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Feeding their faith: Recipe knowledge among Thai Buddhist women

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FEEDING THEIR FAITH: RECIPE KNOWLEDGE AMONG THAI BUDDHIST WOMEN

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Southeast Asia, while noted for its tasty cuisine, has no comparable reputation for tantalizing analyses of food symbolism. Unlike South Asia, where Hindu ideology has stimulated sophisticated studies of Indian food symbolism (e.g., Marriott 1964, Babb 1970), Buddhist Southeast Asia has no significant literature on food meanings. This lack of elaboration reflects the limited concern with food in Buddhist ideology; however, interesting questions about women, food, and Buddhism can be raised when we examine familiar questions from an unfamiliar perspective — the culinary perspective. In this article I examine how Thai Buddhist women use their knowledge of food to define categories of natural and supernatural beings, mark changes in ritual time, and address significant intellectual and practical problems posed by the doctrine of Theravada Buddhism.

THE SETTING¹

Crocodile Village straddles the highway linking important marketing towns in Suphanburi province, west central Thailand. Composed of scattered hamlets surrounded by rice fields, the overgrown village is larger and wealthier than many in the district. With its own market

center, school, and newly built Buddhist temple, it has inhabitants justifiably proud of their material and spiritual resources. The villagers grow rice and other crops, raise cattle, sell household necessities, and offer their labor for daily wages whenever possible. Traditional Thai-style teak houses raised off the ground alternate with garish Bangkok-style, pastel frame houses squeezed into any available space between the older compounds. A network of narrow paths winds around the compounds, with the principal roads leading to the market and the temple. On all but the busiest days of transplanting or harvesting rice, groups of neighbors may be seen in the small coffee shops and noodle stalls in the market. In the kitchens behind the houses women prepare rice and side dishes to meet the nutritional, social, and ritual needs of their households.

The resources and planning required to prepare food for human and nonhuman consumption take up a great deal of village women's time and energy: Occasionally food is prepared and offered communally, by many women acting together. If food is prepared for the monastery, women enjoy the leftovers together. As householders they prepare food for monks during their early morning rounds, and as individuals they request help from a variety of spiritual sources. In these and other food-mediated actions women employ their extensive knowledge of Theravada Buddhism.

BUDDHIST KNOWLEDGE

The dominant religious tradition of present-day Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Kampuchea, Theravada Buddhism is a community-based religion practiced in rural areas as well as elite urban royal centers such as Bangkok. Its rituals use Pali texts and are performed both by members of the monastic order (collectively, the *sangha*) and by devout laypersons. Both lay and monastic Buddhism are guided by the law of Karma: all actions are conditioned by antecedent causes. For laypersons, making merit is the most important religious act. Merit is made by giving (*dāna*), keeping Buddhist moral precepts (*sīla*), and mental development (*bhāvanā*).²

Analysts who distinguish between folk or popular Buddhism and canonical or scriptural Buddhism — between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition — characterize rural Theravadins as animists possessing an incomplete or simplified understanding of Buddhism. While this approach has been criticized (cf. Tambiah 1970, Lehman 1972), its

underlying assumption of qualitative and quantitative differences in the distribution of Buddhist knowledge both within and among communities is useful. Spiro (1966) accounts for variation by determining differences in the levels at which knowledge is internalized. Although many principles influence the distribution of this knowledge in Thailand, both men and women assume that men have more opportunities than women do to obtain canonical knowledge. Thai women regularly prefaced their discussions about Buddhism with the suggestion that if I really wanted to understand Buddhism, I should talk to men — preferably men who had been monks.

Male specialists — monks — know more, or are assumed to know more, than laywomen. Laymen who have once been monks should know more than men who have never been ordained. Most Thai men acquire knowledge of Buddhism through participation in rituals requiring recitation of Pali texts; fewer women have this opportunity, and consequently fewer women can recite from these texts. Notable exceptions to this generalization are the *māe chī* or “women in white,” erroneously referred to as Buddhist nuns. The term *chī* is probably related to the Sanskrit root *jiv*, to be alive (Terweil 1975, p. 258). These specialized laywomen wear white, keep eight precepts, and live together in a community often near a temple.

On the other hand, women generally outnumber men in attendance at weekly temple services and in the observance of the eight precepts, particularly during the rains retreat (Pali, *vassa*), as many ethnographers have noted (e.g., Kirsch 1975, p. 184; Tambiah 1976, p. 308; Terweil 1975, p. 210). Throughout the history of Buddhism generous laywomen have supplied the monastic order with sons, land, and the necessities of life. An inscription from the turn of the fifteenth century in the Thai Buddhist state of Sukhodaya records a widow’s generosity to a particular monk: “Because of our zeal we prepared food in great abundance (to place) in front of his lordship and all the monks, and we lifted up the food to present to them in this areca grove” (Griswold and Na Nagara 1979, pp. 71–72).

In Thailand, and probably elsewhere, men and women experience Buddhism differently: men from the sharply defined contrasts of monastic life, constrained by rules explicating every aspect of daily life, and transmitted through the memorization of Pali texts; and women from the more personal, less sharply bounded perspective of ritual participant and merit maker. For women, Buddhist belief and practice is more a part of everyday life, more directly enmeshed in the world of experience.

FOOD AS SYMBOL

Context-specific religious knowledge converges with everyday knowledge in the domain of food. What properties of food substances make them suitable antecedent objects for symbolic elaboration? Foods come in discrete, named units that are divisible and can be shared. They are describable by reference to several sensory attributes — smell, color, taste. They are common products, used everyday, but critically necessary since our lives depend on food. Foods are valued, and we usually have an emotional response to them, both idiosyncratic responses based on personal experiences and culturally defined responses — repugnance for eating insects, for example. Foods are usually combined and ordered into recipes for dishes, courses, meals, and sequences of meals. Food can be changed in form by human intervention (raw, cooked, rotted, fried, boiled). These different processing techniques change the characteristics of food substances in easily identifiable ways. Food substances can be varied in both quantity and quality, which makes them suitable for marking differences in status or prestige of both people and events. The consumption of food leaves an easily visible mark on a human. Both starvation and over-indulgence in food are easily communicated to the public. These attributes of food make them suitable antecedent objects for symbolic elaboration. In Sperber's terminology, this is the substantial base that derives from the natural and material properties of food used as symbol (Sperber 1975, p. 13).

Anthropologists building on structuralist arguments demonstrate that foods convey symbolic messages. Both meals and categories of food have a definable structure, and the patterns so formed carry substantial social and cultural meanings (e.g., Douglas 1972, 1981, Firth 1973). But the links between the domains of food and religion remain poorly defined because relations between the domains are mediated by women. Knowledge of food in most societies, including Thailand, is in the heads and hands of women and is transmitted through women, for women possess everyday knowledge of food processing and preparation. This recipe knowledge is pragmatic competence in routine performance (Berger and Luckmann 1967, p. 45).

Women as transmitters of food knowledge participate actively in interpreting and manipulating Buddhist paradoxes, although their mode of religious expression has been less frequently captured ethnographically. Indeed, women's religious lives have only recently begun to be explored systematically. In writing of the everyday

concerns of women in different religious traditions, Falk and Gross find "there is no tension between their religious and their mundane lives. Rather, their religious concerns validate these women's ordinary concerns and help to give them meaning" (1980, p. 71). Thai women's use of food demonstrates the complexity and depth of their religious knowledge and devotion.

FOOD TRANSACTIONS

In rural Thai society people control others by feeding them. Food transactions define social relationships among humans and between humans and other classes of beings. Women process, prepare, and usually present these food offerings, and the knowledge of appropriate foods and recipes is passed on orally from mothers to daughters.

The relationship established by feeding others is a voluntary one. If you have never given food to persons in need, or to a guardian spirit, for example, then you have never set up a relationship with them and thus have no responsibility toward them. You can safely ignore that person or spirit. But once you begin feeding a person or spirit, you must continue to provide food. If you stop, you are in trouble, for it is dangerous to break off a relationship once it has been established. Better never to have offered food in the first place than to stop feeding!

Women distribute food to many categories of human and super-human entities. A woman who is a "good nourisher" is admired in rural Thai society. An ideal Thai woman supports both individuals and institutions with food, as the following examples will illustrate.

Humans

In Crocodile Village the nutritional and social needs of infants are met by breast-feeding, an act of loving kindness that establishes a reciprocal relation between mothers and children. Ideally, a son repays this obligation by ordaining as a monk and the youngest daughter by remaining in the parental household to care for her parents in their old age. The ritual texts spoken at the preordination ceremony for monks, and at tonsure ceremonies where children have their topknots ritually cut, begin by emphasizing the degree of obligation children have to their mothers who provided them with milk. As this first natural food, human milk, is replaced by a cultural food, rice, the child joins the rest of the family in consuming meals prepared by women. By consuming

rice, a child gradually becomes Thai. Relatives and occasional visitors are welcome to share family meals and hospitality.

Women regularly prepare food for religious and community ritual. This communal activity allows several women to share the merit accumulated by food preparation and binds participating women into a single moral community. This community is most clearly seen as women pass food dishes back and forth before the dishes are presented to monks. Since women cannot hand anything directly to monk, men generally arrange the food dishes prepared by women and hand the utensils to the monks.

Food transactions also serve as temporal boundary markers, marking the passage of an individual through the life cycle and the passage of time through a yearly cycle. The rituals marking an individual's passage through life are not, with the exception of funerals, the concern of Buddhist monks. These ritual occasions may provide an opportunity for merit making, but the rituals themselves are Brahmanic in origin and derived from Vedic personal rites of passage, as the food offerings emphasize. For example, rice mixed with sweetened condensed milk, or with coconut milk and sugar, is the basis of boiled red and white desserts important for rites of passage such as birthdays, tonsures, marriages, and preordination rites. These brightly colored desserts, auspicious and pure foods, are offered to guardian spirits as well as to the Brahman practitioner and the monks who come to preach following household celebrations. These ritual rites of passage require an individual's *khwan* (soul) to be anchored firmly in his or her body. To complete this ritual task, women prepare a conical "tree" with offerings of cooked rice, bananas, boiled eggs, and desserts. Like the deities, human souls prefer vegetarian food.

Deceased Humans

Women also prepare food for deceased ancestors in order to control the "connectedness" of the living and dead. On occasions of household rituals, ancestors are given small trays to sample all the food dishes prepared — bananas, coconut, boiled rice, meat dishes, sweets, and occasionally whiskey. By feeding the ancestors these particular foods, women are treating them as deceased humans who reside in one of the Buddhist hells or as free-floating spirits between rebirth states. These ghosts or *phī* are placated by food offerings (*līang phī*), not worshiped. They are treated as potentially disruptive guests at family celebrations.

Women also prepare additional food for the monks and share the accumulated merit with the deceased through a ritual called *kraut nam*, which extends merit to deceased ancestors by ritually pouring water from one vessel to another or onto the ground. Villagers often reported dreaming of deceased relatives who were hungry in one of the Buddhist hells. The deceased relatives requested their descendants to feed the monks and share the merit with them. Women who do not provide food for the monks in this life will reap the consequences and starve in their next life.

Funerals are marked by the use of puffed rice, which is strewn on a path following a funeral procession, since "death is like puffed rice which can't be planted to grow again" (Tambiah 1970, p. 156).

The most elaborate cooked food is prepared for the half-year festival of *Sāat Thai* (Pali, *sarada*, autumn). Held in September, this three-day celebration reunites village members who reside outside the village. During this time the souls of deceased ancestors return to earth and are honored communally. Men and boys who seldom attend temple services present substantial amounts of cooked food prepared by their wives and mothers to the monks, in addition to raw rice and fruit. (For a discussion of the equivalent royal ritual, see Quaritch Wales, 1931).

The celebration resembles a first-fruits ritual where the best of the harvest is offered to the temple. Women prepare two special dishes for the occasion. The first, *krayasat*, is a mixture of cooked new rice, peanuts, sesame seeds, dried rice, puffed rice, and coconut, held together by palm sugar or sweetened condensed milk. *Krayasat* prepared for *Sāt Thai* resembles dry, sweet offerings common in South India, the *panchakadjaya* (five foods) or *ettangadi* (eight foods). The confection consists of jaggery, coconut, puffed rice, sesame, and several other variable ingredients (Ferro-Luzzi 1977, p. 513). Historical continuity with Indian food patterns can be seen in some of these narrowly defined ritual contexts within Buddhist communities. Groups of women prepare the mixture under their houses in huge pans. Identical plates of the confection are then exchanged among households. Clients present plates to their patrons, and young people rush to present the sweets to their elder relatives and to the monks.

The second dish is *kanom chin*, a fine rice noodle prepared with a sour spicy fish sauce. The fish mixture is the favorite food of ghosts and spirits and is offered to guardian spirits when they are treated as *phī*. The fine noodles are particularly enjoyed by *phī pret*, a category of ghosts with only a tiny hole for a mouth — large enough to consume fine noodles.

Monks

Monks and laity follow two different routes to salvation, but these paths are linked by food exchanges. Ideally, food offerings to monks are characterized by formality, distance, and impersonality. Women generally offer cooked rice as the monks make their early morning rounds. On holy days women place cooked rice in the bowls of all community monks and offer the best supplementary food dish they can afford to prepare — a meat or fish curry, stir-fried vegetables, or sweet desserts, for example. Food must be served in the best bowl owned by the family and kept for this purpose, and no one may taste or sniff the dishes before they are presented to the monks. If laypersons smelled or tasted the dishes before presenting them to the monks, they might lose their intention to give freely and completely, experiencing a degree of reluctance in giving up delicious food.

Food served to the monks is identical to food served to the unordained except that the best and most expensive supplementary dishes are prepared. Women are well aware of the additional merit accruing from feeding monks, a sentiment also expressed in Burma: “The feeding of a hundred laymen is equivalent to the feeding of one novice; the feeding of one hundred novices is equivalent to that of one ordinary monk” (Spiro 1970, p. 109).

Food offerings for monks also serve us useful temporal markers, distinguishing the four holy days in a lunar month from ordinary “weekdays.” Monks are restricted to receiving cooked food in the mornings. Foods offered to the monks after the noonday fast are presented in their raw form. Similarly, when large stores of food are given during the annual cycle of Buddhist holidays, raw foods are presented. Raw rice and uncooked fruits are given to monks at the beginning (July) and end (October) of the rain’s retreat (Pali, *vassa*) and at the New Year celebration. Presenting food in its raw, unprocessed form does not challenge monastic discipline, which specifies that a monk may not keep or store cooked food after the noonday fast. Uncooked food is most often presented by males.

Buddha Image

Crocodile villagers treated the Buddha image in the preaching hall not as another monk but as a deity (*thēwadā*) and provided it with a tray for rice and a sample of vegetable dishes, fruit, and desserts. The best and most attractive dishes were reserved for the Buddha. One woman from

the community carried the tray and placed it near the image before the monks began their morning chants on the Buddhist holy days. This food was not eaten by the laity after the service but rather was thrown to the pigs, since humans should not partake of food offered to the deities.

The Buddha image is a focal point for the ritual cycle of Buddhist holidays throughout the year. Key events in the Buddha's biography are reenacted ritually — his birth, enlightenment, and death, as if Buddhist communities experience a constant present time.

Deities

Food offerings prepared for the Brahman gods in Bangkok, and for the deities invited to the village for ritual occasions, are always vegetarian, reflecting quite explicitly their Hindu origin. These gods may be invited by name — Indra, Brahma — or as a general category of Hindu gods converted to Buddhism who offer benevolent protection to those practicing Buddhist morality. Vegetarian offerings include bananas, coconut, cooked rice, puffed rice, green peas, sesame seeds, and red and white boiled sweets. These vegetarian food offerings to the Buddha and the deities are referred to as *kryang bucha* and are a form of ritual worship.

Many supernatural beings fall into the ambiguous category of guardian spirits. Guardian spirits can be interpreted as deities (*thē wadā*) or ghosts (*phī*), as I have argued elsewhere (P. Van Esterik 1982), and are treated accordingly. On the many occasions when guardian spirits are invoked for protection of temple, house, or city, appropriate food offerings are prepared for them. Once again the pragmatic knowledge necessary for this very routine performance resides with women, who prepare the appropriate combinations of foods.

The guardian spirit of the temple compound is believed to be the spirit of a former abbot of the temple. His image sits a few inches lower than the Buddha image in the preaching hall. He is a vegetarian, and a number of villagers felt that the Buddha tray, placed casually between the two images, was really meant for the former abbot and not the Buddha. The guardian spirit of the village, on the other hand, ate meat curries, chewed betel, smoked tobacco, and drank whiskey. *Nang māj*, the guardian spirit residing in wood, and more particularly in the house post, is given bananas, coconut, and desserts — but no meat or fish.

The guardian of individual house compounds is given foods appro-

priate for a ghost. When necessary, village women prepare a special dish of fish, fish oils, peppers, and lime, which ghosts particularly enjoy. To illustrate the complexity of food offerings to guardian spirits, consider the foods prepared for the installation of a guardian spirit of a house. This spirit is labeled *phī chao thī*, *chao thī*, *phī ban Phra Phum*, *Phra Phum chao thī*, or *Phra Chai Mong Khon*, depending on how much knowledge the villager has of the spirit domain and whether the spirit is considered a deity or a ghost (cf. P. Van Esterik 1982).

On this ritual occasion, a guardian spirit house was being installed in the northeast corner of a new compound. In a small, open, “eye-level” altar decorated with red and white flags and flowers, the spirit was offered incense, a conical offering made of folded banana leaves, water, and miniature plates of food offerings. The four plates held betel nut, sour and spicy fish with rice, desserts, and water, arranged clockwise from the image of the guardian spirit located at the back of the house (see Fig. 1).

In front of the spirit house a ritual practitioner arranged additional offerings for the guardian spirit. A pig’s head was flanked by a whole fish on the left and a whole chicken on the right. Dishes of meat curry and red and white boiled desserts sat in front of the pig’s head. Both the curries and the boiled desserts require substantial preparation on the part of household women, but the food intended for spirits is not eaten by humans. The stability of this particular configuration of offerings is of considerable historical interest, since the arrangement of fish, pig, and chicken offered to a guardian spirit communicates to a Southeast Asian audience broader than just the ritual specialists of rural Thailand. Loeffler (1968) has proposed that the arrangement represents earth between sky and water, represented by the most prominent food sources in each region. He illustrates a scene of an old death ritual in Shantung, China, showing a pig’s head flanked by a fish on the left side and a fowl on the right. Using configurations from various parts of Southeast Asia, he connects the fish symbol to the prenatal state and the bird symbol to the postmortal state. These symbols may retain their structure in a Buddhist context where, for example, the *naga*, an embodiment of water and the underworld, becomes a protector of Buddhism.

WRESTLING WITH PARADOX

Food defines categories of spirits and provides strategies for dealing with these categories through ritual worship or placation using food

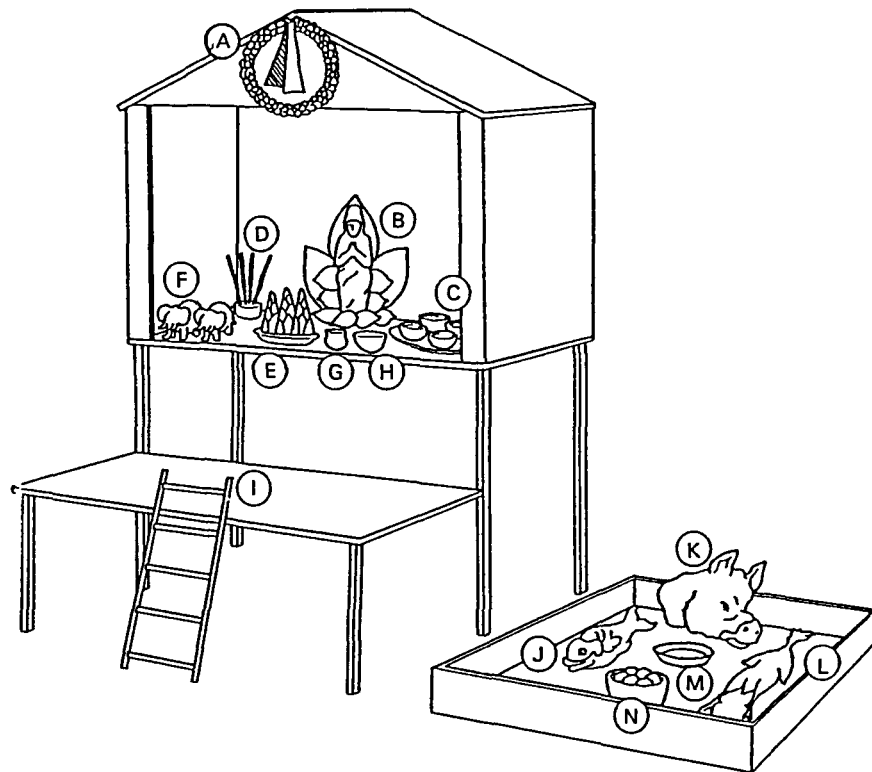


FIGURE 1. Offerings for the Guardian Spirit of the House Compound. (A) Red and white flags and flower wreath; (B) statue of guardian spirit; (C) tray containing dishes of betel nut, rice and fish, dessert and water; (D) incense; (E) bai si (offering of folded banana leaves); (F) elephant dolls; (G) oil; (H) water; (I) ladder for spirit; (J) fish; (K) pig's head; (L) chicken; (M) curry; (N) desserts.

offerings. Food also sets temporal boundaries marking changes in an individual's status and reenacting the events of the Buddha's life throughout the year. In these ethnographic examples food is used to distinguish between different kinds of natural and supernatural entities. The contrast between vegetarian and nonvegetarian offerings differentiates gods that have a place in the Hindu pantheon from humans and ghosts. The vegetarian offerings for the gods feature fruit and sweet desserts often made with coconut milk or sweetened condensed milk, paralleling the Hindu distinction between pure deities who accept only vegetarian offerings and impure (often local) deities who prefer cooked meat, alcohol, and narcotics.

But the Buddhist world order is filled with hierarchically arranged categories of beings, from the depths of the various hells to the realms of various gods. For mortals, the identification and interpretation of other beings is problematic. Consider the problem of feeding deceased ancestors or guardian spirits. They may be treated and fed as deities or as ghosts, depending on the interpretation of the householder; the categories are ambiguous. Possible ambiguity also surrounds the offerings to the Buddha status. Should the Buddha be treated as a deity and given vegetarian offerings? In Crocodile Village the plate of food offered to the Buddha contained only rice, vegetables, and fruit, suggesting that the Buddha is interpreted as a deity. Yet in northeast Thailand both monks and Buddha images are given meat curries (Tambiah 1970, p. 341), suggesting that the Buddha is interpreted more as a monk-teacher.

Concern for the appropriate food offerings for spirits parallels the domestic dilemma surrounding the consumption of meat. Meat dishes require killing, an act that clearly violates Buddhist precepts. But meat dishes are presented to monks, and meat is not explicitly forbidden to them according to the Vinaya rules of the monastic order. In the *Majjhima Nīkaya* the Buddha expressly forbids animal meat only if it is seen, heard, or suspected to have been killed on purpose to make a dish for a monk (Horner 1970, p. 33). Indeed, the texts even specify that the Buddha “eat the proper proportion of curry to rice, experiencing flavor but not greed for flavor” (Horner 1970, p. 324). (Recall, too, that the Buddha died after eating a meal of pork.)

Meat eating is interpreted by the Buddhist laity in more than one way. Thai villagers argue that monks should not be given meat dishes since they require killing, which breaks Buddhist precepts. This is the interpretation made by the Sinhalese who give only vegetarian food offerings to the Buddha, monks, and gods (Yalman 1969, p. 88). Monks, then, may refuse to accept gifts if they know that precepts have been broken by the donor. By turning the begging bowl upside down they are exercising their right and even obligation to censure evil conduct on the part of the laity (Spiro 1970, p. 410). Yet I never saw monks refuse food from a layperson. Vegetarian offerings may be seen as purer and more appropriate for monks, since deities as precept keepers also receive vegetarian offerings; the poor who cannot afford to present meat dishes favor this interpretation.

On the other hand, meat dishes may be consumed by monks simply because they are required to accept any food offering presented to them without making distinctions or showing preferences. In this inter-

pretation the responsibility of the monk to accept the laity's offerings overrides his role as precept keeper. Since meat is the most expensive food item available to Thai villagers, a gift of a meat curry, for example, involves the greatest sacrifice, and *dāna* (charity) requires giving freely without holding back.

Within Buddhist argumentation, then, meat eating could be explained as both appropriate and not appropriate for a monk. Women rehearse this problem daily as they prepare food for the monks, constantly observing what dishes others are bringing to the temple. On Buddhist holidays news of what dishes we had prepared for the monks always preceded us to the temple. Toward the end of our fieldwork, as our funds diminished, I recall trying to argue for the purity and appropriateness of our vegetarian offerings to a very skeptical and wealthy neighbor.

The contradiction between feminine generous giving of food to the monks and masculine ascetic rejection of such sensuous pleasures as eating lies at the heart of Buddhist belief and practice. It demands constant interpretation and reinterpretation by generations of Buddhist believers. Analysts cannot afford to overlook any domain where these interpretations are made.

The problem constantly raised concerns the public nature of selfless and generous feeding and can be traced to the texts of canonical Buddhism. Without doubt, generous public giving is meritorious. In the *Sangutta Nikaya* we read:

This food both gods and men chiefly desire
Whom may that creature be, demon or spirit,
Who, unlike them, hankers not after food?

The food that's given in faith with heart made pure
That finds him out in this world and the next.

(Rhys-Davids 1971, p. 43)

The sentiment is clear: householders who give food offerings will be rewarded in their future lives, those who do not will suffer. The same sentiment was expressed less elegantly in a Thai woman's dream. She dreamed that at the end of a market day she had one rotten banana left over and gave it to a monk. She dreamed she died, went to hell, and had only rotten bananas to eat, although she could see others eating good food. Waking from her dream, she immediately prepared the best food dishes she could afford to give to the monks.

The story of Sujata presenting rice milk to the Buddha before his

enlightenment illustrates the care and devotion women expend on food offerings. The milk Sujata used was obtained by feeding the milk of 500 cows to 250 cows, and so on down to feeding the milk of 16 cows to 8. "The working the milk in and in . . . was done to increase the thickness and sweetness and the strength-giving properties of the milk" (Warren 1969, p. 72). As Sujata's food offering illustrates, charity should be selfless and performed with right intention. Such an act should logically be unpublicized, unrecognized, and not done for personal aggrandizement. But in Thai communities meritorious giving is always done publicly and loudly, with the amount or quality of the gift announced over a loudspeaker or recorded with a flourish in temple records. Neighbors know who prepared or organized food offerings for the monks or who cleaned up after a meal. Clearly, merit-making acts in Thai communities are public social statements as well as private religious ones. The public nature of merit making is proof that a gift is given freely: "It is considered more likely that one has had good intentions if the merit making is public. In fact, if the act of giving is not public it may not be considered an act of merit but rather a personal relationship, a 'deal' between the giver and receiver which may be suspect" (J. Van Esterik 1977, p. 98). Since the amount of merit accumulated from an act of *dāna* depends on the spiritual worth of the giver, the giver's worth must be made apparent and validated publicly.

While laywomen express their devotion by preparing and presenting food to the monks, the monks are admonished to take food "with reflection and judgement, not for sport, not for indulgence, not for personal charm, not for beautifying but just enough for the support, for the upkeep of the body" (Woodward 1973, p. 149). This emphasis on moderation and control in eating developed from the Buddha's rejection of the ascetic path of *semistarvation*.

The rules of the monastic order include specifications about how monks should eat. These rules serve to define the monastic community positively at those who reside together and eat communally. Excommunication, moreover, means that a monk can no longer partake of the communal meal. The distinction between *āmisasambhoga* (communion in eating) and *dharmasambhogakāya* (communion in the law) is based in part on rules of eating. The meaning of *āmisasambhoga* might also be extended to refer to the communal merit making and commensality of the laity (cf. Mus 1978, pp. 263-64, 289-90).

A Thai commentary on the rules explains this concern:

Wrong mental states easily come to the surface during the collecting or

eating of food unless both mind and body are well-guarded. These rules are all concerned with various kinds of bodily restraint to be observed. The sight of *b hikkus* eating their food is one activity of theirs which householders have a chance to observe . . . (Nanomali 1966, p. 116).

Women are particularly observant of monks when they eat. But the response of monks to their food is also problematic for women. For if monks show obvious enjoyment of the food presented, the donor knows that the monk has accepted the gift and that merit has been made. But a monk who shows enjoyment of food is less worthy of the gift. If a monk does not show enjoyment of the food or happens to pass over that dish, women are unsure whether their gift has been rejected or whether the monk is exhibiting ideal self-control. A monk who shows minimal interest in food is the more worthy, but by his self-control he provides the donor with no evidence of having accepted the gift. Perhaps this uncertainty is why women give food dishes to a number of different monks in an attempt to balance worthiness of recipient with evidence of the acceptance of the food.

This paradox exists because food is also used as a metaphor for the foulness of the body. "All beings are persisters by food" (Woodward 1972, p. 35). Monks are admonished to concentrate on the repulsiveness of food and become conscious of "the cloying of food" (Hare 1973, p. 68). "From the arising of food is the arising of body; from the ceasing of food is the ceasing of body" (Woodward 1954, p. 51).

The Burmese also recognize the paradox arising from the constant generous giving of food to the monks: "the greater his rejection of worldly goods, the holier the monk is deemed to be, but the holier he is, the more lavishly he is supplied with worldly goods" (Spiro 1970, p. 414).

CONCLUSION

At the first light of dawn the sounds in Crocodile Village confirm that another culinary cycle has begun. Charcoal fires support a pot of the best rice the household has available; women and young girls pound peppers and shred coconut for curries. By the time the line of Buddhist monks passes silently in front of the house, the rest of the family is ready to share in the merit accrued from feeding the monks by touching the bowl or the spoon the woman uses to make her offering. The food she prepares is the means for increasing her own spiritual worth and

that of her family; but it nourishes more than her faith, as the leftovers provide the best meal her family may consume that day.

Cooking and eating are activities that cut across the artificial oppositions of domestic and monastic, this world and other world, and *Great Tradition* and *Little Tradition* so common in studies of Theravada Buddhism. Using women's perceptions about religious action allows us to obtain a more complete view of the religious field than is possible by focusing only on men's more visible religious roles.

Thai Buddhist women must know a great deal about Theravada Buddhism in order to make culturally appropriate food offerings. More significantly, the correct use of food offerings and exchanges requires constant interpretation and reinterpretation of principles and meanings, some of which are based on significant intellectual problems within Theravada Buddhism. Food is not the only domain where these problems are dealt with. On the contrary, these problems arise in other domains, and other Buddhists grapple with them (cf. Ortner 1975, for the Sherpa; Aung Thwin 1979, for the Burmese). But food is an ideal medium for expressing the ambiguity the contradiction implicit in the practice of religion. As an antecedent object, food is easily available, is infinitely varied in its transformations, and accumulates layers of associated meanings, providing enough historical specificity to tempt speculations about broad cultural processes. How did food and eating lose its caste restrictions in Southeast Asia while Brahmanic ritual was retained? Why are offerings to guardian spirits necessary in a world ordered by the laws of Karma? If feeding someone gives you power over them, how do women use this power in their interactions with men?

Food is the basis for interaction with the whole range of sentient beings who populate the Buddhist cosmos — the layers of hells, the realms of animals, guardian spirits, other humans, and deities, and the dimly perceived nothingness of nirvana. The links between givers and receivers of food are symbolic, and the manipulation of these symbols is in the hands and heads of women. Food offerings create and recreate the categories for conceptualizing the order of the cosmos. By doing so, they also mark the passage of time, for the quality of time in Buddhist order is cyclical; the agricultural cycle provides both the raw materials and the timing for seasonal rituals. Even life-cycle rituals stretch out through many lifetimes, as the cycle of rebirths generates countless opportunities for growth and decay. By defining categories of beings, and cycles of time, food interactions reinforce the total cosmology of Thai Buddhism and place women as key social actors at the center of Buddhist action.

NOTES

1. In 1971 my husband and I spent 8 months in Crocodile Village, preparing a general ethnographic description of a post-peasant community. We began studying related problems regarding the growth of lay Buddhist meditation movements and the relation between Buddhist and Brahmanic ritual in the village. These projects required attendance at all community rituals and detailed interviews with the village "experts" on religion. Our informants included monks, ex-monks, ritual specialists, laypersons who helped organize and carry out rituals, and people attending the rituals. We planned for interviews by preparing broad, open-ended questions or problems to discuss with acknowledged authorities. These interviews elicited normative rules and post hoc explanations for ritual acts. This background, combined with attendance at ritual events and subsequent discussions evaluating the performance, provided more balance between ideal models and actual behavior.

During preparation for ritual events, and even well into the early stages of rituals, I sat with village women helping them prepare food, and being roundly scolded for suggesting inappropriate combinations or arrangements, while my husband sat with men and monks discussing Buddhist doctrine. It was not until my return from the field and my subsequent reading and research in nutritional anthropology that I realized how much of my understanding of Brahmanic and Buddhist ritual, guardian spirits, and village social interaction generally came through these food-mediated experiences buried in my daily journals. In spite of additional fieldwork on infant feeding in that community in the following year, and my husband's more intensive dissertation research on meditation movements (J. Van Esterik 1977), I did not conduct more intensive, focused research of food in that community. Instead, I have turned to secondary sources, Buddhist texts, and our photographs to construct the argument developed here.

2. It is not necessary to know a great deal about Theravada Buddhism in order to follow the argument of this paper. Good overviews of Theravada Buddhism as it is practiced in Thailand are presented in Tambiah (1970) and Terweil (1975).

Buddhism, both Theravada and Mahayana, is based on the life of Gotama who was born in north India in 563 B.C. Among the several different schools existing in the first centuries B.C., the most lasting division is between the Mahayana tradition, which spread north through Tibet, China, and East Asia, and the Theravada tradition of Southeast Asia. The Theravada texts, written in Pali in the first century A.D., and later commentaries on them remain the basis for present-day services and education for monks. The faithful take refuge in the Buddha, the compassionate teacher, the Dhamma, his teachings, and the Sangha, the monastic order he founded.

Theravada Buddhism is a community-oriented religion emphasizing moral conduct, support of the monastic order, and good works rather than the more esoteric, ascetic routes to personal salvation associated with Mahayana Buddhism.

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