



The relationship between Buddhist and animist amulets in contemporary Thailand: PHRA KHRUEANG and KHRUEANG RANG

Premjai Iamkhorpong^{a,*}, Matthew Kosuta^{b,†}

^a Doctor of Philosophy Program in Religious studies (International Program), College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom 73170, Thailand

^b College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University, Nakhon Pathom 73170, Thailand

Article Info

Article history:

Received 19 February 2021

Revised 23 March 2021

Accepted 30 March 2021

Available online 31 January 2022

Keywords:

amulets,
animist,
Buddhist,
KHRUEANG RANG,
PHRA KHRUEANG

Abstract

This research focuses on the practice of Buddhist and animist amulets in contemporary Thailand, so called PHRA KHRUEANG and KHRUEANG RANG in Thai. PHRA KHRUEANG and KHRUEANG RANG are presented in response to demonstrate the relationship between Buddhist and animist amulets, and thus between Buddhism and animism, which have been influenced by the heightened process of religious syncretism. The study argues that there is no clear separation between the religiosity of the amulets moving from ‘purely’ animist amulets to ‘purely’ Buddhist Buddha images, Thai religiosity flows uninterrupted in a changing yet interconnected spectrum as in the visible light spectrum. A range of studies compared three categories within PHRA KHRUEANG and KHRUEANG RANG in order to highlight their relationship in terms of physical features and functions which are Forms, Functions, and Empowerment respectively.

© 2022 Kasetsart University.

Introduction

The wearing of amulets has varied in popularity over 160 years; nevertheless, wearing amulets has become a Thai Buddhist way of life. Two main religious categories have contributed to the world of Thai amulets. First, a Buddhist category called PHRA KHRUEANG (PK) includes images of Buddha, famous monks, and Thai

kings (Figure 1). Second, an animistic category known as KHRUEANG RANG (KR) includes scrolled sheet TAKRUT, cowrie shell BIA KAE and phallic image PALAD KHIK (Figure 2). Thais have faith in both types



Figure 1 PK: Buddha, monk, and king

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: entsys@anet.net.th (P. Iamkhorpong).

† Co- authors.

E-mail address: matthew.kos@mahidol.ac.th (M. Kosuta).



Figure 2 KR: BIA KAE, TAKRUT, and PALAD KHIK

believing them to give apotropaic qualities, alleviate sorrow and misfortune, and bring success to wearers. Usually, a small image of Buddha is worn around the neck and a magical KR is hung around the waist. Today it is often seen that both of them are dangled together on the body or on the same chain around the neck. This commonly wear them when they leave home for reverence, protection, fortune, and psychological comfort. The beliefs and practices surrounding PK and KR reflect a spectrum of different beliefs and practices which have always been syncretic in nature fusing the Thai categories of religion (PUTTHASASANA) and magic (SAIYASAT). This phenomenon is noted by many scholars, Ames (1964) stated that magic and religion cannot be distinguished empirically because they are actually compounded. Terwiel (1976) noted that Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements have become so intermingled it is impossible to draw a distinction between them. Rajadhon (1988) also suggested that there are two strata of beliefs of the Thai people: animism and Buddhism. The latter includes Brahmanism and Hinduism, which have become intermingled with animism and can no longer be separated from Thai popular Buddhism. Another author of Thai Buddhism, Justin Thomas McDaniel (2011) found that there is no essential core to Thai Buddhism. Thai Buddhism is a syncretic blend of Brahmanism, Chinese religions, Theravada Buddhism and animism. The revered monk Somdet To, local belief in the ghost Mae Nak, ancestor and amulet worship all reflect the nature of Thai Buddhists or a Thai way of being Buddhist.

However, the Buddhist framework contains teachings on personal actions and the law of karma, which affect merit and rebirth. The actions of body, speech, and mind in previous life affect the consequence in the future and the next life. Good actions will be rewarded with happiness and merit and can be accumulated for the next life. Therefore, the amount of merit does not depend on supernatural and powerful objects. Ideally, Thai Buddhists

must separate themselves from this supernatural belief in magic and amulets. In this sense, there are many Thais who raise a question about the role that PK and KR play within Buddhism as they see a distinction between religion and magic. Generally speaking, Thai Buddhists may take refuge in the Buddhist philosophy to improve their karma in the *samsara* while they believe in the apotropaic power of amulets to cope with the suffering and affliction in this immediate world.

This study had two main objectives:

1. To prove that while there may be a real distinction in form and merit and a conceptual distinction in terms of Buddhism and animism, in actual practice, there is no clear differentiation between apotropaic function, and thus no practical distinction between what is Thai Theravada Buddhist belief and animist belief in PK and KR, and indeed they are part of a single religious system.

2. To demonstrate that Thai amulet practitioners have their own ways of training their spirituality in the practice of amulets, they perform good deeds and abstain from bad deeds in order to maintain the efficacy of amulets effectively.

Literature Review

The Origin of Thai Amulets and Buddhist Function

Thai amulets can be traced to the ancient votive tablets which originated in India around the beginning of the Christian Era. Votive tablets are small Buddhist icons, called PHRA PHIM in Thai, which are usually made of baked or unbaked clay pressed in a mold (Chirapravati, 1997). They were reproduced over and over as a method to gain merit and meditation practice. A lot of early PHRA PHIM bearing donation inscriptions were discovered in several regions of Thailand. Assavavirulhakarn (2010) noted that the donation inscriptions of the *Dvāravṛti mandala* provide a great deal of information regarding how Buddhist merit was made in those days and with what intentions and goals. The donation of PHRA PHIM was believed to prolong life for practitioners and improve their karma in rebirth. It is said that if someone were to write the dharma verse and install it inside a stupa, it is like doing homage by offering up a rare jewel (Ghosh, 2011). A large number of PHRA PHIM were enclosed inside *stupas* or *chedi* and in the walls of buildings within temple complexes as a meritorious act and as a way of religious propagation. Thus, these PHRA PHIM served a Buddhist function, including a Buddhist symbol to remind of the Buddha's teachings and to generate merit,

through their donation, on the road of karmic improvement and the hope of being reborn in better existence.

Apotropaic Function

During the long period of Ayutthaya (1350–1767), there were many wars and invasions of Burma and Laos. PHRA PHIM were considered as highly respected objects, so soldiers and Thai men didn't wear them on their bodies. Instead, they wore talismanic objects called KR, and though considered animistic, they were still thought to provide apotropaic power for protection and invulnerability (Wanliphodom, 1994). These KR were perfectly acceptable within mainstream Thai Buddhism: such as, PHA YANT or cloth written with sacred YANTRA, SUEA YANT or jacket with Yantra and PHIROT RING, a black cotton yarn mixed with lac in a ring shape. Here, religion and magic were closely blended and coexisted without any conflict in Thai Buddhism. The syncretism demonstrates a process of compromise and negotiation between Buddhism and animism reflecting the devotion of Thais to both the Buddha and SAIYASAT.

It becomes clear when exploring the functions of votive tablets that they have developed other functions over time. Cœdès (1926) noted that PHRA PHIM have developed to be a sort of holy icon containing magic that has survived to be passed down to the amulets familiar to us today. However, no one knows when the practice of wearing Buddha images hung around the neck as amulets began. Chirapravati (1997) suggested that the cult of amulets started at the beginning of the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851–1868). It became fashionable when Western culture and modernization expanded into the kingdom of Siam. A new practice relevant to the spread of the cult of amulets was the popularity of antique collecting. PHRA PHIM, later, shifted function to be used as an amulet and labeled as PK in the King Rama V era and became popular to wear around the neck as practiced today. The way of storing early PHRA PHIM in CHEDI as a meritorious act has been gradually phased out. Various types of antique PHRA PHIM discovered in CHEDI are rededicated as PK for devotion, collection, and wearing for protection. Thus, the Buddha image now appears as and is understood as a revered object enriched with apotropaic power which can be represented on an amulet, the so called PK.

Empowerment

That an amulet can be empowered lies in the belief that a consecration ritual performed by Buddhist monks

will bring the amulet to life. The consecration ritual, called PHUTTHA-PHISEK or PLUK-SEK in Thai, involves the proper recitation of Buddhist scripts by Kechi monks (monks with mystical power). PLUK-SEK means to arouse the power of a person or an object by the use of a spell or incantation, hence a consecration or a blessedness (Rajadhon 1988). It is said that a person skilled in meditation who has reached the fourth *jhāna* stage of deep meditative absorption will gain five kinds of mundane direct knowledge and supernormal powers which are: (1) divine vision; (2) divine hearing; (3) the power of knowing other's mind; (4) the power of performing miracle; and (5) the power of knowing past lives (Buddhaghosa, 2010; Nandamalabhivamsa, 2013). These powers are thought to support the amulet consecration. Thus, consecration and *kechi* monks are the key elements to create apotropaic power and transfer it into PK and KR. Tambiah (1984) also noted that the Buddha image and amulets are created with power and energy through a life-giving process. There are two ways to give life to an amulet; the likeness and monk specialist. First, the life-giving ritual gives life to an amulet by imitating the historic image of the Buddha, revered monk or king. The original image's power is transferred into the likeness image by monks making it effective. Second, the life-giving ritual animates the amulet by a process of transmission effected by monk specialists who possess mystical power expressed and transmitted through their hands, sacred cords, chanting, and intense mediation.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study employed the qualitative research method. The method used for data collections were both documents and in-depth interviews. The documents were investigated from books, research articles, theses, and electronic sources in both English and Thai.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with fifty Thai amulet practitioners from 11–28 March 2017, which were collected from the Amulet Center Ngam Wong Wan Plaza by simple random sampling. Moreover, two monk specialists from Wat Rakhang and Wat Klang Bang Kaeo, and two lay amulet experts from the board of Thai Buddha Image Admiration Association were chosen to support the data of creation and consecration amulets by the method of purposive selection.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included content analysis and interview interpretation. The interview questions were designed to cover three aspects including Form, Functions, and Empowerment. They contained nine questions, five questions asking about forms, and functions of amulets and two asking about the belief in the empowerment and KECHI monks. The last two questions asked about the syncretism between PK and KR and the spiritual development in the use of amulets. The percentage method was used to calculate the total fifty samples. The results were presented in description and tables to compare the physical features, functions, and empowerment between PK and KR.

Results

Table 1 shows the different categories of wearing or worshipping PK and KR by amulet practitioners. The wearing of PK alone such as Luang Pho Sothon and Luang Pu Tuad was the most popular practice. Half of the informants wore PK alone, compared with 4 percent for the wearing of KR alone, and 46 percent for the wearing of both PK and KR together on body such as Luang Pu Tuad on the neck and TAKRUT around the waist, or dangling them on the same chain on the neck. Besides, the study indicated that PK and KR were different in physical forms. Most informants, 98 percent, concluded that PK represented a spiritual human form, compared with only 2 percent undecided. Similarly, 96 percent of informants said that KR depicted an unrestricted form or any shape, compared with 4 percent undecided.

Table 2 indicates that the functions are different between PK and KR. For PK, 70 percent of informants said that PK represented both Buddhist and apotropaic functions, compared with 30 percent, who said they served the Buddhist function only. For KR, 98 percent of informants agreed that KR served the animistic belief providing merely apotropaic nature, compared with 2 percent saying that they may represent both Buddhist and apotropaic functions. Most informants, 96 percent, concluded that PK and RK are different in Buddhist functions but similar in apotropaic function, compared with only 4 percent undecided.

Table 3 shows the high proportion of 92 percent believed that monks who possessed mystical power with a skill in meditation and PARITTĀS chanting (Buddhist scripts) in the consecration ritual can create sacred PK and KR, compared with 8 percent who were undecided. Besides, the results indicate that both PK and KR provided similar apotropaic effects, at 90 percent, compared with 8 percent who disagreed and 2 percent undecided; this reflects the similarity of the consecration method between PK and KR.

Table 4 shows the result of syncretic beliefs and practices between PK and KR. The high proportion of 98 percent demonstrated that the practices of PK and KR have been syncretized in Thai Buddhism, compared with 2 percent undecided. These amulets may not be distinguished clearly enough between what is pure Buddhist and animist amulets. Besides, the result shows that the amulet practitioners must perform good deeds in order to maintain the efficacy of amulets, at 94 percent, compared with 6 percent undecided.

Table 1 Physical Form Results

Description	Total (50)	Percent
Types of wearing or worshipping amulets		
PK alone	25	50
KR alone	2	4
Both PK and KR together	23	46
Physical form of PK		
Spiritual human form	49	98
Unrestricted form	0	0
Undecided	1	2
Physical form of KR		
Spiritual human form	0	0
Unrestricted form	48	96
Undecided	2	4

Discussion

This research aimed to investigate the relationship between Buddhist and animist amulets in contemporary Thailand. By comparing three aspects: form, function,

and consecration, the study shows that in terms of form and merit generating function there is a distinction, but in terms of apotropaic function and consecration they are the same. And even with the form and merit, Thais use PK and KR in identical ways and for nearly identical purposes as shown in Table 5.

Table 2 Functions Results

Description	Total (50)	Percent
Function of PK		
Buddhist	15	30
Apotropaic	0	0
Both	35	70
Function of KR		
Buddhist	0	0
Apotropaic	49	98
Both	1	2
PK and KR are different in Buddhist functions but similar in apotropaic function		
Agree	48	96
Disagree	0	0
Undecided	2	4

Table 3 Empowerment Results

Description	Total (50)	Percent
<i>Kechi</i> monks with a skill in meditation and <i>parittā</i> chanting in the consecration ritual can create sacred PK and KR.		
Agree	46	92
Disagree	0	0
Undecided	4	8
PK and KR provide the similar protective effects.		
Agree	45	90
Disagree	4	8
Undecided	1	2

Table 4 Syncretism Results

Description	Total (50)	Percent
The practices of PK and KR have been syncretized in Thai Buddhism		
Agree	49	98
Disagree	0	0
Undecided	1	2
The amulet practitioners must perform good deeds to maintain the efficacy of amulets.		
Agree	47	94
Disagree	0	0
Undecided	3	6

Table 5 Comparison between PK and RK in three aspects

Categories PK KR	PK	KR
1. Form	Spiritual human	Unrestricted
2. Functions	Buddhist	-
	Apotropaic	Apotropaic
3. Empowerme	Consecration	Consecration
	<i>Kechi</i> monk	<i>Kechi</i> monk

PK precisely portrays the human form with spiritual connotations. The most popular form of PK is the Buddha, which is a representation of the Great Man, the founder of Buddhism and the enlightened one. Similarly, the form of revered monk represents a spiritual person who is often described as a saint or ARAHANT believed to have attained the fourth stage of JHĀNA or higher knowledge and ABHIÑÑĀ or supernormal power. In the same way, the form of respected king depicts a Bodhisattva who is described as a DEVARAJA or divine king with karmic charismatic power (BARAMI) and the virtues of the Buddhist DHAMMARAJA (Ten Kingly Virtues) (Her Royal Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhon Foundation, 2011). On the contrary, KR displays various symbols and a range of peculiar representation which reflect a set of beliefs they are associated with. For example, a cowrie shell of BIA KAE represents a symbol of money which was once used as a currency in the past. PALAD KHIK takes a form of a small phallic shape symbolizing the lingam of the Hindu god Shiva, which represents fertility. However, although some KR may display a human form, they do not represent the spiritual human and Buddhist merit, thus, they are classified as animistic KR. Such a child spirit KUMAN THONG takes a fetus or baby form, which represents a spirit with magical power.

In fact, all amulets are sacred by definition providing several benefits such as protection, luck, and invulnerability. PK serves Buddhist and apotropaic functions while KR provides merely apotropaic function. PK shows opposite sides of the same coin. One side represents religious purposes, a reminder of the Buddha and merit, while the other side displays only an apotropaic nature. Although, the apotropaic feature seems to attract more attention of the wearers and collectors, the specific Buddhist function of PK never changes and maintains its importance. Thais wear PK and KR either as a matter of reverence or belief in their apotropaic powers. Thus, the Buddhist function is a determining factor in separating PK from KR.

Interestingly, mystical power can be acquired from both Buddhist and magical cult (SAIYASAT) practices. The mystical power acquired through intensive meditation

produces Buddhist power or PHUTTHAKHUN while the mystical power acquired from the occult science provides magical power. Both of them may create the similar power, which mainly provides an apotropaic effect. Today there are several KECHI monks who possess both kinds of mystical powers which are widely accepted in Buddhism. The blended power between PHUTTHAKHUN and magical power are used to empower amulets, which is believed to increase the apotropaic power in amulets and also, importantly, to remind amulet wearers to practice morally. It is clear that the interaction between monks and amulets operates in one single religious system. This relationship discloses the power of faith in amulets tied to Buddhism, which give the wearers spiritual morale and enhanced meaning of life.

The study found that there is an unclear separation in practice between PK and KR in Thai Buddhism. The result of wearing both PK and KR together shows the tendency towards an unclear differentiation between them. Many Thais often wear both PK and KR together on the same chain around their necks for reverence, protection and psychological comfort when leaving home in the present time. The wearers want to double, or at least increase, miraculous protection. The faith in PK and KR flows smoothly to blend the combinations of religion and magic harmoniously.

In addition, the study also found that the amulet practitioners have their own ways of training their spirituality in the use of amulets. They perform good deeds and abstain from bad deeds in order to maintain the efficacy of amulets. PK and KR are tools leading people to moral practice, which again blends the Buddhist and animist elements. These amulets will help a good person who morally behaves and uses it for good purposes. The faith in PK and KR creates a spiritual belief to serve everyday life which reflects their own ways of being a Thai Buddhist. Thais wear amulets, regardless of whether they are Buddhist or animist amulets, to cope with suffering and fulfill expectation in the mundane life.

Conclusion

Votive tablets and amulets are primarily made by KECHI monks and distributed to help raise funds for WATS (Buddhist temples). They are usually given as gifts for donors and for rent at WATS. The popularity, age, and famous KECHI monks will considerably increase the demand and high value of authentic amulets in amulet markets. Most older amulets are rented at amulet markets. Thais rent amulets rather than buy them

because amulets are considered as respected objects which cannot be sold. They have been used and have been popular among Thais for over a hundred years.

Throughout this research, the wearing of PK and KR on one's neck when leaving home demonstrates the way of life for Thai Buddhists in contemporary Thailand. It is clear that the apotropaic nature of the amulets is the most significant similarity and this blurs the separation between PK and KR. Although the apotropaic benefit is the most attractive feature and function, the Buddhist religious functions remain undiminished, demonstrating their continued importance. Whether people choose to wear PK alone or wear both PK and KR together on the same chain, wearing any type of amulet denotes reverence and protection at the same time.

It is interesting that the apotropaic power is not present in the amulets until they are passed through the consecration ceremonies which are performed by KECHI monks. The belief that magical power is generated by KECHI monks who have supernormal knowledge through intense meditation and skill in PARITTĀ chanting, places them at the center of the Buddhist-animist synthesis and it is this combination of powers that bring life into amulets. Thus, in a real sense, PK is "animistized" by the magic power imbued into them by the monks, and KR is "Buddhacized" by the empowerment conducted by a Buddhist monk. This study argues that PK and KR do not decrease the essence of Buddhist teaching. These amulets are considered as containing the power of the Buddha or respected monks or saints, and in this way, the Buddha and his representatives have a central role in promoting the belief of protection provided by amulets. Finally, amulet wearers, guided by Buddhist monks and Buddhist teachings, create their own way of spiritual belief to perform good moral practice in order to maintain the amulet's effectiveness or to increase its effectiveness, creating a religious ethic akin to Thai Buddhism extended to animist amulets, which serves to further blur the distinction between Buddhist and animist practice.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

References

- Ames, M. M. (1964). Buddha and the dancing goblins: A theory of magic and religion. *American Anthropological Association*, 66(1), 75–82. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/669083>
- Assavavirulhakarn, P. (2010). *The ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in southeast asia*. Bangkok, Thailand: Silkworm Books.
- Buddhaghosa, B. (2010). *The path of purification* (Visuddhimagga) (4th ed.) (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, Trans.). Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.
- Chirapravati, P. (1997). *Votive tablets in Thailand: Origin, styles and uses*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Coedès, G. (1926). Siamese votive tablets (W. A. Graham, Trans.). *Journal of the Siam Society*, 20(1), 1–23. Retrieved from https://thesiamsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/JSS_020_1b_Coedes_SiameseVotiveTablets.pdf
- Ghosh, L. (2011). *Eastern Indian Ocean: Historical links to contemporary convergences*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Her Royal Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Foundation. (2011). *Dictionary of name lists of Thai Kings*. Bangkok, Thailand: Nanmeebooks Publications. [in Thai]
- McDaniel, J. T. (2011). *The lovelorn ghost and the magical monk: Practicing Buddhism in modern Thailand*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Nandamalabhivamsa. (2013). *Samatha and vipassanā*. Sagaing, Myanmar: Centre for Buddhist Studies.
- Rajadon, A. (1988). *Essay on Thai folklore*. Bangkok, Thailand: Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation.
- Tambiah, S. J. (1984). *The Buddhist saints of the forest and the cult of amulets*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University press.
- Terwiel, B. J. (1976). A model for the study of Thai Buddhism. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35(3), 391–403. doi: 10.2307/2053271
- Wanliphodom, S. (1994). *PHRA KHRUEANG in Siam*. Bangkok, Thailand: Matichon Press. [In Thai]