear other cruel *phī*.

A second scriptural source of potential ambiguity about *phī* could be the guardian spirits of one of the subhells described in the *Trai Phūm*. There is a category of semi-permanent guardians who have done both virtuous and sinful deeds and, as a result, spend fifteen days a month as guardians inflicting punishment on others and fifteen days as victims of the same punishment. Some of these beings are *phī prēt* for the waxing moon and *thēwadā* for the waning moon. The existence of such a category of spirits provides an excellent argument against those who conceptualize *phī* and *thēwadā* as fixed categories representing absolute and opposed spiritual beings that can be represented in a taxonomy.

The scriptures acknowledge the existence of spirits although they do not specify their nature or the extent of their power (cf. *Khuddaka-nikaya*, *Petavatthu*). Similarly, the scriptures provide limited means of protection against them in the form of *paritta* (protective verses). Since these spirits are not clearly defined in the scriptures, there is room for a variety of interpretations as to their origin and nature. Their existence is not defined, but the details are left for the individual to fill in for himself.

Villagers are able to account for a category of good spirits (*phī dī*) who can be supplicated and help solve daily problems such as lost cattle or sick children. *Phī dī* are most commonly those spirits who are associated with a particular territory and have fixed duties to protect and help those residing in their territory. If a villager can define the responsibilities and duties of a *phī*, then he usually interacts with them positively.

A few villagers accounted for the existence of good spirits by referring to the account of the existence of premature death recorded in the *Question of King Milinda* (Rhys-David 1963). In this text, which is familiar to the villagers through sermons, King Milinda asks,

“Venerable Nagasena, when beings die, do they all die in fulness of time or do some die out of due season?” And Nagasena replies, “There is such a thing, O King, as death at the due time and such a thing as premature death” (Rhys-David 1963: 162).

In the words of one old woman, people may die of old age when they “should” (Pali: *upayakāya*), that is, when *Phra Yamarat* (*Yama*, god of death) calls them. They are then reborn in the appropriate realm depending on their past merit. But some people die of accidents or illness before *Phra Yamarat* calls them. These people (Pali: *upaccheda kāmākāya*) become *phī* who wander freely until *Phra Yamarat* calls them to be reborn. If they had more demerit than merit at the time of their death, they will become evil spirits; if they had more merit, they will become good spirits. This interpretation allows for free wandering, spirits who are benevolent, and it can be traced to a well known scriptural source, although the villager version is phrased with an animate actor, *Yama*, who records the appropriate time of death.

Fig. 1

The creation of "bad and good" *phī*

1. Natural Death (Pali: <i>upayakāya</i>)	Birth _____→ <i>Phra Yamarat</i> calls	Death _____→	normal rebirth
2. Unnatural Death (Pali: <i>upaccheda kāmākāya</i>)	Birth _____→	Death _____→ <i>Phra Yamarat</i> calls + demerit	dangerous <i>phī</i>
3. Unnatural Death (Pali: <i>upaccheda kāmākāya</i>)	Birth _____→	Death _____→ <i>Phra Yamarat</i> calls + merit	good <i>phī</i>

Guardian spirits addressed as *phī* are described as immoral and untrustworthy, emotional, unreasonable, and, just like humans, a little stupid. They are quite easily fooled: "You may promise them one hundred eggs if they assist you, then give them only one egg" (cf. Endicott 1970: 55). They can be bribed and will help those residing in their territory only if the individuals have shown respect to the guardian spirits. But the help and protection they give does not depend on Buddhist morality. If ever an individual begins honouring and feeding a guardian spirit and then stops, he is in great danger. However, if a reciprocal relationship was never set up in the first place, the guardian spirit will not harm him nor will he give him protection. Guardian spirits addressed as *phī*, are treated as *phī* and given offerings appropriate for *phī*, such as whiskey, cigarettes, meat, dishes, and an unappetizing spicy, sour, fish mixture.

To summarize, guardian spirits can be interpreted as good or bad spirits (*phī*), behaving morally or immorally. In making sense out of the spirit world, villagers must be able to account for *phī prēt* who are feared but do not interfere in this world, guardian *prēt* who spend part of their time as *phī* and part as *thēwadā*, and good spirits (*phī dī*) who can actively protect individuals residing in their territory. These latter guardians are more likely to be trusted because they are perceived of as being under the control of a "patron." Villagers can describe guardian spirits labelled as *phī* as being good, bad, or neutral depending on the context. There is a body of lore and personal experience that allows a villager to interact with these spirits in an appropriate way. Further, these interpretations cannot be dismissed as individual perversions, underlying animism, or even ignorant "folk Buddhism," since there are scriptural references for villager's interpretations. More importantly, they are representative of the way people interpret their cultural categories. Ambiguity, paradox, contradiction are all potential interpretative strategies for categories as complex as guardian spirits.

3. Guardian Spirits as *thēwadā*

There are also contradictions concerning the category of spirits labelled as *thēwadā*, a term that includes both the Hindu-derived deities and the unnamed *thēwadā* who live in the heaven because of the merit accumulated in their past lives. These unnamed *thēwadā* are the ones that villagers interact with most regularly.

The Hindu-derived deities, such as *Phra In* (Indra), and *Phra Phrom* (Brahma) represent a pantheon of permanent positions or slots which are filled by a progression of beings who take up such a position because of their accumulation of merit in past lives. The “offices,” much like the political hierarchy of village headman, district officer, and governor, are permanent, but the slots are filled by a succession of different people. Gombrich (1971: 181) also notes the analogy between the human and the divine power structure in Ceylon. Since even low level *thēwadā* live for the equivalent of millions of years, it is not surprising that these spirits are considered permanent.

Included among these *thēwadā* are nine guardian spirits with jurisdiction over different kinds of territory. Using the Pali or Sanskrit versions of their names, these guardians include *Jayamangala*, with jurisdiction over houses; *Nagararāja*, with jurisdiction over doors, forts, and ladders; *Devathera*, with jurisdiction over domestic animals; *Jayasabana*, with jurisdiction over food and stored rice; *Gandharva*, protector of marriage; *Dharmahorā*, with jurisdiction over garden plots; and *Dāsadhāra*, with jurisdiction over bodies of water.

To most villagers, the guardians of the house, fields, temples, and stored rice are relevant, but their names are not often known. Only the guardian of the house compound can generally be given his full title, *Phra Chai Mong Khon* (Sanskrit: *Jayamangala*). The ritual specialists³ have texts which use the Sanskrit or Pali titles, and they can associate these guardians with certain astrological configurations, in order to invoke the protection of the guardians and to choose appropriate days for initiating activities within their territory, such as building a house or transplanting rice, for example. These guardians were described as the servants of the *kāmaloka* world who reside just below Indra’s heaven at the summit of Mount Meru (cf. Tambiah 1970: 37). They are anchored in the cosmological structure.

The conventional, common sense meaning of *thēwadā* refers to a “relatively undifferentiated category of divine benevolent agents” (Tambiah 1970: 60). It is this category of unnamed spirits that is invited to the temple and to ceremonies in the home to offer a general benevolent protection to those practicing Buddhist morality. But this general class of *thēwadā* can also provide guardian spirits, as will be seen later.

³ My primary concern in the field was the study of “Brahmanic” ritual, and Brahmanic knowledge. The ritual specialists were described as being “like Brahmans” and officiate at rites of passage such as weddings, tonsures, and pre-ordination celebrations.

Included in the category *thēwadā* are *somutthithēp*, gods by their position in this world, the king and the royal family. Possessing some traits similar to guardian spirits, the King is viewed as the protector of Buddhism and the boundaries of a Buddhist kingdom. Similarly, the term *wisutthithēp* labels a category of pure gods who obtain the status of a god in this life, including the Buddha and the saints who have reached *nirvana*. Although residing in the human realm, these can be labelled *thēwadā*.

Those who label guardian spirits as *thēwadā* perceive of them as an integral part of Buddhist order and describe them as subservient to but supportive of the Buddha. These guardians, then, can only assist those practising Buddhist morality. According to a popular abbot in Uthong district, *all* guardian spirits are worthy of respect as *thēwadā* since they have all finished the eighth perfection (Pali: *pārami*-perfections) and are stream winners (Pali: *sotāpatti* "stream entry"). By their great accumulation of merit, they may be reborn as *thēwadā* with "offices" such as *Phra Phrom* (Brahma) or *Phra In* (Indra). These guardian spirits interpreted as *thēwadā* are conceived of as moral, dependable, benevolent, and powerful creatures worthy of honour and respect because of their merit accumulated in past lives. They are offered vegetarian food gift for a *thēwadā*, such as young coconuts, boiled eggs, and pink and white sweets.

A label such as *thēwadā* does not simply apply to supernatural entities of high moral standards. It includes kings and members of the royal family, as well as the saints who may reside in the human realm, deities of the Hindu pantheon converted to Buddhism, such as *Indra*, *Brahma*, and the world guardians; spirits of humans reborn in the heavenly realms by virtue of their merit accumulated in past lives; and even "bad" *thēwadā* capable of harming or tempting humans (we might include *Māra* here).⁴ To further complicate the ordering, monks and lay devotees who keep Buddhist precepts are often interpreted as morally superior to the *thēwadā* inhabiting a higher realm, for they have the opportunity to make merit.

4. The Creation of Guardian Spirits

Although guardian spirits are labelled as *phī* by some individuals, and as *thēwadā* by others, villagers have no difficulty in behaving appropriately to the guardians. Individual Thai villagers, then, are able to construct a hierar-

⁴ Tambiah cites a Burmese legend, which was also recited to him by villagers in northeast Thailand, in which *Māra* is converted to Buddhism by *Upagupta* (Tambiah 1970: 176). The legend of *Upagupta* converting *Māra* was not familiar to village religious "experts" in Uthong district. The figure of *Māra* is indeed complex and ambiguous, but he was not consistently described as the enemy of the Buddha, much as Ferguson and Johannsen (1976: 650f.) described in Buddhist murals. I concur with Falk's statement that *Māra* never became a servant of the Buddha. He remains the "perpetual antagonist" (13). Several villagers explained the existence of "evil" *thēwadā* analogously to their explanation for good *phī* (Figure 1).

chy of guardian spirits. I have not yet demonstrated the logic by which these spirit hierarchies are organized, nor have I demonstrated how this hierarchy can be related to political and social order. To do this, it will be necessary to examine the creation of guardian spirits.

A free-wandering spirit can be committed permanently to a specific territory by a ritual converting the spirit to a guardian spirit. Guardian spirits interpreted as *phī* originate from victims killed before the end of their allotted lifespan. Such installation rituals set up a patron-client relation between a spirit-client and his human patron who needs super-natural assistance. Villagers can cite stories of rich men who murdered a client and charged him with the responsibility for protecting a treasure against spirit or human encroachment. These guardian spirits are dangerous only to those who would disturb the treasure they guard. Stories such as *Khun Chang, Khun Phan* (Simmonds 1963), set in Suphanburi province, describe these spirit guardians.

Similarly, throughout the history of the Thai kingdom, victims were sacrificed to protect the gates on the cities. These intentionally murdered victims—commonly pregnant women—were also used to create the *Chao Phī Lak Mūēang* (Lord father of the city post) and were buried under the city shrine. Wales (1931: 302 f.) also refers to the shrine of *Chao Cet*, another guardian spirit of Bangkok maintained until 1919, who was “a true *phī* since he was manufactured by the sacrifice of a suitable individual.” But guardian spirits may also be created after natural death. Such spirits are usually considered benevolent and labelled *thēwadā*. For example, some villagers argued that the guardian spirit of the house compound was the *winyān* (consciousness) of the first cultivators of that piece of land. In a similar manner, the deceased abbot of the village temple is described by most villagers and some monks as the guardian spirit of the temple. Since the abbot was addressed as *Phra* during his life, a term reserved for objects full or merit, most villagers associated this guardian spirit with *thēwadā* and other high status guardian spirits.

Phra Chao Uthong (King of Uthong), the guardian spirit associated with the ancient royal city of Uthong, was described by a famous abbot of a local temple as a composite of all the *winyān* of the most powerful kings of the Uthong dynasty. Although created in the same manner as the household and temple guardian spirit, *Phra Chao Uthong* and *Phra Siam Thevothirat* (guardian deity of the kingdom) could not be classified as a *phī* by the villagers because of their royal status and their term of address—*Phra*.

Kirsch, in an insightful essay, has linked the religious and the political domain topped by the king pointing out that they are both separated from and above the secular realm. Thus monks, Buddha statues, and Kings are classified as *ong* (*mana*-filled) powerful objects and are addressed as *Phra* (1975: 187). Guardian spirits addressed as *Phra* are conceptually linked to persons or objects of great merit, and are referred to as *thēwadā*.

For example, the guardian spirit of the kingdom, *Phra Siam Thevothirat*, is a composite spirit composed of the *winyān* of the most powerful kings

of Thai history—specifically those that successfully defended the boundaries of the kingdom against invaders. According to several villagers, the guardian of the kingdom includes *Rāmkhamhāeng* (1276-1317), *Naresuan* (1590-1605), *Narai* (1656-1688), *Taksin* (1767-1782), and *Chulalongkorn* (Rama 5, 1868-1910),⁵ although many of the villagers did not know his term of address and just referred to him as the guardian spirit of the kingdom.

5. Guardian Spirits as Ordered Hierarchies

Guardian spirits, whether interpreted as *phī* or *thēwadā*, are a part of Buddhist civilized order. They protect those within their territory from unconverted hostile spirits. These guardian spirits can be further transformed into guardians with larger territorial jurisdiction if they are incorporated into the political administration by rituals of consecration, such as the coronation of a king (cf. Gerini 1895; Wales 1931; Tambiah 1976). They are thus incorporated into the political domain of a Buddhist polity and are in fact prerequisites for Buddhist social order. Tambiah (1976: 73) documents the relation between Buddhism and polity in Thailand. He cites Mus who writes that the main purpose of a state religion “seems to have been the authentication of the whole system, enlisting as it did, at ground level, the tutelary spirits and genii of the commonfolk.” Hanks expresses the hierarchial relation between the guardians as he describes a farmer offering food and flowers to a local guardian spirit.

Yet this simple ceremony without the preceding royal plowing rites at the capital may well be ineffectual. The king in his capacity as Lord of the Flatness of the Earth addresses higher beings in the hierarchy of gods and angels . . . with word passed on from on high, the many local guardians are prepared to assist in every valley and backwater (Hanks 1972: 78).

A villager, then, knows that there is some order to guardian spirits although he may not know the appropriate labels. There are several possible analogies which may be used to aid interpretation of guardian spirits. These analogies may be known to a limited segment of the population, and appear in my field notes as isolated, esoteric pieces of knowledge, superficially at least, unconnected to the organization of ideas held by the majority of villagers. This field data can be accounted for by viewing the concept of territorial domains and their spirit guardians as encompassing seven structural levels. Labels for guardian spirits could potentially be drawn from the level of the house, house compound, village locality, province, kingdom, and *kāmaloka* world. Each level has its own guardians but the organization of guardian spirits is structurally similar on all levels (cf. J. Van Esterik 1972,

⁵ Two informants included another King, Boromracha (1370-1388), who was Prince of Suphanburi, marched his troops from Suphanburi, and took over Ayudhya (Kasetsiri 1976: 109).

on the structural similarity of the rituals installing these guardians). The guardians of the lower level domains, such as house, compound, and village are usually interpreted as *phī*, while the higher level domains, such as province, kingdom, and *kāmaloka* worlds are guarded by more powerful and higher status spirits interpreted as *thēwadā*. Those villagers who have a wider knowledge of the world outside the village are more likely to apply the name of a higher level guardian to a guardian of a lower domain. Thus, knowledge of the guardians of different domains is not evenly distributed in the village. Levels of relevance to most villagers are guardians of the house compound, village, and locality. Some are aware of the cosmological analogies with the guardian of the *kāmaloka* world. Others are aware of the political importance of the guardians of the district and provincial centres. Not all villagers label the spirit hierarchy in exactly the same way, as a consideration of the labels applied to the guardian spirits of the house compound demonstrates. Villagers referred to this spirit as *phī chao thī*, *chao thī*, *phī ban*, *Phra Phūm*, *Phra Phūm chao thī*, and *Phra Chai Mong Khon*. The first three terms are used by the villagers that consider the guardian spirit a *phī*, and treat him accordingly. The latter three terms are used by villagers that treat the guardian spirit as a *thēwadā*. The few who knew the term *Phra Chai Mong Khon* (almost always ritual specialists) identified the guardian spirit with the world protectors of *kāmaloka* (sensual world). It is consistent with the villager's treatment of and belief in guardian spirits to consider that the variety of labels given to the guardian of the house compound stems from the fact that several domains have guardian spirits occupying the same structural position. Thus, labels for a higher domain, such as the *kāmakola*, can be applied to the analogous guardian of a lower domain, such as a house compound.

Fig. 2

The domains of territorial guardian spirits, hierarchically ordered



As a part of the cosmological system, guardian spirits link the ideological and political realms, and are an integral part of a Theravada Buddhist state (cf. Heine-Geldern 1956; Tambiah 1976). However, knowledge about the labelling and meaning of this cosmology is not distributed evenly in the village. Those practitioners possessing Brahmanic knowledge (P. Van Esterik 1973: 117) are more likely to label the domains “correctly” and in more detail. The farmer knows that he is protected by a myriad of spirits, but he may only have occasion to know the names of a few.

6. Conclusion

Knowledge of guardian spirits is not evenly distributed in this Thai community. Yet all villagers can interpret guardian spirits in a way that could be understood by other villagers. There is a single conceptual structure underlying the variety of behavior toward and labelling of spirits, which allows a villager to generalize about them, and serves as a reference for the interpretations of guardian spirits as either *phī* or *thēwadā* or both. There are clearly canonical inputs into this conceptual structure, but references to spirits in the canon are themselves ambiguous (recall the *phī prēt*, the guardians of the hells, references to Indra, etc.).

It is no longer possible to take refuge in an outmoded theory of Thai animism to avoid more complex analysis of Thai spirits. Analysts must make use of scriptural sources if they wish to understand Thai religious belief and practice, because Thai villagers can and do make use of such sources themselves. It is only by examining the ambiguities and paradoxes in the system of spirits that an analyst (or a villager, for that matter) can begin to discern the principles of ordering guardian spirits and assigning them meaning. Some of the principles underlying the order include the following:

1) Guardian spirits can be interpreted as *phī* or *thēwadā*, depending on their perceived merit level. Those incorporated into the higher levels of the political hierarchy are viewed as supporters of Buddhism, and labelled *thēwadā*. They include spirits that have been described as being derived from the "Brahmanical substratum." Guardians with fixed duties and bounded territories are considered "controlled" and therefore dependable. Guardians interpreted as *phī* are perceived as having a low merit level and are capable of disrupting Buddhist order. Because they are not "controlled," and may have few fixed duties, their behavior is more unpredictable.

2) But neither guardians as *phī* or *thēwadā* can be distinguished absolutely by "goodness" or "badness." There is a continuity of merit level in the supernatural world, just as in the human world.

3) Just as humans cannot "know" their own merit level with any degree of certainty, so they cannot know the merit level of occupants of the supernatural world. They must rely on cues which may lie outside of the supernatural domain, such as personal difficulties or the apparent disintegration of political or social order (cf. J. Van Esterik 1977).

4) Guardian spirits are linked to the social and political world through patron-client relations established through ritual. Intentionally killed victims and those dying of natural causes become different kinds of guardians.

5) But rituals can convert one kind of spirit into another kind. Thus, the process of creating guardian spirits is continuous.

6) Since distribution of knowledge of the supernatural world differs among specialists and non-specialists, there is unlikely to be agreement on the mapping of the spirit world. Not all villagers structure the spirit hierarchy in the same way. From the point of view of a single individual, there

are at least seven structural levels of guardian spirits which might provide labels and possible interpretations for guardian spirits. Only by conceptualizing these different levels as potential sources for interpretation, or potential analogies, does this intra-cultural variation become meaningful.

This essay underscores the importance of relating the meaning an individual assigns to the spirit hierarchy, and his behavior toward those spirits (cf. Lehman 1971; Tambiah 1970). Further it demonstrates why taxonomies are totally inadequate to express knowledge of the spirit domain. Taxonomies of the spirit domain (cf. Frake 1964; Brown 1976) would not permit recognition of ambiguity, and would simply reflect a few labels at one point in time in some particular context. In fact, the power of guardian spirits may be derived from the potential of ambiguous items to be ordered in more than one way. Guardian spirits, as identities on the boundaries of major categories (*phī* and *thēwadā*), can be powerful and dangerous (cf. Van Gennep 1960; Douglas 1966; Endicott 1970).

At the base of this question of Thai guardian spirits is the more general problem of how to express both process and structure simultaneously (cf. Willis 1967; Cicourel 1974). Guardian spirits are ideal vehicles for mediating a basic contradiction in Buddhist cosmological paradox dealt with by Spiro (1970), King (1964); and Tambiah (1970), among others. Briefly put, how can a religious system emphasizing central values such as *anattā* (non-self) and *anicca* (impermanence) provide the basis for a stable social and political organization based on permanent statuses, hierarchy, and kingship? This contradiction is encapsulated in the guardian spirit paradox, where spirit entities must be capable of interpretation both as temporary manifestations continually being created and as a fixed permanent bounded set of identities linking cosmological and political order.

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