http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2012/07/11/review-of-lovelorn-ghost-and-magical-monk-tlcnmrev-xxxix/

Justin McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*.

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Reviewed by Erick White.

Few scholarly monographs in recent years have risked making large arguments about the breadth and depth of Thai Buddhism as a whole. Fewer still have critically reflected on the various long-standing assumptions and models which have shaped the academic study of Thai Buddhism. Justin McDaniel's *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* pursues both of these challenges, and does so with passion, wit, insight and care. McDaniel explicitly seeks to upend established descriptions, interpretations and theories regarding the character and dynamics of Thai religiosity in the present and the past. This ambitious rethinking is, moreover, solidly grounded in a broad and deep substantive knowledge of Thai Buddhism, as both a textual tradition of scholasticism and a living tradition of practice, as well as an impressive familiarity with the wide scope of existing academic studies in English, Thai and other languages. As a result, this monograph will likely serve for years to come as a benchmark in the study of Thai Buddhism, and McDaniel's arguments, claims and interpretations will be advanced, debated and critiqued by future scholars seeking to elucidate Thai Buddhism with the same care and insight he has displayed.

While ranging broadly across the full expanse of past and present Thai Buddhism, McDaniel concentrates most centrally on four specific topical foci: sacred biographies, protective magical texts, devotional rituals and liturgies, and vernacular religious art. In the process, he fruitfully brings into his discussion and opens up for investigation a range of source materials typically neglected in the study of Thai Buddhism, materials such as films, murals, ritual calendars, amulets, regional liturgies, statuary, hagiographies, comic books, CDs, and tourism performances. Accordingly, the substantive picture of Thai Buddhism conveyed is richer, more idiosyncratic and less tied to the stereotypic representations typically conveyed by Thai authorities, foreign scholars or casual observation. Providing structure within and across this buzzing diversity is McDaniel's repeated use of the figures of Mae Nak ("the lovelorn ghost", of his book's title) and Somdet To ("the magical monk"). As two neglected figures within academic studies of Thai Buddhist history and mythology, they provide numerous illustrative examples of his more general points. The end result is an illuminating look at familiar concerns, but one which asks new questions from unusual angles *via* the use of unconventional materials.

After framing the general analytical and interpretive approach of his study in the Introduction, McDaniel proceeds in the next four chapters to unpack in considerable detail the empirical and interpretive significance of his four neglected thematic topics, before closing with an impassioned call for a new approach to the study of Thai Buddhism. Chapter I centers on an examination of hagiography, focusing on the biographical tales told about Somdet To, a high-ranking Bangkok monk of the nineteenth century who is regarded by many as the most famous and popular Buddhist saint in contemporary Central Thailand. Through the stories told about this monk and the uses made of him by contemporary Thai Buddhists, McDaniel seeks to challenge common assumptions that elites dominate religious discourse, that Buddhism is primarily about meditation and world peace, and that Thai saints only exemplify certain canonical values such as nonattachment and indifference.

In Chapter II, attention shifts to religious texts, their multiple mediums of transmission, and their various social uses, focusing especially on the Jinapanjara, a protective magical

incantation written by Somdet To. In the course of examining the social life of this text across vernacular scriptures, hand-books, CDs, shrines, films and chanting clubs, McDaniel critically examines ideas of the esoteric and the magical in contemporary academic studies of Thai Buddhism.

Chapter III explores in depth the cacophonous ritual calendar of Buddhist Thailand, the complicated history of modern liturgical chanting manuals, and the idiosyncratically expansive pantheon of deities that contemporary Thais supplicate. Central to all of these discussions is McDaniel's criticism that, contrary to many scholars' assertions, there has not been a pronounced standardization and homogenization of Buddhist belief and practice over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that dynamism, debate and diversity have in fact flourished.

In Chapter IV, vernacular religious art and its social reception takes center stage, as statues, shrines, amulets and murals are examined in terms of their material aesthetics, associational logics and social uses. McDaniel's overarching goal here is to investigate the material and artistic culture of Buddhist Thailand within its local historical and performative contexts rather than the more common art-historical frames of canonical iconography, aesthetic styles and Indian precursors.

The illumination, appeal and persuasiveness of McDaniel's various arguments are due to a variety of literary and stylistic elements beyond those arguments' interpretive and logical strengths. For one thing, the rhetorical style of the monograph is for the most part conversational and non-technical. Whether describing the spatial layout of the temple that houses Mae Nak's shrine in Bangkok or examining arguments about the Tantric character of popular Thai Buddhism, McDaniel's discussions remain accessible to and informative for the general reader. In addition, the monograph is richly descriptive and packed with numerous examples of each of the general topics explored. There is in fact an embarrassment of descriptive riches, as McDaniel explicates film narratives of Somdet To, describes temple murals depicting hell, reports on a shrine grotto dedicated to Somdet To, or unpacks the scriptural components of regional liturgies. This attention to

comprehensive descriptive detail grabs the reader's attention and richly conveys the subject under discussion. At the same time, McDaniel's accounts are peppered with evocative personal vignettes of his explorations, discoveries and realizations in the field, such that the reader frequently has a sense of standing alongside the scholar as insights are made. Lastly, McDaniel's arguments are built on a broad and deep foundation of scholarship, and expanded upon in sometimes quite extensive footnotes that tell stories unto themselves. Most noteworthy in this regard is the seriousness with which the author takes Thai-language primary sources and scholarly works, integrating them extensively into his scholarly framework.

Aside from any of its specific interpretive and theoretical arguments, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* is also noteworthy for its general approach to the study of Thai Buddhism. The book consistently highlights the cacophony of voices and individual agents at work in contemporary Thai religiosity, emphasizing in particular the ambiguous and potentially contradictory character of Buddhist beliefs and practices as lived realities. It seeks to document the everyday and everyman of mainstream religiosity, rather than focusing upon the elite or the official, the dominant or the marginalized. McDaniel's arguments consistently return to aesthetics, practices, technologies and repertoires, rather than focusing on theologies, worldviews, canonical teachings and official doctrines. The monograph relentlessly examines Buddhism in Thailand in its full local, historical messiness, rather than seeking explanation by appeals to the idea of Theravada Buddhism in general or Indian Buddhist precursors. Moreover, the book prioritizes and seeks to vindicate the practical and worldly concerns of Thai Buddhism in contrast to those soteriological and transcendent dimensions that most normative discussions of Buddhism emphasize. The book's arguments consistently privilege and emphasize the assumptions and statements of Thai informants over scholarly theoretical and explanatory models, regardless of how much the former fail to conform to the expectations of the latter. As an exploration of the historical, social and performative contexts of practical, everyday religious behavior, the book is, as McDaniel makes explicit, "an exercise in following, listening to and seeing individual Buddhist agents" (p. 19). In all of these ways, this

monograph represents an exemplary model that one hopes will inspire future scholarly work guided by these same principles.

At the same time, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* is a sustained, informed investigation of a diverse set of foundational, but frequently neglected, methodological, substantive, interpretive, analytical and theoretical issues in the academic study of Thai Buddhism. Many general technical and academic debates frequently linger under the surface of McDaniel's descriptions and arguments, even as he also explicitly engages with a variety of specific scholarly theses, models and theories. McDaniel is forthright and opinionated as he passes judgment on the analyses and interpretations offered in the work of scholars, named and unnamed, who have preceded him. As a result, the monograph exemplifies, provokes and demands greater self-reflexivity regarding the general theories, analytic frames, conceptual models, interpretive categories and empirical conclusions which scholars have advanced in the study of Thai Buddhism. Inevitably, however, such self-reflection is deeply shaped by the disciplinary training that every scholar brings to the subject at hand.

Inspired by McDaniel's spirited response to prior scholarship, what follows is a more extended series of critical reflections on some of the technical academic arguments advanced explicitly and implicitly by *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*. I approach these arguments, and the broader scholarly issues that they raise, from the perspective of an anthropologist, rather than that of a religious-studies scholar. My hope is that this contrasting disciplinary perspective will prove illuminating as I seek critically to rethink many of the important arguments, ideas and positions that McDaniel advances.

Rethinking Received Wisdom, Critiquing Established Analyses

Framing and underlying the various topically focused arguments that McDaniel advances are a number of more general claims about the historical, social and cultural dynamics of Thai Buddhism. Each of these is in turn a critical response to established perspectives that have dominated, in McDaniel's opinion, the academic study of Thai Buddhism over the last few decades. McDaniel continuously returns to these counter-claims across his

various chapters, and they thus constitute a meta-counter-discourse at the heart of his book. In combination, they also constitute, in essence, a more general argument about what McDaniel believes is the misunderstood character of Thai Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The weakness of modernist reform Buddhism

Central to the story of modern Thai Buddhism as typically told is the importance of the modernist reforms that are seen as beginning under the new Chakri dynasty, intellectually crystallizing with Prince Mongkut's innovations, socially expanding with the emergence of the Thammayut order, and institutionally intensifying when administratively advanced by the modernizing nation-state beginning in the late nineteenth century. The final result of this multi-faceted series of developments is understood as a more rationalized, standardized, centralized and homogenous form of Buddhism which increasingly spread across the social and geographical terrain of Siam and penetrated its various classes and subcultures. Religious beliefs, ritual practices, social institutions, cultural forms and even personal experiences are all seen as being shaped by these processes of rationalization, standardization, centralization and homogenization. Demystification, bureaucratization, purification and increasing orthodoxy are frequently seen as concomitant historical developments.[1]

McDaniel is intensely skeptical of this thesis. While never repudiating it absolutely, he sharply qualifies it over and over. A flourishing diversity of rituals, liturgies, ideas and experiences has in fact persisted, he claims. The reforms were not as coordinated, all encompassing or effective as is frequently argued. Many dimensions of Thai Buddhism were not subject to interventionist policies of reform and reconstruction. The power of orthodoxy and the degree of demystification have been seriously overstated. The social centrality of the Pali canon, official doctrine and the institutions of the national Sangha is much exaggerated. The lived reality of Thai Buddhism on the ground and in the field, McDaniel ultimately argues, runs defiantly against the grain and even in dismissive

[1] One of the earliest and most forceful critiques of this development is the now classic Kamala Tiyavanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

ignorance of this supposedly dominant modernist reform sensibility which was backed by the administrative power of the state and its affiliated elite social groups.

McDaniel's suspicions and criticisms are justified and valid, but what is unclear is whether in countering an overly robust and often simplistic narrative of the triumph of modernist reform he has not himself swung to an opposite extreme. By the end of the book, the reader is left unsure how and with regard to what issues modernist reform has proven successful, despite the fact that McDaniel makes clear that he sees its influence as more circumscribed than traditionally understood. Yet claims of standardization, centralization and homogenization are inevitably claims about relative degrees of reduction in diversity and localism. Pointing out that there is no single national ritual calendar or liturgical form, consequently, is not obvious, definitive proof that such projects have failed. Literal singularity of belief, practice or cultural form among a national population is a virtual empirical impossibility after all. Moreover, it is not clear that the national is the only framework against which such developments should be measured. Growing similarity across geographical, sectarian, ethnic, class, gender, occupational, age or other markers of group identification could also constitute evidence of standardization.

McDaniel's discussion of the history of liturgical manuals, for example, apparently points to the emergence in the twentieth century of novel attempts to envision and produce liturgical texts that claimed to represent standard Northeastern or Southern regional traditions. Does this not represent a move towards standardization and homogenization, even if not national in scope or reform in character? Does a diversity of empirical content that nonetheless follows an increasingly similar set of formal features, structure of idioms and hierarchy of values in the practical instructions of liturgical manuals constitute evidence of increasing standardization, proliferating diversity, or perhaps both? On the other hand, while modernist reform celebration of the Pali canon is clearly not universal or uncontested, presumably McDaniel would agree that a greater percentage of contemporary Thai Buddhists think about, refer to, and make use of Pali canonical texts than was the case in the mid-nineteenth century. Does this not indicate the expanding

influence of modernist reform Buddhist sensibilities and ideas, even if not their complete and total dominance? Is it not possible in fact to imagine that both standardization and pluralism have increased during the twentieth century in Thai Buddhism?

What McDaniel's criticisms make clear, I would argue, is that we actually need much more conceptually precise, analytically focused and substantively fine-grained empirical studies of both the successes and the failures, the achievements and the limitations of modernist reform Buddhism in and across Thai history. They also make evident that we need similar studies of the counter-reactions provoked by projects of modernist reform. Far too often, scholars have accepted the triumphalist ideological claims and public assertions of reformist actors or institutions as an accurate representation of the actual social changes produced. Any reformist social project is inevitably highly uneven in time, in space, in scope and in focus with regard to its various consequences. Yet we have few careful, fine-grained studies of modernist reform projects as they unfolded in particular local settings or interacted with particular dimensions of Thai religiosity.[2] Similarly, there has been little to no attention to how such reform projects could play out very unevenly across the total religious field of beliefs, practices, organizations, institutions and actors. Empirically documenting how reformists could unevenly target different dimensions of the religious field at different times and in different places would do much to clarify and complicate our established understanding of modernist reform in general as a driver of historical and social change. Empirically documenting how the interests and projects of different groups of reformers could conflict with each other in practice would also do much to enrich our understanding of modernist reform Buddhism in Thai history. Such careful empirical studies would also demand that scholars define more precisely the criteria by which they measure standardization, homogenization, centralization and other related developments. All of these refinements would do much, I believe, to illuminate and advance our understanding of the particular saliency and consequences, intended and unintended, of modernist reform Buddhism in Thai society and history.

[2] One fine study in this vein is Patrick Jory, "Thai and Western Buddhist Scholarship in the Age of Colonialism: King Chulalongkorn Redefines the Jatakas", *Journal of Asian Studies* LXI, 3 (2002): 891-918.

The exaggerated influence of religious elites

As a corollary to his skepticism regarding modernist reform Buddhism, McDaniel repeatedly questions the influence of elites in shaping modern Thai Buddhism. This is the flip side to his defense of the integrity, agency and autonomy of the average Thai Buddhist practitioner. Over and over, he criticizes prior scholarly interpretations that posit the masses as victims of the propaganda, manipulation, suppression, and scheming of self-serving religious and other social elites who seek to produce commonly shared Buddhist beliefs, practices or social forms that actually only serve the elites' own interests and worldviews. Thus, for example, the biographies, teachings and amulets of Somdet To are not the product of a propaganda machine, a single factory, a single committee, a smoky backroom, a royal commission, a monastic council, a political party, or a military dictator (this is McDaniel's language, p. 64). They are rather the product of a diversity of diffuse and disconnected average but willing participants, collectively acting in an uncoordinated and open fashion that ultimately creates a plurality of attitudes, practices and material products. "The diversity in Somdet To's hagiographical tradition shows that the purveyors of his story are neither being unconsciously controlled by the parameters of a particular biographical genre nor consciously manipulating a genre" (p. 64). Similarly strong critiques of the limited ability of economic, political, military, monastic and royal elites determinatively to shape and influence mainstream Thai religiosity also repeatedly surface in McDaniel's discussions of protective incantations and magical practices, ritual forms and devotional liturgies, and vernacular religious arts.

It is not particularly clear, however, exactly which prior scholars have advanced such strong arguments about the controlling influence of elites. While McDaniel, with the help of footnotes, sometimes offers hints, he rarely if ever explicitly identifies a particular scholar, monograph or article as advancing this position, nor does he reproduce in full any particular argument to this effect in order to counter it. The argument in principle hovers instead as a generic type that he frequently vilifies. This looks at times as dangerously close to creating a rhetorical straw-man, especially since most social-scientific models of ideological and cultural influence rely on more nuanced ideas of

socialization, public opinion formation and hegemony than are contained in the notion of manipulative elites and duped masses. Such models also rarely suggest that a single set of elites consciously design and are successful in spreading a singular norm, value or idea that then gains uniform dominance over a broad and diverse populace's ideas and actions. McDaniel at times sounds almost as if he is advancing a version of the dominant ideology thesis, whereas scholars who do advance arguments about elite hegemonic control and influence rarely in fact rely on such a model.

Furthermore, defending the autonomy of everyday religious practitioners does not logically entail thoroughly repudiating the influence of elite conceptions, arguments or frames of reference. One can after all speak of relative autonomy and relative influence, remaining conscious all the while that the particular contours of this balance are empirical questions to be determined in the course of specific investigation of particular social and historical circumstances. To the degree that McDaniel's assertions remain at the level of general elites and general practitioners in general circumstances, therefore, his arguments open themselves up to legitimate criticism and fail to provide nuanced accounts of the complex interweaving of autonomy and influence at play in social behavior in particular settings. Again, I would argue that what is needed are more fine-grained empirical investigations of the uneven influence of elite actors, ideologies and institutions in particular social contexts or among particular social actors as they live their religious lives in order to more precisely document just how much influence elites have and under what conditions.

The centrality of Thai society and history

For a variety of complex disciplinary reasons, studies of national or regional Buddhist traditions have historically deferred in interpretations of beliefs and practices to the idea of originary precursors (such as Indian Buddhism) or general sectarian identifications (such as Theravada, Mahayana or Tantric Buddhism). McDaniel is consistently and justifiably critical of this repeated tendency of earlier scholars of Thai Buddhism to judge local Thai texts, teachings, practices and material forms in terms of their degree of conformity with seemingly older, more authoritative and more authentic Indian, Pali, or

Sanskrit precursors. As he accurately observes regarding Tambiah's classic study of Thai amulets, "He looks past Thai history to Indian history, past Thai-language sources to Pali and Sanskrit sources" (p. 194). Moreover, a far too frequent consequence of such an evaluative frame is that Thai cases are interpreted as a decline from normative classical standards, and as a distortion, deviation or misreading as well. Local innovations become either the remains of a discredited pre-Buddhist past or signs of the corruption brought about by modernity. As a result the creativity, value and legitimacy of Thai Buddhism is always somewhat suspect and in need of justifying itself, while the local conditions and meanings through which Thai Buddhism takes shape are frequently ignored by scholars.

McDaniel's investigations of Somdet To's biographies, of the multiple forms and use of the Jinpanjara, of liturgical chanting manuals, and of murals, statues and amulets consistently refocus interpretations around the specificity of Thai society, history and culture. Vernacular scriptures, local histories, non-canonical teachings, Thai social norms and the statements of average Thais on the street are the resources to which McDaniel turns when seeking to understand the cultural meaning and social significance of the various phenomena that he is investigating. Such a reorientation in approach is welcome and long overdue, especially from the perspective of an anthropologist (even though we have in the past been just as guilty of deference to canonical and trans-national precursors). More careful explications of the substantive specificity of national, regional and local traditions of Thai Buddhism on their own scriptural, ritual, liturgical and institutional terms is one of the more exciting and productive avenues opening up in current scholarship, and McDaniel is one of the earliest advocates of such a project. Such an approach lays the groundwork for a truly comparative understanding of Thai Buddhism in the past and present, as well as a nuanced appreciation for how ideas about the authority of the Theravada or the salience of Southeast Asian or Indian precursors were historically used and deployed in the social life of local Buddhisms on the ground. As McDaniel notes, however, the vast wealth of vernacular, Thai-language materials has hardly been tapped for translation and study by foreign scholars, and thus much work awaits us.

De-stigmatizing apotropaic Buddhism

Over and over in the course of his investigations, McDaniel returns to a familiar set of practical religious goals – protection, healing and blessing – embedded in or woven around the biographies, rituals, liturgies, technologies and vernacular arts that he is documenting. These personal ends and social uses are overwhelmingly oriented towards furthering more or less near-term worldly success, prosperity and happiness. By chanting the Jinapanjara, making offerings to Mae Nak, collecting blessed water from Somdet To's grotto or employing one of numerous other ritual techniques, Thais seek to win lotteries, heal suffering, pass examinations, avoid conscription, impress neighbors, achieve invulnerability to bullets, augment financial wealth or secure romantic love, to name just a few possibilities. While the pursuit of such mundane felicities is granted legitimacy even within the canonical teachings of Theravada and Thai Buddhism, modernist interpreters of Buddhism have consistently stigmatized and questioned the legitimate value of such pursuits, seeing them at best as concessions to either the uneducated masses or a laity trapped by worldly obligations. Yet as McDaniel makes undeniably clear, the active pursuit of liberation from samsara and the cultivation of saintly virtues is the goal of only a small minority and thus serves as a poor standard against which to judge other goals and practices as falling short. Most Thai Buddhists are, most of the time, equally unapologetically pursuing more immediate worldly benefits, and monks and temples unapologetically facilitate such pursuits. Exclusive valorization of Buddhism's soteriological and philosophical dimensions, furthermore, has consistently caused scholars, as McDaniel rightly observes, to ignore numerous, more culturally prominent religious phenomena hidden in plain view. These include many of the very topics explored in this book.

In Melford Spiro's classic model of Burmese Theravada Buddhism, such immediate worldly felicities define apotropaic Buddhism, against which Spiro contrasted other legitimate and sanctioned religious orientations such as nibbanic Buddhism (concerned with liberation from suffering, samsara and rebirth), kammatic Buddhism (concerned with achieving greater happiness across the continuum of worldly rebirths), esoteric Buddhism (concerned with eschatological and millenarian expectations), and

supernaturalism (concerned with contractual transactions between humans and neutral or malevolent spirits).[3] While the conceptualization of the total religious field of Theravada Buddhism has admittedly been the subject of an unresolved and contentious debate since the 1960s, Spiro's general frame – if not all of his particular arguments – continues to have analytic value, I would argue.[4] In this sense, then, McDaniel's monograph is a thorough-going, wide-ranging effort to restore the dignity, value, and importance of apotropaic Buddhism within scholarly interpretations of Thai Buddhism. Apotropaic Buddhism is, as he sees it, central to the cultural meaning and social significance of the everyday, lived religiosity practiced by the average Thai. To this end, McDaniel is undeniably successful. With the publication of *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk,* scholars should in the future find it even more difficult than in the past to ignore, dismiss or denigrate apotropaic beliefs, goals or practices as an insignificant or less authentic form of Thai Buddhist religiosity.

In his zeal to de-stigmatize and recuperate the social salience of the apotropaic, however, McDaniel has much less to say about those other religious orientations within Thai Buddhism, and most of what he does say is directed at deflating the over-emphasis of the soteriological in prior academic approaches. I would argue, however, that each of Spiro's "types" or "modalities" of Buddhism constitute relatively distinct practical orientations and religious projects of virtuous self-fashioning which are sanctioned as legitimate within Thai history and which, moreover, can be pursued simultaneously in a complementary fashion by any individual or group. If this is true, then any discussion of Thai Buddhism as a lived religion on the ground in all its full messiness must acknowledge and analytically account for all of these orientations and projects within the life of any particular individual or group.

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[3] See Melford E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism: A Study in the Explanation and Resolution of Suffering* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967), and *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

[4] Benedicte Brac de la Perriere has provided an analytically nuanced review of the historically changing ways in which the total field of Burmese Theravada Buddhist religiosity has been conceptualized since the earliest scholarly studies. Note however that there are substantively and analytically significant differences in how scholars have conceptualized the total religious field in Burma and in Thailand (as well as in the other Theravada countries of Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia), although these differences have rarely been commented upon or theoretically explored. See Benedicte Brac de la Perriere, "An Overview of the Field of Religion in Burmese Studies", *Asian Ethnology* LXVIII, 2 (2009): 185-210.

In particular, what must be explored is how different social groups, movements, institutions and settings have historically articulated in contrasting ways these different religious orientations and projects in relation to one other as elements of the authentic religious life. Other recent scholarship, after all, has explored how the modernist reform privileging of the soteriological orientation, in combination with the expansion and spread of modern vipassana meditation techniques, has created a growing movement of Thai monks, temples and organizations providing instruction to laity who are explicitly seeking kammatic benefits and even nibbanic release through a meditative refashioning of their experience and identity.[5] While such religious movements represent a minority of the Thai population, they are historically speaking a growing and novel minority, and one which it is somewhat difficult to locate or make sense of within the full spectrum of Thai religiosity when viewed through the interpretive emphasis upon apotropaic Buddhism that McDaniel has prioritized in this book.

Analytic Categories and Concepts: Repudiate, Transcend and Replace

Throughout *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* McDaniel is dismissive of the value of a wide range of descriptive and analytic dualisms frequently employed by scholars to make sense of Thai Buddhism. Urban *versus* rural, monastic *versus* lay, classical *versus* vernacular, written *versus* oral, canonical *versus* folk, modern *versus* traditional, elite *versus* popular, Thammayut *versus* Mahanikai, Indic *versus* local, otherworldly *versus* worldly, orthodox *versus* heterodox – these are just some of the various categorical distinctions that are found wanting. All are ultimately perceived as inadequate because they are unable accurately to convey the ambiguities, inconsistencies and complexities of religion on the ground. McDaniel's actual travels amongst Thai Buddhists exposes him to many more exceptions and many more idiosyncrasies than can be usefully described, explained or contained by such categorical dualisms. The living

[5] Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). And yet these same practitioners of vipassana in the pursuit of nibbana are not averse to making recourse to idioms and strategies of protective, apotropaic Buddhism, although they do so with their own unique interpretive twists, as Cook makes clear in more recent scholarship. See Joanna Cook, "Power, Protection and Perfectibility: Aspiration and Materiality in Thailand", pp. 27-50 in Liana Chua, Joanna Cook, Nicholas Long and Lee Wilson, eds., *Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

tradition of Buddhism exceeds these interpretive frames, and the descriptions that McDaniel provides and the arguments that he advances seek to undermine and displace the value that these and other common dualisms have had in the scholarly investigation of Thai Buddhism.

McDaniel is equally critical of a series of analytic categories and the interpretive claims and models that they have fostered. Syncretism, hybridity, Tantric Theravada, esoteric, commodification, vernacularization, standardization, homogenization – as heuristic tools describing traits of Thai Buddhism or historical dynamics, each is examined in some detail. All are ultimately found to be inadequate and misleading at best. McDaniel doubts their ability to provide sufficient clarity or explication, and in the end he suggests that they be abandoned. They cannot convey the buzzing, blooming complexity and contradictions he sees as foundational within Thai Buddhist religiosity. As he concludes in his closing pages,

> In attempting to describe modern Thai Buddhism, I have not tried to create an ideal or even a comprehensive gallery of features and standards. It is not that I did not try. It is just that various methods, models, tools and approaches that I have considered over the years applying to this subject, if it is even a subject, have proved inadequate. (p. 223)

And yet, while arguing in general for a more radically inductive approach, McDaniel does strongly advocate the adoption of one particular heuristic category whose descriptive and interpretive value resides in the fact it captures what is experience-near for Thai actors, and thus recognizable to and valued by Thai Buddhists themselves. Moreover, this heuristic concept highlights what Thai Buddhists do rather than what they believe, and prioritizes pragmatic ends rather than normative canonical ideals – both of which are important elements of McDaniel's general approach. For all these reasons, McDaniel argues that scholars of Thai Buddhism should focus upon "repertoires". He defines a repertoire as "a constantly shifting collection of gestures, objects, texts, plots, tropes, ethical maxims, precepts, ritual movements and expectations that any individual agent employs and draws upon when acting and explaining action" (p. 225). As assemblages of somatic, affective, and semantic cues, of scripts and strategies for pragmatic action designed to get things done, often in coordination with other actors and

through the manipulation of material artifacts, they constitute a basic building block in the creation of an inter-subjectively meaningful and shared social world. More specifically, however, McDaniel proposes that repertoires centered on the four themes of security (*khwam plotphai*, *kan pongkan*), heritage (*moradok)*, graciousness (*khwam sawtdiphap*, *kreng chai*), and abundance (*udom sombun*) significantly define and guide behavior in the everyday market-place of Thai religious ideas, objects and practices. In McDaniel's opinion, these axiomatic values and the repertoires that support them constitute mainstream Thai Buddhist orientations and behavior much more pervasively than such normative saintly values as nonattachment, indifference, compassion and selflessness (p. 14).

McDaniel is right to be suspicious of the explanatory value of the dualisms he criticizes. Likewise, the scholarly concepts that he critiques are in need of serious rethinking. Yet in the end I remain doubtful that we can totally dispense with such dualisms, or that the various scholarly concepts are so flawed as to be destined for the dust-heap. McDaniel's own language throughout the monograph indicates just how hard it is to dispense with the dualisms. Despite his best efforts, they do nonetheless frequently slip back in as descriptive adjectives, at best, or implicit interpretive frames, at worst, as he fleshes out his picture of Thai Buddhism in all its diversity. One wonders therefore whether it is possible to exile such dualistic distinctions, and whether instead it is enough explicitly to note the limited reach of such dualistic frames, and to use this terminology more carefully, precisely, and with the necessary qualifiers. Similarly, while syncretism, commodification and other such scholarly concepts do suffer from logical and explanatory weaknesses, it is not clear to me why the better response is not revision in the pursuit of greater analytic clarity and precision rather than abandonment. All scholarly concepts are heuristic simplifications that cannot adequately capture the complexity of social reality, after all. And their value lies in how carefully they are defined, operationalized and applied, as well as how adequate they are as tools for answering the particular analytic questions under investigation. Disagreements regarding all of these issues are the very heart of scholarly debate, moreover. Without boring readers with the details, I would argue that revised conceptualizations of many of the scholarly terms that

McDaniel dismisses is possible, would address many of his concerns, and could consequently provide improved insights in the study of Thai Buddhism. I am not yet persuaded, therefore, that the time for their abandonment is at hand.

To an anthropologist's eye, McDaniel's idea of repertoires is, on the other hand, a welcome, complementary addition to the academic tool-kit. In its emphasis on practice, performance and pragmatic action, it speaks to the analytical and methodological predispositions of anthropologists, and so my endorsement is not so surprising. His four thematic repertoires also provide very useful frames for thinking about religiously orientated social action and collective behavior in Thailand. Still, additional studies employing these particular repertoires will be necessary to determine just how useful they are. The ideas of security, heritage, graciousness and abundance are not always front and center in the actual descriptions that McDaniel advances in his book. Nor are these concepts often centrally integrated into the interpretations that he provides. Often, instead, they are proposed as framing devices towards the end of discussions and explanations, and as ways of categorizing and labeling the phenomena at hand.

The concept of repertoire, moreover, requires additional social, historical and theoretical clarification, I would argue. To begin with, security, heritage, graciousness and abundance hardly exhaust the salient repertoires in circulation within mainstream Thai Buddhism, but instead are probably best envisioned as repertoires within the project of apotropaic Buddhism. Surely however there are other sets of thematically-focused repertoires that provide the scripts for meaningful performative action with regard to other religious projects of self-cultivation such as the nibbanic or the kammatic. Clarifying the diverse range of repertoires available for use across the various domains of sanctioned religious action, therefore, is a necessary task. In addition, documenting the variability of such repertoires across historical eras and social landscapes would also seem necessary if one is to avoid the danger of the unwarranted, ahistorical generalizations against which McDaniel himself warns. Likewise, one can easily speculate that different religious institutions, groups, organizations and subcultures articulate, prioritize and privilege different repertoires in different combinations, and that

these more intimate social environments of action are in fact the very social settings which nurture, shape and reproduce over time repertoires as public, shared cultural forms. How to account for the shared quality of repertoires or their social reproduction over time are questions that McDaniel does not really seek to answer, but such questions inevitably would bedevil social scientists. The comparative synchronic and diachronic investigation of religious repertoires within and across religious institutions and subcultures, therefore, constitutes a necessary next step if the concept of repertoires is to prove as interpretively useful as I suspect it could.

A Circumscribed Sociology, the Valorization of the Individual, and the Absence of the Social

McDaniel describes his study as "a pragmatic sociological study of cultural repertoires" (p. 9), and frequently calls for attention to the local, contextual use by individuals of biographies, texts, practices and objects in the social construction of reality. At the same time, he is consistently dismissive of what he considers sociologically reductionistic explanations. His goal is "to temper any macrosociological speculative analysis with the explanations and actions of individual agents" (p. 9). Thus he criticizes studies in which Jatukham Ramathep amulet fever "is reduced to the product of modern socioeconomic forces and their moral ramifications" (p. 192), while praising scholarly work on amulets that

> does not reduce the rise of amulets simply to sociohistorical forces but instead emphasizes that the histories of individual amulets, individual sacred monks, and individual thieves and crime fighters need to be undertaken to explain why certain amulets are treasured and others fall into disuse. (p. 196)

Explanations that rely upon sociohistorical forces (such as globalization, Westernization, commercialism, lower-class frustrations, modern anxieties), abstract social theorizing (such as Bourdieu's ideas about habitus and power or Foucault's notions of power and resistance), or social institutions (such as the state, the Sangha administration, or the palace) are consistently characterized as reductionistic and inadequate. Too many scholars are seen as granting too much power to social structural forces and social institutions, whereas for McDaniel "we cannot reduce the belief in the efficacy of magic

to class, premodernity or modernity, economic conditions, cultural anxiety, political chaos" (p. 227).

McDaniel characterizes his book, in fact, as "an ethnomethodological study" (p. 9). He quite explicitly seeks "to offer a new way of approaching the study of Thai Buddhism through repertoire versus institution or doctrine" (p. 22). Focusing on repertoires and their use by individuals, furthermore, alleviates the risks of misunderstanding that result from relying too heavily on theory, over-ambitious analytics, and sweeping substantive generalizations.

> By seeing multiple examples of these practices we can avoid overarching, explanatory theories and offer a less theoretically filtered view of the why of Thai Buddhism and begin to understand those things that are simply taken for granted by the practitioners themselves. (p. 13)

By centering his approach around a method that investigates the practical reasoning and reflexive accounts that individuals employ to create a shared, inter-subjective social order, McDaniel seeks to advance his goals of defending the autonomy of individual actors (*versus* macro social forces), defending the understandings and priorities of everyday Thai actors (*versus* scholarly theorizing), and defending messy diversity (*versus* generalizing statements about culture and society at large).

For a social scientist, not surprisingly, such a perspective is ultimately not so persuasive. It remains unclear to me why one cannot approach the study of Thai Buddhism through an integrated examination of repertoire, institution *and* doctrine. Ethnomethodology has displayed a consistent historic weakness in accounting for or explaining the dynamics of social institutions or structural phenomenon. Therefore, unless sociologists wish to deny the social reality and causal influence of either of those analytic dimensions of social life, they have typically complemented ethnomethodolgical studies with other types of interpretations and explanations. Different methods and theories answer different questions about analytically distinct levels of social life and social processes. While no single theoretical model or methodological approach in sociology neatly explains the macro, meso and micro dimensions of society, sociologists do believe that all ultimately need to be attended to and granted their relative influence *and* autonomy. Sociological

theorizing, after all, ultimately seeks – even if it never truly achieves and constantly debates how to achieve – a balanced but integrated accounting of structure *and* agency in explanations of micro, meso and macro social phenomena.

McDaniel's presentation of contemporary Thai Buddhism, however, actually has very little to say about the dynamics of the macro, meso or micro dimensions of Thai social life. There is no serious attempt to come to terms with how structural phenomenon – such as class, gender, sexuality or ethnicity, for example – may influence and shape Buddhist beliefs, practices and experiences. Similarly, there is no sustained attempt to examine how different institutions and organizations – such as the military, businesses, the monarchy, or the media, for example – may influence and shape Buddhist narratives, repertoires or experiences. McDaniel is after all consistently critical of either of these types of explanations. And yet surprisingly, despite his emphasis upon the local and contextual, there is actually also very little close examination of the emergent dynamics of particular groups of actors seeking particular ends within particular social contexts at particular points of time. Ethnomethodologists, for example, carry out detailed, fine-grained conversational and observational analysis to show how through narrative and coordinated social interaction the common sense facticity and interpretive frames of an intimate social world are produced, secured and sustained by its members. Nothing like this is attempted in the book, and thus it is, strictly speaking, fairer to say that ethnomethodology has inspired McDaniel's approach but that his arguments are not ethnomethodological *per se*. Nor would one characterize his interpretations as dramaturgical, symbolic interactionist or phenomenological, other standard sociological approaches utilized in micro-sociological investigation.

McDaniel consistently presents repertoires as the possession of individuals. Nowhere does he talk about the repertoires of a group, an organization or an institution. In this valorization of individual agency and implicit denial of collective agency, repertoires become more or less socially free-floating phenomenon. Both their replication across the social landscape and their enduring, patterned, shared nature, therefore, become difficult in fact to explain. Likewise, the discussions in *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical*

Monk of individuals' using and making meaning with biographies, texts, rituals and artistic objects downplay or neglect how the social, collective organization of action can shape, guide or influence (which is not to claim determine) such pragmatic use or meaning making. McDaniel's passion to defend the autonomy, agency and creativity of individuals ultimately renders invisible the complicated, coordinated character of much individual action and reduces sociality to an analytically ephemeral and epiphenomenal factor.

Just as surprising is the empirical invisibility of the social in McDaniel's account of contemporary Buddhist Thailand. This is most evident if one thinks about the typically underappreciated fact that there have been dramatic changes in the social organization of Buddhism over the past century in Thailand. Compared to the beginning of the twentieth century, contemporary Thailand is home to a diverse, robust, complex and extensive ecology of collective forms of organized religious behavior. The scale, reach, and intensity of religious groups, organizations, institutions, movements and subcultures is remarkable in comparative historical perspective. The religious landscape is littered with a diverse set of formally bounded social environments for organizing and coordinating collective action, producing in the process a much more diverse ecology of collective Buddhist self-identifications, self-interests, ideologies and practices than was the case at the turn of the twentieth century. There are Buddhist universities, publishing houses, missionary organizations, and television and radio channels. There are Buddhist social movements such as Santi Asoke and Wat Phra Dhammakaya. There are Buddhist associations seeking to defend Buddhism as a national religion, to cultivate sufficiency economy or righteous governance, and to protect local cultural heritage or local ecological environments. There are Buddhist groups that celebrate the achievements of saintly renunciants, organize local temple affairs, provide instruction in vipassana meditation, and chant the Jinapanjara for the benefit of the nation. While some of these social forms are off-shoots of the expanding institutional presence of the state, most instead reflect the religious wing of the more general efflorescence and expansion of Thai civil society in recent decades. McDaniel's perspective recognizes very little of this

diverse, rich social ecology of Buddhism as important, however. His book does not, consequently, investigate its salience.

Clearly, most Thais do not belong to any one religious group, institution or organization. Equally clearly, many do not belong or belong only loosely to such collectivities. Furthermore, the degree to which any of these institutions, organizations, associations, groups, or subcultures significantly captures and shapes its members' self-identifications, beliefs and actions is variable and uneven. Some, such as Santi Asoke and Wat Phra Dhammakaya, self-consciously pursue a more totalizing project of socialization than other groups or institutions would ever dream of. Equally variable is the degree to which they foster sharply bounded collective identities, autonomous subcultural worlds, uniquely inflected religious beliefs, clearly elucidated programs of collective action, and distinctive repertoires of ritual practice. All of these social projects in collectively organizing Thai Buddhist life and action, however, are in principle distinctive sources for socialization above and beyond the family, social networks and local community, on the one hand, and a general, mainstream national religious culture – to the degree that it exists – on the other. And thus the degree of their social and cultural significance in shaping Buddhist public and private life in Thailand is an empirical question that requires empirical investigation. A vision of Thai Buddhism that valorizes the individual and downplays the various collectively organized social environments within which religious thought and action are embedded, however, makes such investigations appear superfluous. And it renders the patterned, enduring, shared quality of repertoires difficult to explain fully.

Conceptualizing and Constituting Mainstream Buddhism

The limitations of notions such as orthodox and heterodox, elite and popular, classical and folk in McDaniel's thinking mean that it is not surprising that he is interested primarily in writing about the category of "mainstream" Thai Buddhism. This domain of the pervasive, the common, the dominant, the foundational, and the everyday is a topic that he believes prior scholars have neglected because of the seductive appeal of official, elite and modernist reform presentations of Thai Buddhism. The protective, apotropaic

repertoires of heritage, security, graciousness and abundance are firmly located within the mainstream in his eyes, and in fact, the more such repertoires are publicly affirmed by monks or monasteries, "the better they will be able to compete for relevance in a highly competitive marketplace of ideas and objects, the better they will be able to speak to and hold the attention of their respective audiences" (p. 14). Consequently, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* is, quite explicitly, "a study of mainstream Thai Buddhism articulating the repertoire and reflections of Thai practitioners and scholars" (p. 10).

McDaniel critically investigates the degree to which concepts such as "tantric" or "esoteric" are useful in thinking about his four repertoires. Ultimately he finds them misleading, since they suggest that ideas and practices focused on heritage, security, graciousness and abundance are secretive and restrictive as well as marginal and suspect, rather than mainstream. As with his sense of repertoires, mainstream Buddhism is seen as a work in progress and constantly changing, as ambiguous, inconsistent, evolving and unfinished. To the limited degree that he speaks at all about the creation of mainstream Thai Buddhism, the overall sense suggested is that it is the uncoordinated, aggregate result of innumerable individual actions, as in a free market.

> Over time, new saints will emerge, new deities will be honored and feared, new amulets will be made, and new teachings will be promoted. Or perhaps new values will emerge through the morphology of accretion and choice. Both the elite and the nonelite, the worldly and the local take part in this ongoing and nonteleological process of creating Buddhism person by person, ghost by ghost. (p. 230)

Skepticism towards the systemic nature of Thai Buddhism is long overdue, and investigations highlighting the emergent, ambiguous, inconsistent and unfinished character of religious ideas, practices and experiences are necessary and important. Furthermore, focusing on mainstream Thai Buddhism in all its complexity and contradictions is a useful corrective to prior attempts at describing and interpreting religious dynamics within Thailand. But while mainstream Thai Buddhism is in part the uncoordinated, aggregate result of individual actions, it is not only that. There are collective actors and social institutions consciously seeking to shape it as well. Furthermore, not all actors, voices, actions and perspectives are granted the same

authority, achieve similar degrees of recognition, or display equal influence within mainstream Thai Buddhism. I would argue, in other words, that one needs explicitly to investigate the social production of mainstream Buddhism, conceptualized as an historically contested field of beliefs, practices and experiences. The contestants, one needs also to bear in mind, include an unevenly authoritative set of actors, both individual and collective in character. Mainstream Thai Buddhism is the arena within which various individuals and groups battle to create religious common sense, standard operating scripts, and the assumed background stories and material artifacts of a religious life well lived. It is, as a consequence, filled with a plethora of conflicting, competing messages. And the diversity within mainstream Thai Buddhism is also, to a certain degree, created group by group, institution by institution, and subculture by subculture.

The very idea of "the mainstream" is a lodestar of orientation for nearly everyone across the Thai Buddhist landscape, in the end. Most groups or individuals seek to portray themselves as part of the mainstream, while reformist groups and revivalist movements seek to transform the mainstream in their own image. Different groups and individuals disagree with each other about what is in or out of the mainstream, because the very label is so powerful in legitimating ideas, rituals and projects. To varying degrees, many religious organizations, institutions and subcultures not only conceptualize themselves in relation to the idea of the mainstream, but also are defined in part by formally organized, consciously designed projects seeking at a minimum to insert their voice and their vision firmly within the mainstream, and even perhaps more grandly to significantly shape and define the mainstream. And such projects aimed at consciously influencing mainstream Thai Buddhism inevitably perceive themselves as virtuous, authentic and beneficial to the masses, regardless of how others may view them. Missionary organizations seek to spread their teachings among the unfaithful or those not faithful enough. Religious publication houses, television stations and radio programs seek to disseminate the insightful wisdom of particular teachers. Development monks and their organizations seek to promote visions of right living through economic self-reliance, while ecology monks and their organizations seek to promote visions of right living through sustainable ecological livelihoods. Buddhist Youth camps seek to inculcate the values and etiquette

of a virtuous life among teenagers not disciplined enough, while Dharma Armies seek to educate the general public about the need for righteous, loyal politicians. Temples and associations providing instruction in vipassana meditation seek to disseminate the life-changing techniques of insight practice among those too caught up in worldly concerns, while workshops run by reformist Buddhist organizations seek to transform palliative care at the end of life into a spiritually meaningful and liberating experience for both the dying and their caretakers. Mainstream Thai Buddhism is nothing if not a prime target requiring change, big and small, in the eyes of many religious organizations.[6]

It would be neither helpful nor accurate simply to portray all these projects undertaken by religious organizations as elite or state-led. Similarly, it would be neither helpful nor accurate simply to portray them as manipulative, controlling or victimizing. And clearly one should be skeptical regarding the actual ability of any religious organization or institution to influence mainstream Thai Buddhism and the wider public beyond its own membership. All of these are empirical questions that require study. Religious groups, organizations and institutions, whether they are located in civil society or the state, however, are undeniably part of mainstream Thai Buddhism, and the investigation of their uneven presence, reach and influence within the local, regional or national arenas of mainstream Thai Buddhism is a necessary complement to studies of the creative autonomy of individuals within those same arenas. Analytically speaking, I would argue, one cannot understand one without the other. And a vision of how individuals and collectivities mutually constitute each other in the creation of mainstream Thai Buddhism is necessary, in fact, if we are adequately to understand that evolving, ambiguous, inconsistent and unfinished milieu of diversity and complexity that constitutes mainstream Thai Buddhism.

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[6] A comprehensive listing of relevant literature would obviously be impossible. A few of the more interesting examples of recent scholarship narrowly documenting attempts to transform the mainstream are Pierre Walter, "Activist forest monks, adult learning and the Buddhist environmental movement in Thailand", *International Journal of Lifelong Education* XXVI, 3 (2007): 329-345; Siriporn Yamnill, Gary McLean and Pagorn Singsuriya, "The role of a religious institution in HRD: the case of Wat (temple) Panyanantaram, Thailand", *Human Resource Development International* XI, 3 (2008): 223-235; and Scott Stonington, "Facing Death, Gazing Inward: End-of-Life and the Transformation of Clinical Subjectivity in Thailand", *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* XXXV, 2 (2011): 113-133.

Syncretism and the Contested Character of Thai Religious Diversity and Complexity

How to describe and analytically comprehend the diversity and complexity of not only mainstream Thai Buddhism but also the total Thai religious landscape has been a consistent challenge for scholars. Various axes of comparison have been employed. Sometimes scholars have resorted to territoriality (rural/urban; regional markers such as Northern, Northeastern, Central and Southern). Sometimes they have utilized ethnicity (Thai, Chinese, Indian, Malay, Vietnamese, Lao, etc.). Sectarian markers have been very common (Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana; Thammayut and Mahanikai). Temporal qualifiers (traditional, modern), ideological characteristics (conservative, liberal), and more vague qualitative qualifiers (folk, vernacular, classical, reform, elite, popular) have also proven popular. Distinctions of social hierarchy, such as class, have proven less popular, and to the degree they have been used one finds middle-class utilized much more often than working-class or upper-class (even less common are qualifiers such as peasant, aristocratic or royal). Markers of discretely identifiable historical traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Brahmanism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism)—like those of more ambiguous but still apparently distinct traditions (Chinese popular religion, animism)—have, not surprisingly, proven especially popular . Some scholars have relied in part upon academic etic categorical distinctions (Spiro's nibbanic, kammatic, apotropaic, esoteric and supernaturalism, for example). Ultimately, most scholars have employed a combination of these various distinctions when trying to describe and conceptualize the total landscape.

Most challenging has been arriving at integrated and more or less systemic conceptualization of the total religious landscape or field. The concept of syncretism has been an enduring interpretive strategy for comprehending the overarching character and dynamics of Thai religious pluralism, and scholars have most often resorted to a tripartite model of traditions – Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism.[7] McDaniel's skepticism regarding systemic models, reluctance to generalize, criticism of scholarly categories,

[7] The classic and still influential academic formulation in this regard remains A. Thomas Kirsch, "Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation", *Journal of Asian Studies* XXVI, 2 (1977): 241-266.

celebration of complexity and individual creativity, and valorization of the contextual mean that it is not particularly surprising that he finds the idea of syncretism inadequate. He also believes that the idea fosters more specific misunderstandings. Syncretism implies a blending, mixture or synthesis of otherwise pure, undiluted and distinct religiosities into a new fusion. Yet historical scholarship reveals that such prior purity and singularity are an essentialist fiction. Syncretism presumes the idea of accommodation, which often strongly suggests the local corruption or distortion of a more authentic, classical predecessor, such as Theravada or Indic Buddhism in the case of Thailand. Syncretism typically proposes one type or configuration of locally blended adaptation that is identical across the social landscape, when in fact local uses and meaning-making are much more variable and complex. Syncretism implies there are markedly distinct logics of religious practice and belief between which actors are more or less consciously shifting, when "perhaps what scholars have been trying to define as syncretism is actually uncertainty" (p. 229).

McDaniel's criticisms of the concept of syncretism, both specific and general, are fair, and they parallel recent criticisms raised by other scholars in religious studies, anthropology and history. In the past decade or two the concept has been the subject of considerable critique, while alternative concepts – such as hybridity and creolization – have faced their own, but often similar, problems.[8] Truth be told, the concept of syncretism has been made to carry considerable, probably too much, descriptive and analytic work by Thai scholars. It has been used to describe and explain a vast array of issues within the field of Thai religion – the dynamics of historical change, the structure of contemporary pluralism and diversity, the character of the popular and the folk, the social logics of localization, the strategies for securing orthodoxy and authenticity, the hierarchical ranking of religious authorities, the ranked differentiation between religious practices and goals, and finally the overarching character and logic of the total religious field. These are all related but distinct empirical and analytical questions that in fact need to be framed and addressed with greater theoretical precision. Using a single concept to

[8] A useful overview of recent reflections on the promise and peril of the concept of syncretism can be found in Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Singing Jensen, eds., *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (London: Equinox, 2004).

refer to all of these issues, however, undermines such precision. Just as interestingly, moreover, rather than suggest the synthesis of a new religiosity as conventionally understood, syncretism for scholars of Theravada Buddhism has tended instead to indicate the great power of Buddhism to incorporate and subordinate other religious ideas, practices, objects or deities without compromising its own essential identity or logics. Thai religious pluralism as characterized in many conventional uses of syncretism does not resemble the robust vision of competing and contrasting moral orders and cultural logics more commonly found in investigations of medical or legal pluralism, for instance.

Thai scholars will at a minimum need to be much more explicit and precise in explaining how they are using the idea of syncretism and what questions about religious pluralism they are seeking to answer with it. The limitations that McDaniel has pointed out need to be taken seriously. At the same time, other scholars have argued for the concept's enduring value, as well as for a revised and more circumscribed use of the idea, rather than its dismissal.[9] In my opinion, the concept still holds value in pointing to a constellation of ideological issues and social dynamics surrounding the definition and negotiation of religious diversity. These include techniques for defining the legitimate, categorical boundaries of religious belief and practice, strategies for inclusion and exclusion across these boundaries, and justifications for the hierarchical ranking of authenticity, authority and purity within and across these boundaries. Rather than describing and explaining religious diversity and pluralism *per se*, the concept of syncretism helps scholars to illuminate discourses and social strategies used by different actors seeking publicly to define, reinterpret and negotiate religious diversity and complexity. While reformists, revivalists and modernists are often particularly animated by such issues, stigmatized and marginalized actors perceived as working on the edge or outside of the mainstream – occult magicians or spirit mediums, for example – are similarly often quite concerned to reinterpret borders and authorities in order to locate

[9] Two examples are Charles Stewart, "Creolization, Hybridity, Syncretism, Mixture", *Portuguese Studies* XXVII, 1 (2011): 48-55, and Joel Robbins, "Crypto-Religion and the Study of Cultural Mixtures: Anthropology, Value and the Nature of Syncretism", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXXIX, 2 (2011): 408-424.

themselves within the privileged circle of the legitimate and the mainstream. Discourses about syncretic mixture, historical purity and localized accommodation are thus also simultaneous claims to public recognition, presence and authority on the part of particular actors and collectivities embedded within particular strata of the larger hierarchical social landscape. They are as much about describing the religious landscape as creating practical, self-serving changes within it. Investigating the uses to which discourses about syncretism, and religious pluralism more generally, are put by Thai religious actors, therefore, can help illuminate how claims to religious authority, authenticity and efficacy are asserted, negotiated and secured within mainstream Thai Buddhism.

Analytic Categories, Etic Theorizing and the Necessary Risks of Reification, Generalization, and Explanation

In his closing reflections McDaniel writes about the problems that emerged in his research when he relied too heavily upon academic categories and etic theories.

> I soon realized that it was not only scholars who had difficulty in determining what was Hindu, Mahayana, Theravada, superstitious, orthodox, esoteric, folk, and the like. The practitioners and scholars in Thailand had trouble separating practices and objects into these categories. (p. 229)

When enough informants expressed confusion and uncertainty about these categories, he explains, “I started asking different questions and stopped trying to fit Thai practices into my preconceived categories” (p. 229). As a result,

> instead of seeing a Thai shrine or Thai monastery or even Thai image blending essentialized local and translocal, Indic and Southeast Asian, Brahmanic and Buddhist elements, I see these complex lives, rituals, and objects as questioning the very usefulness of metacategories like Buddhism, Brahmanism, animism, local, translocal, Indic, Chinese, Thai, and the like. (p. 228)

McDaniel is similarly skeptical of overarching theories, speculative conclusions and even general empirical statements. Early in the book he advises his colleagues to approach Thai Buddhism inductively by following a Wittgensteinian “methodology of examples”:

> By seeing multiple examples of these practices we can avoid overarching, explanatory theories and offer a less theoretically filtered view of the why of Thai Buddhism and begin to understand those things that are simply taken for granted by the practitioners themselves. (p. 13)

Cleaving closely to the understandings of Thai Buddhist practitioners as communicated through the experience-near logics of repertories, McDaniel hopes, will provide a more accurate and complicated vision of Thai Buddhism, as well as one which better respects individual Buddhist agents on their own terms. In his closing comments, however, he expresses worry about whether this approach is fully adequate. “Could the evidence drawn from individual shrines, texts, biographies, or objects justify generalizations about Thai Buddhism more broadly? Does the accumulation of evidence constitute an argument?” (p. 223). In the end, he admits he cannot really answer those questions.

In its own stark terms, such an approach is not likely to justify generalizations or to constitute an argument. And yet *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* is, in fact, filled with illuminating generalizations, arguments, interpretations and explanations that exceed the terms or understandings that the average Thai Buddhist practitioner would likely offer up. McDaniel’s deep knowledge of Thai society and history and of Buddhism past and present inevitably results in his risking such generalizations and arguments, over and over. Despite his own stated hesitancy in offering up general claims, McDaniel’s scholarly counter-arguments and critiques are fundamentally grounded in general empirical assertions and overarching explanatory claims about the character and dynamics of Thai society, history and culture, assertions and claims that inevitably risk interpretive speculation, reductive empirical simplification, and the tyranny of preconceived categories. A strict inductive approach and reliance upon the categories, interpretations and frames of one’s informants cannot save one from the necessary risks of generalization, explanation and theory if one seeks to write an academic account of any social or historical phenomenon, Thai Buddhism included. Rather than trying to avoid these risks, a better strategy is to make more explicit, self-conscious, and precise one’s commitments regarding generalization, explanation and theory, and explicitly and more humbly to explain to one’s readers the limitations and potential distortions resulting from those choices.

It is axiomatic for anthropologists that they must take seriously the messy, empirical experiences of their informants, as well as seek to understand the language, categories, frames and interpretations that their informants utilize to give meaning and significance to those experiences. A commitment to inductive data gathering and the documentation of experience-near emic interpretations is a disciplinary priority. At the same time, this descriptive, documentary project is only the beginning of ethnographic interpretation and analysis. Anthropologists (as well as other social scientists and humanists too) also ask other questions, questions which are neither the same as those of our informants nor always even understood by them. We ask questions about social, cultural and historical processes, about the relationship between different analytic variables, about the explanatory value of certain theoretical presumptions or analytic models. And in asking these disciplinary questions we employ specialized disciplinary languages and concepts that often are meaningless or incomprehensible to our informants. Tensions and contradictions between our informants' languages, concepts, frames and interpretations and our own scholarly categories, concepts, models and explanations are inevitable and sometimes difficult to navigate or translate. This does not, however, render our scholarly descriptions, models, arguments, explanations or conclusions by definition false, distorting or condescending. After all, our disciplinary questions are in the end not the same as the questions that our informants ask of themselves and of each other as they carry out the pragmatic work of living their lives.

McDaniel was surprised to discover that his Thai informants and interlocutors could not recognize or did not employ the scholarly language and concepts that he had been taught, and ultimately he suggests that we instead use a different language to describe and explain their behavior. But would one be surprised to learn that a stock trader did not recognize or use the concept of "commodity fetishism", that a patient in therapy did not understand or employ the ideas of "transference" and "countertransference", or that a speaker of any language did not know what "bilabial stop" referred to? This lack of recognition or use does not mean that these political economic, psychoanalytic or linguistic concepts have no explanatory value in answering certain specialized scientific

and scholarly questions. This is not to say that the scholarly concepts that McDaniel criticizes are necessarily valuable or not in need of significant revision. McDaniel's criticisms of their weaknesses are often valid, and as I have suggested many need substantial revisionist fine-tuning, specification and clarification if they are to be analytically useful in the future. But questions about their explanatory value are dependent upon disciplinary standards of logic and empirical validation, not whether they resonate with the average Thai Buddhist.

It is also useful to remember that just as certain concepts are valuable in answering particular questions, so too their recognition, use and value in descriptions or interpretations can be quite context-specific. McDaniel found that among his informants categorical distinctions between Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism were not made. Interestingly however, among the subculture of Bangkok professional spirit mediums that I have investigated, something like these distinctions were recognized as salient and meaningful, at least some of the time. Mediums, devotees and even sometimes clients employed the distinctions of "*phut*", "*phram*" and "*phi*" (roughly analogous to Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism) to distinguish between different actors and practices within and outside their subculture. These tripartite distinctions were inherently tied up with hierarchical assessments of greater or lesser authenticity, authority and legitimacy, and their social use was inevitably tied to competitive claims to prestige, status and dominance. It is not surprising that the members of a marginalized, stigmatized subculture would find these categorical distinctions more salient and meaningful than would many other Thais, I would argue, since their claim to religious legitimacy and mainstream status is often either explicitly contested or in doubt. After all, while the practice and experience of spirit possession is in many ways and for many people common, pervasive and well known, this does not in itself make it mainstream or legitimate—a conundrum with which all of the members of the subculture live on a daily basis.

In my scholarly work I have often found myself bedeviled by the same questions as McDaniel, and haunted by many of the same methodological and interpretive fears. I find

myself critical of many of the same scholarly concepts; I advocate many of the same revisionist emphases. Religious diversity, individual agency and historical contextualization do need to be taken more seriously in the study of Thai Buddhism. Accepted arguments about syncretism, standardization, commodification and elite dominance do need to be critically questioned. The repertoires and idioms of apotropaic Buddhism do need to be granted more recognition and salience in the interpretation of Thai religious life. The messy empirical inconsistencies, ambiguities and emergent qualities of Thai Buddhist values and practices do need to be accounted for more directly and fully in scholarly analysis. What I am less convinced of is that in pursuing these goals I need to make what sometimes seem rather stark choices of "either/or". In my eyes, it is possible to recognize the social reality of both increasing religious diversity and standardization. Individual agency and creativity can be examined alongside the structuring influence of social institutions. Scholarly concepts can be revised and improved rather than dispensed with. The etic explanations and interpretations of scholars need not smother or invalidate the emic understandings and meanings of informants. Thus, while I am in frequent agreement with McDaniel's initial critical instincts and corrective counter-assertions, I am not always in agreement with the full trajectory, substantive arguments and analytical implications of his counter-proposals. But such disagreements are what fuel productive academic debates.

As this extended review has made clear, there is much that I agree with and much that I disagree with in *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk*. McDaniel has persuaded me with a variety of his arguments and claims. But at the same time, there are other points on which I disagree, sometimes quite strongly. Disagreements between scholars with different disciplinary perspectives and different research experiences in the field are not surprising, however. In the end, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk* is good to think with. And it is good to think against. That is serves both of these purposes so well is a measure of its true value and accomplishment. It is a book that all scholars of Thai Buddhism need to read and take seriously. Hopefully, McDaniel will give us in the near future more studies which are just as stimulating, ambitious, and challenging.

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