

State Power and Culture in Thailand

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Nurturance and Reciprocity in Thai Studies

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Local and state systems are connected through individuals whose lives are shaped simultaneously by both systems. Any model that opposes local and state systems of power and meaning and poses no connections between them is unlikely to be grounded in the lived experiences of people. Yet, as much as we recognize the need to contextualize the local in terms of state power, we must pull away from reifying “Thai culture” as a means of explaining the relation between these systems. But it is essential that cultural analysis not be left out of the picture. Work such as Lucien Hanks’s, “Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order” (1962) and “Two Visions of Freedom: Thai and American” (1965), and Jane Hanks’s “Maternity and its Rituals in Bang Chan” (1963) and “Reflections on the Ontology of Rice” (1964) provide opportunities to explore the linkages between rural and urban systems, or local and national systems—not simply in terms of resource distribution and utilization, but also in terms of symbolic capital and ritual exchange. Treading carefully among later treatises that have provided valuable insights into a local and inside understanding of concepts such as power and gender ideology in Thailand (Keyes 1984, Kirsch 1985), we seek shared practices and meanings that can articulate between state and local systems. Feeding and eating are critically important to the establishment and maintenance of gender and power relations in Thailand (cf. P. Van Esterik 1986, 1992). *Liang*, the Thai term for providing food or eating

together exemplifies this shared practice. *Liang* provides the most widely understood arena for negotiating and displaying power and hierarchy, yet it is also a metaphor for intimacy and closeness. It is basic to understanding gender construction in Thailand.

This paper explores how *liang* as a system of reciprocity persists in a world increasingly dominated by impersonal commodity exchanges. I argue that *liang* is embedded in deeper and more enduring values than those motivating commodity exchange. In fact, *liang* remains key to social interaction precisely because it embraces a wide variety of alternate models of exchange. *Liang* encompasses food exchanges requiring no reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, generalized reciprocity, and market exchange, stressing differing degrees of equality and hierarchy in both ritual and non-ritual contexts. *Liang* successfully maintains the logic of the gift exchange that creates relations between people even in the context of rapidly changing economic contexts. *Liang* incorporates a broad range of rules of reciprocity operating in different contexts of Thai society. This paper explores some of these contexts.

Recently, anthropologists have reasserted their traditional concern with analytical frameworks for interpretation and have reflected more self-consciously on how their ethnographic statements are produced. This reflection leads naturally to the recognition of the role of past scholars and scholarship and of the life experiences of ethnographers on current frameworks for interpretation.¹ The Hanks have provided valuable insights into the key role of food sharing in Thai society. Yet, it is surprising that their insights have not stimulated more research on this important topic, building from some of the Bang Chan food habits studies (Hauck, Saovanee, and J. Hanks 1958). In addition to the insights of past scholars, my formulation of this research question reflects formative personal experiences in Thailand. During my first years in Thailand, my husband and I were so often the recipients of Thai generosity, first as volunteers and later as graduate students, that we had to learn very quickly the patterns of reciprocity embedded in the constant generous giving—particularly of food. Now that my resources permit an easier *quid pro quo*, the overriding memories of missed opportunities, bungled

exchanges, the too ostentatious return haunts me still. Nevertheless, these personal experiences inform the argument to follow.

Nurturance and Reciprocity

Jane Hanks's paragraph (1964) summarizes the orientation to food that underlies the concept of *liang*:

The idea that to nourish is to give life has been socially translated to a general feeling that a gift of food is especially acceptable, important, and appropriate. On a multitude of occasions foods are prepared, arranged with care, and offered to others. Most of the activity on any occasion of ceremony revolves around food preparation and serving. There is tremendous satisfaction not only in giving a feast, but in serving one's family the daily meals. A reputation for generosity with well-cooked foods is an integral part of leadership. Buddhist precepts have reinforced the importance of food giving. A major source of merit is to give the priests their daily meals as well as to feed others, especially the poor. Offered food may not be refused lest one sinfully deny to the donor the opportunity of acquiring merit.

(p.153)

This led Jane Hanks to develop the concept of woman as nurturer, an argument furthered by Keyes (1984). Jane Hanks pointed out that all deities concerned with the welfare of people's bodies and souls were female and, more precisely, maternal (1963:71). Thus, mother rice, mother water, and mother earth were particularly responsible for the personal welfare of individuals, and people owed them more. Women nurture before birth, after birth by the provision of their milk, and lastly by rice, thus providing continuity in female nurture for body and soul. In this essay, I would like to shift emphasis away from the idea of the woman as nurturer to the nurturing itself.

The English and Thai dictionary meanings of the word nurturance are both intimately connected with food. But they differ in the extent to which they are also about power relations. Although there are parallels in the meaning and use of the terms in English and Thai, the differences are more instructive. The core meaning of the English word nurture and the Thai verb, *liang*, is to feed, nourish, and bring up to maturity. *Liang* is also used to refer to the actions of

cares for, tending, supporting, maintaining, and fostering (Hass 1964:493).

The word is probably of great antiquity because it is widespread among groups of Tai speakers. There appear to be two similar proto-Tai forms of *liang* and a fairly probable Chinese cognate (ancient Chinese, *jiang*, *zhang/yang*, to nourish or feed, *xiang*, feast). The key meanings centre around to feed or tend, and to raise or support. White Tai has a term, *leng*, that refers specifically to an adopted child. White Tai also has a special development, using (*kin*) *leng* to refer to the evening meal.² In Bangkok, *liang* is often combined with *bamrung* to intensify its meaning. *Bamrung liang*, means to feed, nourish, cherish, or take good care of (Hass 1964:290). There are interesting differences in the use of these two words. However, these can best be explored by a linguist. For our purpose here, it is enough to note that the use of the two words together simply intensifies the meaning (cf. A. Diller 1980, for discussion of this convention in Thai).

The concept of *liang* emphasizes the active support of people and institutions through the provision of food and sharing in its consumption. The cultural concept can best be seen in the contexts where food is the means through which power and control are exerted. A wide range of life forms—plants, animals, humans, and spirits—can be controlled through feeding. In the agricultural domain, *liang* and *bamrung* are most often used to refer to raising plants that need special care and attention—plants such as young banana trees and orchids. However, in inscription 13 on the Shiva image of Kamphaeng Phet (dated around 1490), reference is made to the king making an irrigation conduit to *liang* the rice fields.³ The act of feeding animals tames or domesticates them and puts them at the disposal of their human masters (*liang bet*). Spirits (*phii*) are particularly difficult to control. However, they too can be tamed through food offerings. Certain individuals may be skilled in coercing ghosts and spirits to do their bidding (*liang phii*). These are dangerous individuals who are capable of striking bargains with spirits and those afflicted by spirits, for their own profit.

As in the English verb to nurture, *liang* is used to refer to raising children. *Liang luuk*, to raise children, covers the period from

pregnancy until children marry or leave home, and includes all forms of support in addition to the provision of food. Whoever renders this support in addition to the mother is considered the foster mother or father of the child and takes over the rights of the natural mother. It is not necessary for this person to be a female. Anyone with compassion (Pali: *metta-karuna*) for a child may perform these actions. A Thai proverb reflects the uncertainty and risk associated with fostering or adopting a child:

*Ao luuk khao ma liang
Ao miang khao ma om*

(bringing up another's child; keeping another's *miang*, or wad of fermented tea in one's mouth)

(Duangtip 1985:124)

The suggestion here is that one cannot get full benefit if something belonged to someone else first. One can never be sure of the affection or gratitude of the child. Of course, parents cannot be "sure" of their own children either; however, by provision of food, they increase the chances of forming strong bonds with their children.

Liang can also be used with reference to breastfeeding. A good nurturer, a woman who nurtures well (*liang dii*), was admired in rural Thai society and could be depended on to have a copious supply of breastmilk. This person might share her breastmilk with another infant out of compassion for that child. Jane Hanks discusses the importance of initial experiences such as first breastfeeding in setting a good pattern or habit for future feeding and future relationships (1963:63). This concept and several other interpretations developed in *Maternity and its Rituals in Bang Chan* were very useful for understanding changing patterns of infant feeding in rural and urban Thailand (cf. Van Esterik 1985) and influenced program and policy to improve infant feeding practices in Thailand.

Although mothers also used the verb *liang* to refer to feeding their infants with a variety of breastmilk substitutes, breastfeeding has remained the root metaphor for explaining the relationship between a mother and her infant. But this is not a model of altruistic giving and endless sacrifice. Rather, mothers recognize that breastfeeding "costs" in both time and energy. These costs are calculable.

In rural contexts, women express the idea that one raises a child in expectation of explicit returns. A daughter repays the debt to her mother by remaining in the parental household to care for her parents in her old age, while a son ordains as a Buddhist monk to pay his mother back for her breastmilk (P. Van Esterik 1976, J. Hanks 1963). This ritual obligation is often reflected in the opening prayers for household-based rituals such as weddings, preordination, and tonsures where mention is made of the debt owed to mothers for provision of breastmilk (*kha nom*, milk price). The reciprocity expected is expressed in the phrase, *mae liang luuk, luuk liang mae*—the mother cares for the child, the child cares for the mother.

The following anecdote makes clear the underlying reciprocity built into the concept of *liang*. Colleagues from the Philippines told the story of a woman who kept the empty tins of infant formula she had used to feed her child. When the child grew up, the mother opened the closet and showed her child exactly how much she had spent on her early feeding. I told this story to two Thai anthropologists who nodded enthusiastically; one said that her sister had done the same thing. The other commented on the foolishness of the practice because the cost of the infant formula should be calculated according to the current market price, not on the price the mother paid for the products many years earlier.

Although the currency of breastmilk is diminishing in rural Thailand, this story of the tins of infant formula makes sense only in the context of *liang luuk duey nom mae* (raising a child with mother's milk). The storage of the infant formula tins to remind the daughter of her debt to her mother is a concrete illustration of changing relationships—a mixed metaphor that tries to fit a commercial transaction into a model of balanced reciprocity expressed through the idiom of mother's milk.

Feeding their Faith

Women and men make merit by feeding monks and generally supporting rural and urban monasteries with food (*thambun liang phra*). This phrase encompasses a wide range of household, monastery, and community rituals which strengthen relations between people

through the exchange of food. Household-based rituals such as pre-ordination, weddings, funerals and house-building require cooperative preparation of food for attendant monks, as well as “party” food for guests. Households contribute money, a cooked dish or ingredients, and labour to defray the costs of community feasting. The amount of each donation is carefully recorded so that households can reciprocate the exact same dish or contribution at future celebrations. The equality of contribution emphasizes the complementarity of gift exchange in contrast to commodity exchange in rural Thai communities. These balanced exchanges can be terminated once the initial donation is reciprocated, indicating a household’s decision to end a relationship or, perhaps to switch loyalties to another village faction, thus reinforcing the Hanks’ emphasis on the shifting nature of social hierarchies in Thai communities. However, there are numerous strategies for avoiding such potential conflict, such as sending half the household to one party (*ngan liang*), and half to the other, sending a cooked dish to both, or conveniently being out of the village while the party is being held.

Commensality and Exchange

I have argued elsewhere (P. Van Esterik 1985) the importance of food offerings in the definition of time, space, and entities in Thai Buddhist rituals. However, an exclusive focus on food exchanges in ritual contexts can mask the relation between food exchanges in ritual and nonritual contexts. Commensality (or food sharing) and exchange, as described below in the rituals of *kin salak*, *thot pha pa*, and *kathin* reestablish and reaffirm categories, metaphors, and modes of thinking that guide social and political action in nonritual contexts as well as ritual contexts.

Three related rituals to distribute food and monks’ robes illustrate subtle differences in the rules of reciprocity within rural Thai communities. Temple committees may select from a range of potential rituals those that offer the best opportunities for acquiring necessities and raising money for the community temple. While resources of money, monks, and people are certainly important considerations, there are also outside forces of change that are subtly

transforming the ritual calendar. *Kin salak*, *thot pha pa*, and *kathin* must all be arranged far enough in advance to make sure other monasteries in the area can participate. Each ritual presupposes certain reciprocal obligations concerning the provision and consumption of food, how much food is prepared, how carefully accounts are kept regarding repayment with the same dish, and who shares in the commensal circle.

In *kin salak*, baskets of offerings containing gifts, food, and money are prepared and numbered. Monks from a number of different monasteries are invited to draw an allotted number and claim the basket. This offering by lottery may be done once a year and has been traced to conditions of food scarcity when perhaps not all monks and novices could be fed adequately, and redistribution of food by lottery would prevent quarrels (Terweil 1975:231).

The occurrence of *kin salak* when fruit is abundant at the end of the hot season is an interesting transformation of the original meaning and context of the ritual. In this season, even the poorest households could afford to provide a basket of fruit for the lottery. Pathom Phuaphansakun (1981) describes a northern Thai variant where baskets of offerings are prepared by an unmarried woman in her twenty-first year, with the help of her relatives and friends. The offering coffer includes a note transferring the merit accrued to her parents. According to Wijeyewardene (1986:64) and Davis (1984:199) *kin salak* is being replaced by *kathin* and *thot pha pa*.

The forest robe ceremony, *thot pha pa*, occurs any time after the rains retreat (*phansa*). According to Buddhist texts, monks’ robes were originally collected from cloths discarded in village rubbish heaps. Only later were they donated by the faithful in a *kathin* ceremony. The forest robe ceremony continues a fiction that the monks still find cloth for their robes by the wayside. Such cloths are sometimes given by actually leaving them by the side of the road or in a tree for monks to retrieve (cf. Khantipalo 1970:182). This connection of the forest cloth with the wilderness and polluted contexts such as cemeteries is reflected in the ceremony itself. The presentation of robes, money, and food, usually left on the branches of a “wishing tree” (Pali: *Kapparukkha*), by people from nearby villages,

are part of the regular set of reciprocal relationships established over the years between neighboring villages.

Bilmes argues that *thot pha pa* occurs in times of financial stress when one congregation decides to hold a merit-making ceremony in another temple to “help out.” He describes both *thot pha pa* and *kathin* as “unusual” in occurrence (Bilmes 1976:163). But in Central Thailand, these rituals are very common. After the “wishing trees” are presented to the monks, the money and goods donated from all participating communities are added in together. This cooperation is reflected in the sharing of a communal meal provided by the host village. The entertainment at one celebration observed in Suphanburi province included risqué dancing by “the forest people,” a group of inebriated middle aged women dressed in elaborate royal style *likay* costumes, dangling bananas, tubular melons, and cloth monkeys from their belts.

The robe given at *thot pha pa* is often only one of the set of three monk’s robes, specifically the *sabong* or lower robe (Kingkeo 1968: 133). *Thot pha pa* celebrates direct, balanced, carefully calculated reciprocity between equals in a synergistic multiplication of local resources—merit, food, and the fertility of women and rice, rather than stressing the reserved asexuality of celibate monks. *Thot pha pa* demonstrates a bawdy awareness of the ripeness (*suk*) of young men about to leave the celibate order of monks and contribute their reproductive capacities to enhance village prosperity. Political contacts, marital arrangements, and food offerings are all multiplied in a reciprocal giving of forest robes over the years.

This intensification of social and political contacts is paralleled in the spiralling of merit production. For example, villagers argued that forest cloth rituals make more merit than *kathin* (although to sponsor a *kathin* is more prestigious because of its greater cost), because of the voluntary nature of the giving for *thot pha pa*. Villagers participating in a *thot pha pa* have made an intentional decision to participate and contribute. In addition, merit is shared at such events. For example, a one *baht* coin passed among several persons produces one *baht* worth of merit for each person, plus additional merit for the person who gave the coin in the first place, because his or her act has resulted in influencing others to have the

intention to make merit and to rejoice in the giving of others (Pali: *pattidana*). As villagers hold the coin, they murmur “*anumothana khopkhup*,” “I rejoice in your merit making and thereby receive merit also” (J. Van Esterik 1977:97).

Kathin sponsorship is beyond the means of most peasant farmers, although occasionally households will save for years to be the main sponsor of a *kathin*. Each monastery receives only one *kathin* offering in the month after the rains retreat (*phansa*). Offers to give the *kathin* robes are carefully juggled whenever possible by monastery leaders to insure the greatest return for the monastery. Usually the ceremony is sponsored by wealthy individuals, or more often today in Central Thailand, by large associations, government departments or by the staffs of large commercial firms from Bangkok. *Kathin* is clearly associated with royalty, and with the presentation of royal alms. Only the king can designate others to offer *kathin* in his name—often in the guise of “helping rural people” (Gray 1991). Occasionally *kathin* are given by the villagers themselves in years when no other offer is made.

The usual urban based cliché surrounding *kathin* is that it provides an opportunity for urban dwellers to enjoy the gentle hospitality of the villagers and to meet with their country cousins in a common effort to make religious merit. However, urbanites often express their contempt for villagers in subtle and not so subtle ways. A *kathin* celebrated in a village in Suphanburi province in the seventies illustrates some of these contrasts. A large government department from Bangkok whose head had some relatives in the area had negotiated successfully to present *kathin* robes to the monastery’s inhabitants, some 70 monks and novices. Each monk and novice received three robes and a tray of goods wrapped in orange colored cellophane which included soap, utensils, candles, incense sticks, powder, cigarettes, and other items. In addition, the visitors donated a large sum of cash to the monastery, in this case, the equivalent of slightly over US\$1,000. After the donations and the service, the visitors’ spokesman made announcements over the monastery loudspeaker. Like many urban males on a *kathin* outing, he was drunk and proceeded to insult the villagers. The villagers had not provided a final figure on the amount they had given to

the monastery when the visitors announced the sum mentioned above. The spokesman asked sarcastically if anyone in the village could add. He continued in this vein, suggesting that one could buy village women for 50 *baht* (\$2.50).

At this point, the abbot had had enough and he led the monks and novices away. The villagers, sitting with legs folded on the floor, raised their hands in respect as the monks left the hall. In contrast, the visitors, tired of sitting on their chairs, stood chatting and smoking as the monks retired. The disrespect, however unintended, could not have been more apparent, and the villagers took some pride in the differences between rural and urban manners. In addition, the visitors did not remove their shoes on entering the hall, while the villagers did—all the villagers, that is, except a small group of village elite. These large landowners and school teachers kept their shoes on, emulating the visitors from Bangkok. The villagers prepared a lavish meal for the visitors, who were invited to sit on chairs in the meeting hall and were served by village women. Some noodle stands from the market had been set up on the monastery grounds for anyone wanting an alternate meal for payment. The villagers did not join the meal, emphasizing social distance, for the hosts did not eat with the guests. The spokesman continued his commentary complaining about the small amount of the villagers' offerings when they finally were announced. He eventually closed the proceedings by saying that they had wasted enough time here and that they had better things to do in a nearby town.

The *kathin* offering may be viewed as a kind of redistribution system whereby urban superiors return some of the wealth taken from peasants in the form of a donation. But, to the villagers, this is not "their" resources returned, but resources from another system much like government programs that return certain resources to the village. Certainly such redistribution does not involve local resources or the expansion of local resources. In this ritual context, hierarchical relations are emphasized, and the political and economic dominance of urban over rural is reaffirmed. Predictively, then, there is no expectation of reciprocity (cf. Terweil 1975:243). In fact, the geographical distance between the visitors and the host monastery is emphasized. Even when rural communities make a *kathin* offering,

they often go to distant centres like Chiangmai or Ratburi outside the local system of political, economic, and material interchanges. And there is nothing about the ceremony that is voluntary: the monastery committee must accept the first *kathin* offer made to their monastery. If a deputy minister or a high-ranking civil servant decides to give a *kathin*, the civil servants in his division do not really "volunteer" to participate. The coercion is not apparent, because the emphasis is on the "fun" of the outing.

Kathin models the hierarchical relation between urban centre and rural periphery, paralleling the increasing dominance of the central government in regional activities. Wijeyewardene notes that in Nan Province, the municipality has taken over much of the ritual life of the town, organizing merit-making activities at *kathin* and other occasions (1986:155). The patterns of reciprocity and exchange developed in these ritual contexts are mirrored in nonritual contexts as well.

Political Parties

In most areas of Thailand today, rituals stressing hierarchical relations of centre over periphery are replacing the communal emphasis on incurring reciprocal obligations. Yet the potential for status mobility remains, as an individual jockey for position "... by riding in a better car to a more expensive restaurant where after a heartier meal he leaves a larger tip" (L. Hanks 1962:1259). *Liang* as a means of strengthening social ties remains critically important in political contexts.

In fact, the most widely elaborated dimension of meaning of *liang* extends to cover the acts of feasting, partying, and banqueting. Hosting a party and extending hospitality is as much at the heart of "nurturing" as the domestic tasks of home food preparation. Friends sharing lunch every day take turns "sponsoring" each other for lunch, and woe betide the foreigner who fails to recognize the rules of hierarchy and reciprocity guiding this intricate exercise. Both rural and urban households must avoid the accusations that they do not *liang* very much. The expression, "*phan kin ha ngai, phuan tay ha yak*" ("It's easy to find a friend to share food with you, but difficult

to find a friend who will die for you") brings out the transitory linkages established through hosting meals. To maintain more permanent relations, households must continuously sponsor parties (*ngan liang*) to restrengthen ties.

Village and district heads must be particularly vigilant to *liang* their supporters in order to achieve and maintain power. Those who do not, quickly lose their influence. Because women generally manage household finances, there is potential conflict between males' preferences for using resources for political ends and women's concern not to deplete household resources. Since 1982, when Thai women could be chosen as village heads, several hundred women have held these positions. A study of women leaders in local administration found that their superiors felt that women received more cooperation from villagers and were less likely to have power cliques than their male counterparts (Chamrathirong and Limanonda 1984). But without these political cliques, will women be able to hold power? It will be interesting to see if women leaders *liang* their supporters differently from male leaders and so contribute to building a new pattern of political reciprocity in Thailand.

Certainly, there is a long-established pattern of paternal nurturance exemplified by the *phau liang*, a man who employs, feeds, or controls others—a successful patron (see Wijeyewardena 1971 for a slightly different view). The king, as the ultimate symbol of paternal nurturance, provides protection and benefits in an otherwise uncertain world. The urban Thai word, *taan* (eat), comes from *raprataan*, to receive what is royally given, i.e. food. The use of the term *liang* in historic inscriptions fits well with these political implications of *liang*. A Sukhothai inscription dated around 1350 refers to the actions of a king who "does not kill or beat his war slaves, but *liang* and fattens them." Thus, he feeds them in order to control them.⁴

Patrons, both male and female, use food as a means of attracting and holding followers, because a person cannot turn against or fail to support anyone who has provided food. In Bangkok, many Sunday mornings we received a large dish of specially cooked noodles from our neighbor's female servant. On one occasion, when thanking the lady of the house for the noodles, she informed me that her husband, a high-ranking police officer, cooked noodles every

Sunday morning for his police colleagues. One Sunday morning, I watched him prepare his favorite dish from scratch—cutting the beef and slicing onions and garlic himself—and serve it with pride to his senior officers.

At the level of national and international relations, the reciprocal obligations created through food are an important part of broader diplomatic practice. From embassy dinner parties to international food aid, the concept of reciprocity guides social interaction. In the late seventies, social columns of Thai newspapers featured the "food diplomacy" of Prime Minister Kriangsak Chamanand, who often cooked his favorite chicken curry with brandy for guests. These lavish meals were served to individuals or groups and widely publicized. The occasions included the meal served to the Vietnamese prime minister and to the student activists of the October 1976 revolution following their release from prison.

In these incidents, there is no expectation of a balanced counterexchange, for to do so would infer that the receivers were eager to discharge their responsibilities to the prime minister. The intention of *liang* is rather to keep people in debt to the prime minister and insure that the elements of control are widely understood, using a symbolic code intimately understood by the Thai public.

Managing food exchanges in Thai society requires extraordinary tact and dexterity and continuous decoding, skills often acquired by foreigners after recognizing their own errors of practice and interpretation (in hindsight, unfortunately). Casual observation and conversations around the Canadian embassy since the early seventies uncovered stories of the dilemma of the apples.

When the embassy first opened, gifts of beautiful Canadian apples were sent to Thai individuals and institutions as gifts at the Christmas season. At first, the number of recipients was limited, but as the embassy and its staff grew and relations with Thai institutions increased, the number of cases of apples multiplied. It became a major task packing and keeping track of who received apples. If the embassy had sent nonfood gifts, the rules of balanced reciprocity might apply. But when relations are created through food, it is almost impossible to avoid very negative interpretations when the food gifts stop.

As with feeding a guardian spirit (*liang phii*), if you have never established a relation by the provision of food, you have no difficulties: but having once provided food (if it is not part of an explicit *quid pro quo* ... "I'll feed you if I win the lottery"), a potentially dangerous situation exists when you stop feeding or feed inappropriately. Failure to provide the customary apples signified to the former recipients a clear break in relations with the embassy, and hence with Canada. A Thai friend expressed surprise on hearing that York University and Thammasat University had recently negotiated a five-year linkage program funded by CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency). The reason for her surprise? "We used to have a close relation with Canada, but then the embassy stopped sending us apples."

Nurturance and Gender Ideology

The Thai concept of nurturance refers to acts of feeding that have certain calculable consequences rather than a sex-linked personality trait attributed to women. Nurturing in the Thai sense is accomplished by both men and women and is highly context sensitive, stressing the potency to feed built into the concept of *liang*, rather than the duty to feed emerging from the English concept of nurturance.

By focusing on the practice of nurturing, *liang*, we have analyzed the term and removed nurturance from its more usual place in essentializing women. While not denying the arguments regarding feminine power as creator and nurturer of life, this position can overstress gender opposition rather than gender complementarity. We can defend the same conclusion by travelling the more circuitous route through Buddhist logic, in this way insuring that we do not slip into assumptions about nurturance reflecting Judeo-Christian logic about personalities, sex roles, and human behaviour. These biases are obvious in the meaning of nurturance in English, and its place in western gender ideologies.

The Oxford English dictionary uses cherish, to hold and treat as dear, as a synonym for nurture. Nurturant is generally thought of as a personality trait attributed to women and related to traits like caring and compassion. Nurturance has become a construct in the

analysis of western sex roles, and has contributed to the development of stereotypes of women's personalities. It is often included as one trait in an individual's social orientation, closely related with cooperation, helping, sympathy, social sensitivity, and emotional responsiveness, and opposed to power-linked traits such as aggression, dominance, and assertiveness. Yet the evidence for sex differences in nurturant behaviour is at best equivocal (cf. Frieze 1978:77).

Bardwick has argued that feelings of maternal nurturance towards infants are biologically grounded in the high levels of estrogen and progesterone present during pregnancy (1971:33-35). According to this argument, the nurturing instincts of women arise from their child-bearing functions. The key question raised by this approach is whether women have a propensity or biological suitedness for mothering or nurturance which is unrelated to their reproductive experience. Regardless of whether or not women have given birth, some women are more nurturant than others, and some men are more nurturant than some women.

Certainly, whoever performs the tasks of caring for, feeding, and nurturing the young and the helpless is likely to become more skilled at nurturing. In the western world, these tasks have been assigned to women, and institutional structures have developed to perpetuate the nurturant roles of women. The dominant cultural image of western women then, derives from the role of nurturant mother and fits with a prominent cult of domesticity.

Chodorow describes the development of the moral mother in the early capitalist period in the United States where "... bourgeois women were to act as both nurturant moral models to their children and as nurturant supporters and moral guides for husbands" (1978:5). She demonstrates how women as mothers produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother, and sons whose nurturant capacities have been repressed (Chodorow 1978:7).

Mothering a child refers to acting in a nurturant manner to a child, caring for, and socializing it (Chodorow 1978:11). It is the mothering role that has had profound effects on the development of both female roles and gender ideology in the west. However, the difficulties in applying this western construct cross-culturally were

identified decades ago (cf. Barry, Bacon, and Child 1957; Whiting and Edwards 1973).

A derivative nurturant role is the nurse, originally meaning one who breast feeds or suckles an infant. This term has also been applied to the professional nurse who, through compassion and feeding, helps someone to recover from illness. These meanings clearly relate to female roles and presumed attendant personality characteristics. Hence the difficulty male nurses and male infant caretakers face in North American society.

In this western paradigm, nurturance is treated as a personality characteristic of women in their domestic roles, and is extended to cover domestic and compassionate capacities of people generally. This maternal model dominates western gender ideology, and is supported by the Judeo-Christian image of the nurturant and compassionate moral mother.

Buddhist ideology informs all aspects of Thai social interaction, either selfconsciously or unconsciously. Both the canonical Pali texts and popular Thai interpretations of these texts are sources of images that can be used as reference points for interpreting everyday interactions in Thai society.

According to Buddhist logic, a personality trait like nurturance could never be attributed to men or women, for, because there is no self (*anatta*), there can be no accumulation of personality traits which together form some conglomerate category of self or person. Such a personality belief is a "... theoretical error caused by seeing a relation, of one sort or another, between 'self' and the *khanda*" (aggregate, mass, or heap) (Collins 1982:133). This false personality belief is called *sakkayaditthi* (Pali).

Anatta is a very difficult concept to grasp and has been the source of much debate within Buddhist scholarship (Collins 1982, Hoffman 1980, DeSilva 1979). Nevertheless, Theravada Buddhists consider that human suffering is caused by attachment to a false notion of self. The *Abhidhamma* and the *Visuddhimagga* elaborate on the aggregates (*khandas*) that come together in the form of a human organism. These aggregates can be categorized as follows:

- 1 *rupa* (matter)
- 2 *vedana* (sensation or feeling)

- 3 *sañña* (perceptions)
- 4 *samkhara* (mental states, volition)
- 5 *viññana* (consciousness)

Among the material qualities that make up a living organism are 24 secondary derived qualities including the qualities of the femininity faculty and masculinity faculty. These faculties are not internal to the person, but external and subtle or difficult to perceive (Dhammaratana 1964:100).

In short, in the logic of Theravada Buddhism, we come to realize that we hold the false belief that there are male and female humans with separate identities and selves. The concept of person is the conventional truth of the unenlightened (Collins 1982:179). Through insight and wisdom, we learn that "there is no male, no female," and hence no need to develop theories of fixed properties associated with each temporary physical manifestation of male or female.

In Theravada Buddhist logic, there is no person or self but rather a succession of moments of awareness, constantly dying and being reborn, that cluster in the bodies of individuals (Tobias 1973:59). These moments of consciousness have both causes and consequences. The karmic conditioned sequences of cause and effect are what motivate and explain behaviour, not any attribute of self. Just as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it makes sense that man is created in the image of God, so in Theravada Buddhism, it makes sense that humans do not have permanent fixed characteristics for eternity (Tobias 1973:55).

Underlying the Buddhist approach to male and female identities is the concept of impermanence (Pali, *anicca*), best understood in Thailand by a consideration of rebirths and karma (*kam*), a more familiar idiom than the *Abhidhamma*, the commentaries on the discourses of the Buddha. Knowledge of rebirth emphasizes the transitory nature of present identity as humans with male or female features, for every rebirth may be experienced as a male or female (or as an animal or spirit). Unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition where identity as male and female is fixed for eternity, and one has only one lifetime to experience either, Thai men and women have the possibility of experiencing existence as male or female over many rebirths (and recall that this is only "a subtle difference, difficult to

perceive"). In fact, it is only the very last moment before birth that the femininity-faculty or masculinity-faculty is adjusted to produce a male or female infant (Radjadhon 1961:127).

According to the "Three Worlds According to King Ruang," a fourteenth-century text attributed to Phya Lithai, the heir apparent of the central Thai kingdom of Sukhothai, the femininity and masculinity factors that determine the sex of the embryo are there from the moment of formation (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982:117). While the material factors of masculinity and femininity distinguish humans and the lower deities, the higher brahma levels exhibit only a remnant of material factors. At these levels of existence, the physical appearance of beings is masculine, although they have no passions or desires. But at still higher levels, brahma without perceptions possess neither the femininity factor nor the masculinity factor (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982:251). *Nirvana*, the cessation of rebirth, is beyond any consideration of masculinity and femininity; to say that both males and females can reach this level is, in fact, an error of understanding and a distortion of Buddhist logic that is perpetuated by most writers on women and Buddhism. Enlightenment is simply not embodied, and therefore could not be embodied in either gender.

Two myths from the "Three Worlds According to King Ruang" emphasize the nurturant acts of both men and women. While myths describe both men and women feeding the poor and the monks, on one occasion, a rich man feeds the king, his court, citizens, slaves, and all the inhabitants of the city from one pot of rice and curry which, like the loaves and fishes, is constantly sufficient (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982:194). A second beautiful image is the capacity of males and females to feed infants by extending a finger or thumb from which milk flows (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982:132). These beautiful images of nurturant acts do not reflect gender identity, but moral status.

Ortner and Whitehead have noted that "the degree to which cultures have formal, highly elaborated notions of gender and sexuality is itself variable" (1981:6). In Buddhist Southeast Asia, gender does not appear to be as dominant an organizing principle as relative age, wealth, or merit store, for example. Even key symbols such

as the *Naga* or water serpent express a certain degree of androgyny and ambiguity. The *Naga* is an excellent example of the complementarity and reversibility of symbols of masculinity and femininity in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia. As a servant and protector of Buddhism, the *Naga* is a suitable symbol of masculine potency and the power of the forces of nature. As the embodiment of water and the underworld, it is also a symbol of fertility and exhibits feminine characteristics. The *Naga*, like other key symbols of Theravada Buddhism, is an example of the interchangeability of masculine and feminine form. Even some Buddha images display a gentle androgyny. The Thai language demonstrates this lack of extreme gender differentiation; men (*phuu chay*) and women (*phuu ying*) are humans with penises and humans with vaginas, respectively, a minor difference, viewed from the perspective of the cycles of birth and rebirths.

Conclusions

Liang expands the commensal circle from mother and infant to household, community, and beyond to embrace support for all sentient beings. It provides a way around and an acting out of Buddhist paradoxes. Feeding monks followed by sharing the merit with others is a critically important part of ritual occasions in Central Thailand. Wijeyewardene points out the inherent contradiction between the pursuit of individual merit and the denial of the reality of the individual. He suggests that the transference of merit is a particularly suitable reconciliation of this contradiction (Wijeyewardene 1986:49).

In both ritual and nonritual contexts, the act of eating together constitutes a group. Groups formed by the act of eating together may share group identity only during the act of eating. The meals of precept keepers sharing donated food after a temple service and spontaneous dinner parties in Bangkok restaurants exhibit this miraculous but transitory group closeness created through eating together.

These rules of reciprocity affirm that "... the expectation of services in return for benefits varies between a meticulous accounting

and the never-calculated easy transactions of old friends As long as love (*khwaamrrag*) and respect (*nabthyy*) dominate, neither partner reckons his efforts. Love and respect thus become stabilizing factors in liaisons, for then fewer are inclined to break the relationship" (L. Hanks 1962:1259). With the Hanks who have nurtured Thai studies, these relationships, stabilized by love and respect, will never be broken.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was prepared as a tribute to Jane and Lucien Hanks and published as Working Paper Number 8, Thai Studies Project, York University. Many of the ideas in it were developed at Australian National University when I had the opportunity to discuss ideas about *liang* and nurturance with colleagues there. My understanding of the meaning of *liang* was vastly strengthened by conversations with Anthony Diller, and I thank him for his help.
- 2 Personal communication, Anthony Diller, June 1987.
- 3 Personal communication, Anthony Diller, June 1987.
- 4 Personal communication, Anthony Diller, June 1987.

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