

# THE BELIEF OF HOLY MAN AND ITS INFLUENCE IN THAT SOCIETY: PAST AND THE PRESENT

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## ABSTRACT

Thai society has a long tradition of "holy man". This belief is influenced by Buddhist conception of the great virtue. Buddhists have been taught that people's virtue depended on the accumulation of merit in their past lives. A ruler's virtue is higher than others. In traditional Thai society, the Buddhist belief of the great virtue was blended with supernatural belief. Thus, the great virtue can be held by charismatic people such as respected monks, political figures, and folk scholars. "Holy men" thus claimed to possess virtue and magical power that brought their fame and popularity. They sometimes claimed themselves as holy men who have special or magical powers such as healing sick people, knowing what the gods want, and talking to the gods. Also, holy men referred to Buddhist belief of the Golden Age of Maitreya, or the future Buddha. According to this belief, after the Buddha's death the Kali age, or the dark age, begins. Buddhists are thus expecting Maitreya to come to help people towards the Golden age, while wicked people were eradicated.

In Thai society, the beliefs of holy men and the Golden Age of Maitreya thus caused many resistances to government. Leaders of holy men movements in the past mostly claimed that they had greater merit than the ruler currently occupying the throne or claimed to possess magical power, which gained respect from villagers. Some holy men movements resisted the rulers, while other movements only earned money and precious objects from villagers. These movements affected social order and political security of the rulers.

In the present day, this belief still alive in Thai society. Many disciples pray their high respect to some sects led by charismatic monks as well as provided money and properties to the monks who became the influential people in the society. These influential and rich monks are respected as holy men. There were then many cases of corruption and crime occurred. The state thus needs to control and suppress.

**Keywords:** Belief of Holy Men, Buddhism, Thai Society

## INTRODUCTION

Influence of the belief of holy man has long been in Thai society since the traditional period to the present. In Thai society, Buddhism has a strong influence to people's notion, way of life, culture, and belief. The belief of holy men was thus influenced by Buddhist conception of the great virtue and folk belief of charismatic leader. (Dabphet. 2013) The appearances of holy men in traditional Thai society mostly dealt with political causes to resist the rulers, ruling policies, or the state control. Some holy men referred to visions of Utopian Buddhist realm which meant blaming rulers or the state for the failure to uphold social order and Buddhist morality. (Cohen. 2001) These political movements sometimes caused serious impacts for the society and people's lives. Some holy men movements firstly unlinked with politics. Their leaders, which were popular monks or folk scholars, gained renown for their charisma, teachings, or referring to their magical power that have impacted on people's worldview and way of life. Their followers and influence increased and then the sects or the holy men were watchful from the state as they affected state control. This type of holy men can still be seen in the present society both in Thailand and other countries.

## Literature and Approaches

There are important pioneering studies on social history and people's worldviews basing on beliefs and religions that influenced this paper. Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese & The Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller* (1976) is a significant and early study on socio-cultural history, microhistory, history of mentalities, and intellectual history. Ginzburg studies oral history and print culture in the 16th century France to culturally analyze and represents worldviews of farmer class which linked with the growth of print culture in Europe. This study also analyzes feeling, opinion, and motivation of common people. It also reflects the role of religion in society and in people's point of view.

Reynaldo Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*, published in 1979. This study looks at how revolutionary movements in the Philippines started and figures out the voices of the marginalized people through prayers and other undocumented evidence. In traditional society of the Philippines, some old superstition beliefs of Holy men and Holy Mountain were blended with the Christian teaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These beliefs were referred by holy men movements against Spanish rulers. The local charismatic leaders sometimes claimed to be Jesus Christ or legendary heroes to lead the resistant. This work shows the similarity of holy men belief in many cultures.

Social and cultural history in Thai studies was firstly studied in the 1970s, but it gained more interest in the past 20 years. The topics are various such as life and culture of marginalized group, way of life, costume, food, female, health, and hobbies. Some significant and starting works involving social history in Thai. Akin Rabibhadana. (1969). *The Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period, 1782-1873* is one of the most important study on the social organization of Thai society in the premodern era. This study analyzes the social structure of traditional Thai society, the manpower and patron-client relationship, and aspects of social stratification and social mobility through a socio-anthropological approach. This work helps to understand people's thought of society and their place in the society.

There are also some studies focusing directly on Buddhist influence and holy men. Charles F. Keyes (1977 and 1982) and Stanley Tambiah (1984) are well known for using anthropological approach to historical study. Keyes's article, 'Millennialism, Theravada Buddhism, and Thai Society' (1977), looks at beliefs in Thai society that impacts holy men movements such as the Golden Age of Maitreya, holy man, and Phra Malai influenced from Buddhists' beliefs of 'karma', the accumulation of merit, and rebirth. Keyes's 'The Death of Two Buddhist Saints' (1982) underlines the ideal of bodhisattva and sacred kingship by examining case of two forest monks respected as "savior saint". Tambiah (1984) in *The Buddhist Saint of the Forest and Cults of Amulets* analyzes case of Kruba Srivichai, a famous monk who has been respected as the Buddhist saint of Northern Thailand in the early twentieth century. He was the spiritual and popular folk leader of 3,000 to 4,000 true believers and disciples, inspiring them to build an 11 kilometer road up to Doi Suthep Temple that sits on a mountain top overlooking the city of Chiang Mai in 1934. Because of his great popularity, Kruba Srivichai became the phenomenon of Buddhist millenarianism. His movement was blamed as violent and magical form of millenarianism that might impact the state stability.

Paul T. Cohen (2011) in "Buddhism Unshackled: The Yuan 'Holy Man' Tradition and the Nation-State in the Tai World" studies a holy men belief in Yuan Buddhism, a form of Theravada Buddhism that exists among the Tai speaking people of the upper Mekong region. The author examines the case of Kruba Srivichai in Chiang Mai and argues that the "modern holy man tradition" is a form of religion revivalism combing the bodhisattva idea with sacral kingship and the movement desires to revive former custom by blaming the state's failure.

The book *"Maitreya Beliefs" and "Holy Men Rebellion" in Thai Society* (1983), edited by Phonphen Hantrakul and Atcharaphon Kamutphisamai, gathers 13 articles on holy men movements and the ideal of

Maitreya in other places in Thai society. Some include Charles F. Keyes's "Holy Men and the Belief of Maitreya, Theravada Buddhism and Thai Society"; Yoneo Ishii's "Holy Men Rebellion in Northeastern Thailand"; John B. Merdock's "Holy Men Rebellion in 1901-1902"; Somchot Ongsakul's "Holy men Rebellion and Holy Men in Southern Thailand" and Chalong Suntravanit's "The Belief of Maitreya and Rebellions in Northeastern Thailand: Primary Notice on Ideology and Leader". The main and similar argument in these articles is the study of culture and popular movements. The studies argue that holy men movements mostly were farmer rebellions.

Suvit Theerasatsavat and Chop Deesuankhok (1994) in an article "Holy Man Rebellion of Savati Village, Khonkan City" examine case of a folk scholar in Northeastern Thailand, Sopa Pontri. Sopa was an educated person and performed rites for villagers. In 1940, he led the popular resistant to oppose the state's cultural control and exploitation. His act was condemned as the holy man rebellion. Sasithorn Kongchan (2015) studies holy men's rebellions in the Northeast during 1936-1959. This work examines the background and the factors related to holy men's rebellions in the Northeast of Siam as well as the forms, methods, characteristics, and aftermaths of holy men's rebellions. It also analyze similarities or differences of holy men's rebellions taking place before and after 1936. It is found that the rebellions resulted from policies of the government such as taxation and state education system as well as problems of starvation and drought. In the rebellions, local clergy and folk singers sang verses to describe various problems of villagers and using people's belief in Maitreya to persuade them to join the rebellions.

This study is a social history dealt with people's belief and impact of the belief. This research put together approaches of social history, microhistory and the history of everyday life in order to explore beliefs and worldviews of the people. These worldviews basing on Buddhist influence were behind the holy men movements. Thus, the work contributes to our understanding of the lives, worldviews, and experiences of people in the period of time.

## **Methodologies**

To answer the proposed research question, this study applied microhistory and cultural approach to history for research design. This paper is a historical research, which deals with studying past events to draw conclusions and to make predictions about the future. There are steps in historical research: recognizing a historical problem, gathering relevant information, organizing evidence, analyzing collected materials and relations between different types of information, as well as using descriptive analysis to express research result. As a historical research, main data used in this research are primary sources. Previous research studies are also surveyed and analyzed. These sources have been analyzed and interpreted.

## **Discussion Analysis**

### **I. The notion of holy man in Thai society**

The belief of holy man in Thai society was inspired by Theravada Buddhist conception of the great merit or "*bun*" in Thai. This belief, thus, had influenced to Thai society as Buddhism teachings impact people's notion, way of life, culture, and belief.

#### *1.1 Popular conception of 'bun'-merit and holy man belief*

For Buddhists, rebirth and 'bun' or merit are two main concepts concerning the Buddhist way of life. These two concepts are linked together. Buddhists have been taught that people's merit depended on the

accumulation of merit in their past lives. Thus, basing of Buddhism “holy man” is a form of revivalism that mixed the bodhisattva ideal with sacred kingship. (Cohen. 2001) Holy man is also meant a person who claimed to have special powers to persuade people to belief such as chanting amulet that helped to protect people. Holy men thus gain reputation for their charisma.

The belief in holy man in Thai society was blended with a millenarian belief regarding the Golden Age of Maitreya. Maitreya (Sanskrit) or Mettaya (Pali) is the Buddha-to-come, the *bodhisattva* who will be the next holder of the supreme status of Buddha, representing the Final Relief. His appearance in a time of chaos will be linked to dramatic, cataclysmic change. The Golden Age of Maitreya in Buddhist beliefs refers to the Utopian society, in which people will live perfect lives in a perfect society, after the time of Lord Buddha, which would last only 5,000 years. (Dabphet. 2013)

According to the notion of Theravāda Buddhist kingship in traditional Thai society, important concepts that were utilized to express the king are merit (*bun barami*). The king is a ‘person of merit’ (*phu mi bun*), a *Cakravartin*, ‘whell-turning monarch’, and a *bodhisattava* or the king who possessed the greatest merit of all people in the kingdom and were accumulating merit to “wished to become a Buddha to help all beings... leave behind the sufferings of transmigration.” (Samuels. 2013). Although in Theravada Buddhist kingship the king was referred as *phu mi bun* ‘men-having-merit’, there is another imagine of the term ‘*phu mi bun*’ or holy man. As the king was claimed as *phu mi bun barami* or the *bodhisattava*, charismatic people such as folk scholars or respected monks were called *phu mi bun* in the meaning of holy men who possess magical power that brought their fame and popularity.

Generally, holy men in Thai society are mostly understood as charismatic people, not the king. Their merits were different as the king as the *bodhisattava* will reach Nibbana (Nirvana) which is the sole essence of Buddhism, but holy men will never reach that goal. Thus, those who have been referred as holy men in Thai society since past to the present are not the king but charismatic people in regions, cities, towns, and villages. They are also respected monks, local scholars, local physicians, or politicians who have gained their reputation and popularity from town people or villagers. Also, the disunity and chaos in society caused people to seek protection in influential nobles and holy men and their amulets. Monks became involved in animistic and magical practices. Some respected monks were remembered and credited as possessing great merit and magical powers. Supernatural beliefs and animistic practices seemed to be common in Thai society till the present.

## **II. Influences of holy man belief in Thai society from past to the present**

Influences of holy man belief in Thai society can be seen in two main points: politics and peoples’ worldviews. Politically, the belief encouraged people to pay respect to those claiming as holy men who acted against state authority. Since the past, there were many rebellions claiming as holy men rebellions and caused disorder to the society and affected state power. The second influence of this belief is holy men’s leader were as “spiritual leaders” of the people. These spiritual leaders were respected as holy men; their followers showed respect in many aspects to them. Some holy men were respected monks, folk scholar, and local officer, for instance. This part explores influences of holy men belief in various periods.

### *1.1 Influence of Holy men in the traditional period (17th – early 19th century)*

The belief of holy man had impacted on political stability of the state since the seventeenth century in the Ayutthaya period (1350-1767 CE.). The great merit or *bun barami* was invoked in a more direct manner many times by political figures, monks, and folk scholars claiming themselves as holy men, the implication being that they had greater merit than the ruler and thus could potentially supplant him. (Dabphet. 2013) There were holy men movements or rebels against the state and the leaders of the movements claimed as holy men.

They spread the belief of the Golden Age of Maitreya, or the future Buddha to common people to persuade them to believe that they will help people to reach the Golden of Maitreya. Consequently, commoners might join uprisings, follow holy men who promised to help them, or escape into the jungle. These caused problems to the state. (Keyes. 1977)

Rulers were fully aware of the threats to their authority from those claiming to be holy men. For instance, in the late 1690s, during the reign of the usurper Phetracha, the leaders of two uprisings, the Thammathian Uprising and the Bunkhwang Uprising, claimed to be holy men. They also each claimed to be the late king's brother who survived execution because of their spiritual powers. (Dabphet. 2013) Their claims were effective in Thai society where people believed in supernatural powers and respected royalty. (Sisak. 1992). The uprisings thus got support from ordinary people. However, they were then suppressed.

The other example of holy man is the case of Maha Da, a monk of Phra Ram Temple in Ayutthaya in Thonburi period (1767-1782), claimed to have magical powers and created amulets. Nobles and villagers in the town and surrounding areas became his followers and presented money and precious objects to him. Maha Da was accused of being holy man and summoned for an investigation by senior monks at Thonburi. He rejected the accusation and claimed that he was collecting money to renovate temples in the areas of Ayutthaya. The monk was subsequently exonerated; he then told his followers that his "escape" was due to his supernatural powers and great merit. His popularity consequently increased. The monk's claims would later lead to a holy man revolt. He thus was arrested, defrocked and executed. (Dabphet. 2015)

During the First Reign of Bangkok era (1782-1809), the state supported the reviving and purifying the Sangha and Buddhism, attempted to rationalize Buddhism and Buddhist practices, and supported monastic study. Religious writings written and revised in the First Reign thus provided rational explanations of religious practices and principles. (Chanthonwong. 1997) Thus, the belief of holy man was prohibited as it opposed Buddhist teachings and the movements of holy men seriously affected social order and state stability. It may be assumed that the Thai rulers perceived that the popularity of the belief in the supernatural affected both Buddhism and the stability of the state, as many rebellions were led by holy men in the past.

King Rama I of Bangkok enacted the ten laws of Sangha to reveal problems such as monks possessing and transmitting inaccurate knowledge of Buddhism, believing in superstitions, acting as holy men, and violating discipline. The king explained his aims to purify Buddhism and restore the Sangha by changing and managing the conduct and behavior of monks, partly through punishment. (Chanthonwong. 1997) The laws encourage monks to amass accurate knowledge of Buddhism in order to prevent them from acting as holy man and assembling for unlawful purposes. However, historical records show that during this time the belief of holy men were widely spread and there were many cases of holy men. Dabphet (2013) provides some example of case of holy men movements in this period and states that the belief of holy man and the Golden Age of Maitreya provided a strong influence to the people. For instance, in 1816, there was a holy man movement at Saraburi province, located to the north of Bangkok, involving the spread of *Tamra thamnai phumibun* (The Book of Prophecy on Holy Man). This text tells the story of an orphan who helped people towards the Golden Age of the Maitreya and punished wicked persons. In this case, eight ex-monks claimed to be holy man. When arrested, they confessed that they followed the predictions from the Book of Prophecy. Hence, a decree was issued to ban monks from representing as holy man and restrained the distribution of the text. The decree blamed these eight people as "insane" criminals who believed in a prophecy without reason; the monks falsely claimed to have spiritual power and persuaded villagers to believe in the Golden Age of Maitreya and abandon their livelihoods. They also harmed and killed other people. Thus, the law disallowed the possession and distribution of the Book of Prophecy. The book owners had to surrender them to officials for burning; offenders would be charged and punished as rebels. (Dabphet. 2013)

However, there was a case of holy man in 1840, which indicates that this popular belief and the Book of Prophecy remained popular among ordinary people. In the town of Nakhon Ratschasima in the ethnically

Lao northeast, a man claimed to be an immortal orphan who came to release sinners. He claimed to have magic spells and presented charms to villagers who trusted and respected his charms. The man was then arrested.

The cases of monks claiming to be holy man reflect an adherence to this belief among the people and the ineffectiveness of the laws. The law had no power in changing people's beliefs. Believers still disregarded the laws. They showed their belief in holy men and supported them when they occurred. These cases demonstrate that, at that time, the Book of Prophecy was well known and distributed widely in society, either in the capital or provinces, and that the belief in holy man was still popular. The cases of holy men in 1816 and 1840 both occurred in the northeast region and in two provinces that were close together. The second case occurred 24 years after the first. Based on this, it can be argued that the laws were ineffective and the belief in holy men was still popular among ordinary people. The story in the Book of Prophecy became a folk legend in rural areas. (Dabphet, 2013) Moreover, the cases reflect problems in the daily lives of ordinary people, which made them turn to popular beliefs and ways to better their lives. Irrational beliefs of commoners led to the attempts to revive Buddhism.

### *1.2 Influence of Holy men in the reformation period (19th-20th centuries)*

During the reforming period of Siam or Thailand in the late 19th – 20th centuries, Thai kings strengthened their authority throughout centralization policy which controlled over provincial cities and local leaders. This caused the oppositions, blaming as holy men rebellions, in North and Northeastern regions in 1889, 1895, 1900, 1901, 1924, and 1936. Local leaders claimed themselves as holy men. The belief of holy man in Thai society was blended with a millenarian belief regarding the Golden Age of Maitreya which refers to the Utopian society, in which people will live perfect lives in a perfect society. These beliefs encouraged an increase in the number of monks acting as holy men, especially in the chaotic period. (Moolsilpa & Waraphon, 1982). Therefore, local leaders and folk scholars thus referred to holy man belief to endorse that their movement was to release commoners from the state. Tem Vipakpotjanakit's *History of Northeastern Region* (2014) studies the eruption of holy men rebellions in Northeastern region in the late nineteenth-century Thailand which caused from the centralization policy of the government at Bangkok. According to the historical record, villagers believed in the notion of holy men and the Golden Age of Maitreya and there were the spread of the "Book of Holy Man" in many areas. The leaders of holy men movements told villagers that they were representations from heaven coming to help people from devils. The holy men movements in North and Northeastern regions continuously erupted. The leaders of the rebellions were monks, folk scholars, and local rulers. The people had a great faith in the notion of Buddhist merit and the Golden Age of Maitreya. Thus, the leaders of the movements referred to the notion of holy men to gain faith of the commoners. Also, pressure from lessening local authority of Bangkok caused dispute among local leaders, while the control of economy and taxation led to the dissatisfaction of local people. These factors caused the eruption of holy men movements in regions.

Khongchan (2015) study the background and the factors related to the Holy Men's Rebellions in the Northeast of Siam as well as the forms, methods, characteristics, including aftermaths of Holy Men's Rebellions occurring in the Northeast during 1936 –1959, dividing into three periods. The first is the 1936 Rebellion, called *Mor Lam* (folk singer) *Noi Chada Rebel*, resulted from taxation policy of government. Mor Lam Noi Chada used his ability as a folk singer to sing verses concerning the problems of people who suffered from government policies and using people's belief in Maitreya to persuade them to join his group. However, the movement did not last long and Mor Lam Noi Chada was arrested by the government authorities. The second is Mor Lam Sopa Pontree Rebel in 1939 to oppose education system of the central government, land taxation, and forestry law. Mor Lam Sopa Pontree also describe problems through her verses which become popular, but attacked the government which were afraid about social order. The group of Mor Lam Sopa Pontree was therefore finally arrested. The last is Sila Wongsin Rebellion which occurred from the problems

of starvation and drought in the region. However, Sila Wongsin helped his followers not to starve and had adequate food without doing any work. They were taught that they must pray and follow instructions of Sila Wongsin. Besides acting as a holy man, the organization and Sila's gather of people were similar to the ideas of Communism. The government thus suppressed the movement. The rebels in this period can still be seen the continuity of the notion of Maitreya as a key basis for movements. However, these movements differed in forms, methods, and purposes.

Causes of holy men movements in the reformation period mainly came from political and economic factors. In politics, the Bangkok state expanded its authority to control over provincial states in North and Northeast of Siam. Kings of the Northern states were subordinate to Bangkok kings and Bangkok sent officers to rule provincial states. In economy, Bangkok controlled over taxation and trading policies of the provinces and issued some rules that caused dissatisfaction of local people. These led to the oppositions and the eruption of holy men movements claiming to release the local people from Bangkok's ruling.

### *1.3 Influence of Holy men in the present*

The belief of holy men is still influenced in the present Thai society. Although no one publicly claim themselves or were regarded as holy men as the past, their popularity and some practices are similar to holy men. There are a few cases of popular monks gained high respect from their pupils and disciples. The first example case is the Holy Monk - Luang Phor Koon Paritsuttho, the late and revered abbot of Banrai Temple, Nakhonratchasima, was famous and respected from his Buddhist practice, remaining in the jungles as a forest monk for ten years, and his spiritual power in chanting amulets. Luang Phor Koon also donated funds, receiving from his lay disciples, to charity projects such as healthcare, schools, and foundations. He is one of the most respected monk in Thailand, referring and remembering as a holy monk.

Another case of the present holy man is Dhammachayo, the head of Phra Dhammakaya Temple in Pathumthani. Dhammachayo and Phra Dhammakaya Temple has become a controversy because practices and teachings of the monk that opposed Buddhist teachings. Also, there are much more common accusation of commercialism of the temple. (Liusuwan. 2016) Dhammachayo was very popular and gained high respect from millions followers. However, in 2016 Dhammachayo was accused of conspiring to launder money by accepting cash stolen from a credit union (Klongchan Credit Union Cooperative). He has still disappeared since then. The controversy of Phra Dhammakaya Temple seriously impacts the society. The followers respect Dhammachayo as a holy man; his's approach to Buddhism has drawn some criticisms with the accusation of Buddhist commercialism. It may be said, Phra Dhammakaya Temple's acts is a case of the salvationist and millenarian traditions of the so-called "sectarian". Comparing to Chinese history, as David A. Palmer's study (2011), Phra Dhammakaya Temple case can be classified as the "reactionary sect and secret society".

## **Result**

The Belief of holy men has been in Thai society since the past to the present. Buddhist conception of merit has an influence to people's belief and referring of holy men. There are two main reasons of the holy men movements in the past that is political and economic factors. Holy men movements were to oppose the state from the state's ruling policies such as taxation, lessening local leader's authority, and commoners' trouble. In the present, there is no holy men movement that act against the state as occurred in the past. Those respected as holy men are popular monks and folk scholars. They are as spiritual leaders. Some of them are respected from their teachings, practices, or magical fame. As many people in Thai society believe in amulets, some monks are revered from their amulet and talisman. Followers wish to have amulet and talisman in many purposes such as believing in their magical power and keeping as 'good luck charm'. Many disciples pray their

high respect to some sects led by charismatic monks as well as provided money and properties to the monks who became the influential people in the society. These influential and rich monks are respected as holy men. Then, they were accused of dealing with corruption and crime occurred. The state thus needs to control and suppress, as seen in the case of Phra Dhammakaya Temple.

### **Conclusion and Future Work**

Although the present Thai society is developed and Thai people are well educated and interested in high technology, many of them still have faith in spiritual amulet, believed in unreasonable story, and vowed to Buddha images, angles, and spirits to help them or give them wealth and good luck. Buddhist teachings mention about believing in reasonable things, the law of Karma, the way to live that reduces suffering and the way out of suffering. However, many Buddhists neglect Buddhist essences. That is why some sects became popularity and the sects' leaders were respected as holy men.

There are some main questions that need to do more research of why the salvationist and millenarian traditions has still be popular in the modern society. Future work may study more to find the answer in order to understand the present Thai society in a particular way.

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