

A Historical Study of Buddhist Civilization in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the religious, cultural, and sociopolitical aspects of Buddhist civilization in Thailand, from its early Indian influence to modern day. The primary objective of the research is to examine how Buddhism influenced Thai culture and demonstrate how Buddhist institutions, practices, and patronage changed throughout several dynasties. Understanding how authorities and Buddhist institutions interact dynamically and how this has helped shape a distinctively Thai Buddhist identity is the main research challenge. Through the use of primary and secondary materials, including as epigraphic records, temple inscriptions, ancient writings, and archaeological data, this study takes a historical-analytical scientific method. Interpreting the evolution of Thai Buddhism also involves content analysis of religious and historical literature as well as comparative research with nearby regions. The results shed light on the long-standing contribution of Buddhism to Thailand's cultural continuity and sense of national identity.

Keywords: Buddhist civilization, Thai Buddhism, Thai history, Theravāda, development,

INTRODUCTION

Thailand is referred to as the "land of the free." This Asian nation has never been incorporated into the European Empire. The former name was Siam, but it was altered to Muang Thai in 1939, which again signifies the country of the free. In 1945, it was rebranded as 'Siam' after the dissolution of the Japanese Empire. In 1949, it was called Thailand. Thailand is situated between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Boundaries delineating People's China in the Northwest, Burma and Laos, Northeast Cambodia, North and South Vietnam, Malaysia in the South, and the Bengal Strait in the West. Thailand encompasses an area of 502,350 square miles, measuring 510 miles from east to west and 985 miles from north to south. Thailand is a tropical country that has been divided administratively into four areas. Malaya sub-centrifugal and North Central-North East regions. It was a split between North and South, as historically indicated. During the northern era, "Vinhuloka" functioned as the capital, whilst Ayuthiya (Ayodhya) was the capital in the southern era. Buddhism has significantly influenced the cultural, spiritual, and political framework of Thailand for centuries. This article seeks to elucidate the significant and evolving link between religion and Thailand's historical development through the analysis of archeological data, historical documents, royal patronage, and monastic organizations.

DISCUSSION

Historical evidence indicates that individuals in antiquity lived in accordance with and had beliefs about natural objects. Chals Eliot asserts that those who venerated natural items predated the advent of Buddhism and the belief in sacred artifacts introduced from Cambodia. In Thailand, it is said that Ven. Sona Ana and Ven. Uttara, dispatched by Emperor Ashoka to Suwarnabhumi (Buruma), established Buddhism. The consensus among historians is that the Thai people originated in the southern Chinese province of Yunnan. Individuals who settled in Northern Thailand during the fifth century are believed to have established a monarchy in the thirteenth century, showcasing a fusion of Chinese and Indian traditions. Historically, from the early 17th century, traders from Western nations started their arrival in Thailand. King Mongkut (A.D.

1851–1868) permitted foreign trade and prohibited the slave trade and servitude, resulting in the formation of a new social hierarchy in Thailand.

Subsequent to the 1932 revolution, Thailand was designated as a buffer state between France and England, governed by a constitutional framework. Subsequently, it seems that all individuals aged 20 and above were conferred the right to vote. According to the constitution established in 1932 by King Prajadhipok, all Thai monarchs are required to be Buddhists, and non-Brahmins are prohibited from governing the kingdom. Only Buddhists may govern the Thai country. Buddhism is currently designated as the national religion of Thailand. After the assassination of King Ananda Mahidol in 1946, his brother Pramroj, often referred to as Bhumibol, ascended to power. In 1963, General Thanom Kitti Kachorn assumed control following two military regimes. The universal franchise was established in 1969 by the individual who reinstated the parliamentary state system.

In order to defend the nation against foreign invaders, he established an agreement with the United Kingdom. A South Asian group called "SEATO" granted him membership. It's approved. The population, which was 35,448,000 in 1970, has now dropped to about 46,540,000.

The critics have separated the history of Thai Buddhism, which has been developing up to this point, into four sections.

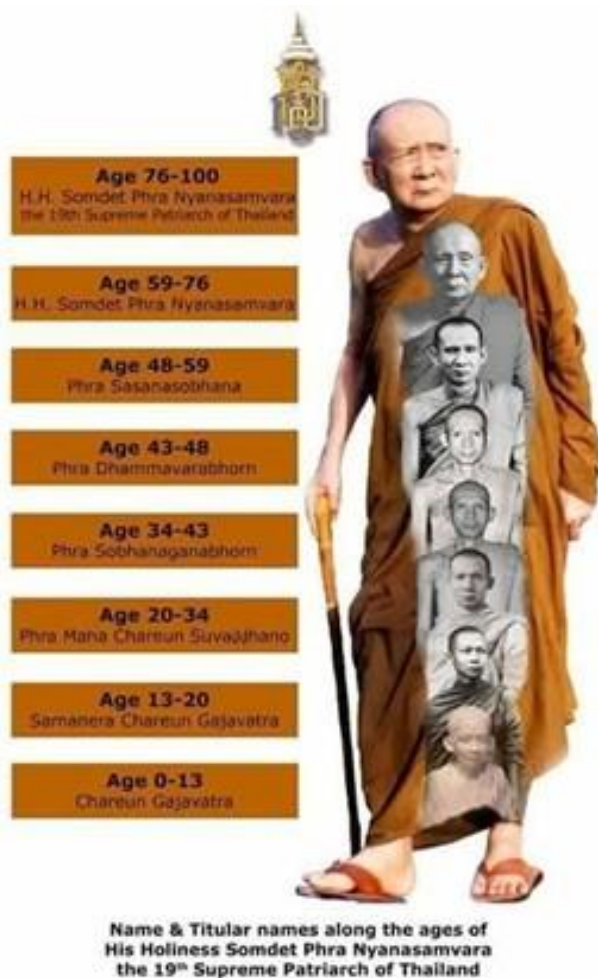
1. The era in which Buddhism circulated from Nakkhor Patthom city as its centre. (from 329 BC).
2. The era in which Buddhism circulated through King Palamkhan of Sumatra in the Year 1282 BE (from 700 AD).
3. The era started after the stabilization process of the sasana by King Anawarata of Burma in 1600 BCE. (From 1000 AD)
4. The era in which Buddhism spread from Sri Lanka (from 1361 AD) at the beginning of the reign of Liddha, the son of the king Ramakhameng, in the 18th century BE.



Map 2 – The Ancient Kingdoms of Thailand

A number of Thai bhikkhus were sent to Sri Lanka by Emperor Suriyawansarama. Maha Dharmika Rajadhiraja, a former monk, participated in missionary activities, as recorded in the history of the Sasana. All successive Thai emperors effectively continued the Buddhist revival. According to Lee Mei Reginold's book, *The Culture of South East Asia*, Chinese Mahayana missionaries introduced Mahayana Buddhism to Thailand. The remains found in the Pongtuk and Phrapaton areas corroborate the backing of Thai Buddhism by the ruler of ancient Sri Lanka. The nation's king acted as the protector, active counselor, and executor of the Buddha Sasana.

The king required familiarity with all actions pertaining to the Buddha Sasana. Following the political crisis in 1941, the Sangharaja was predominantly selected and requested to oversee the religious activities. It constituted a totalitarian regime. The Sangharaja of Thailand possesses authority and honors that are equivalent to or above those of the king. Images of the king and the sangharaja are exhibited in all governmental edifices and institutions. A board of forty-five admonishers exists. Their other designation is the Sangha Ministers' Cabinet. The foremost member of the sangharaja dwells at the Vat Benchama Bopit royal temple. The monarch visits the sangharaja to demonstrate respect, rather than the reverse. The judgments of the board of admonishers are determined by the Buddha Sasana Department, a division of the Ministry of Education. This division acts as the intermediary between the government and the church. The sangha has prohibited the discussion of politics. The Buddhist Temple Protection Act, enacted in 1941, mandates that prior authorization from the appropriate agency is essential before the establishment of a temple. Current data suggests roughly 22,415 "vat" members of temples and 280,660 resident monks. Approximately 50 Mahayana temples are managed by Chinese Mahayanists. Tibetan and Vietnamese Only twenty of these serve as centers for Buddhists. There are little distinctions between Theravada and Thai Mahayana views. The "Sekhiya" disciplinary cord (vinaya) is the sole distinction between the 227 laws of Theravada and the 250 of Mahayana Patimokka. Theravada and Thai Mahayana were aligned. hence, their matrimonial practices are likewise nonexistent.



Dhammayuttika and Maha Nikaya are the sole two sects of Thai Buddhism. 1851 to 1856 CE. To advance the Sasana, King Monkuth founded the Dhammayattika sect. Every facet of religious life is regulated by discipline. Sects must cover both shoulders when wearing robes to adhere to the king's stringent disciplinary regulations. Like Sri Lankan monks, Thai Mahayana monks drape their robes to the left. Twice daily, the Dhammayuttikas address ecclesiastical sins regarding the garment. Upon believing they had committed an error, they disclosed their transgressions to the public and the Maha Sabha. The monarch should also undertake a brief time of monastic life in addition to embracing Buddhism. At the time of Athulya Teja's father's demise, the young prince was in America, participating in military training alongside the reigning Emperor Bhumibala. Despite his return to the country, he was denied entry into Thailand as he was not a monk. The prince was appointed for a brief period to qualify for kingship upon the monks' summons aboard the ship. Prior to marriage promotions and appointments to any senior office, temporary ordination is needed. That nation lacks a tradition of humiliating those who are unclothed. Based on their duration of membership in the order, individuals were allocated social values and ranks. Mahanikaya serves as the residence for all bhikkhus. Bat guano, situated within a tunnel of the Kau Vong Kot Temple, encircled by the Lop Burry mountain range, reportedly generates an extra annual revenue of 35,000 baht.

In Thailand, there are three different types of enormous temples: Mahavihara, Rajavara Vihara, and Rajavara Mahavihara. The primary Ecclesiastical property fund was augmented by the revenue collected in the temples. Individual bhikkhus are not permitted to use the temple's wealth for their benefit. However, each person's property or parikkaras could be used as they see fit. A temple is considered complete if it has an uposathagara for vinaya performances. Such temples are run by an administrative board or a board of devotees. Buddhist temples serve as both educational and cultural hubs for the hamlet. Schools and universities teach Pali as a language.

Annually, the Thai populace commemorates the life of the Buddha and a significant event in the history of the sasana via various festivities. Religious festivities are conducted to commemorate events including the birth of Prince Siddhatta (18 May), the Enlightenment, and the death of Lord Buddha (15 May). The history of the Sasana is directly linked to Magha Puja. Songkran, the festival of water offerings to the elderly, commemorates the new year. Other examples are the rites commemorating Vanavasika puja, the giving of Kathina robes (Thonklhin), the festival honoring the rain gods, and the water-throwing festival. During the ceremonial event termed Akathina Puja, the monarch and consort partake. The royal palace serves as the commencement point for the splendid procession that proceeds to the Vat Arune barge and the kinnara mermaid barge, which carries the robe designated for donation to the Maha Sangha as a kathina civara. Every Thai festivity is characterized by its Buddhist influence.

A timetable dictated the operations of each temple. At around 5 a.m., the monks are expected to rise and proceed to the begging bowl at 6 a.m. They must recite Pirith and venerate Buddha three times daily. Subsequent to a short overview, the Sangha court sanctioned those who contravened ecclesiastical norms and those who transgressed disciplinary legislation. Wat Phra Keo in Bangkok serves as the epicenter of Thai Buddhism.

The beginnings and development of Thai literature may be traced to the Pali language and its literature. The Sanskrit language and literature predominantly impacted Mahayanists and Hindus, whereas the languages of China, Tibet, Laos, and Vietnam have been integrated into Thai. The Vessantara Jataka story (Maha Jat Khan Thet) is extensively utilized in Thai literature and drama. We might utilize Ven. Sri Mangalacarya's "Vessantara Jataka Deepanie" as an illustration. Prior to birth, several suttas from Sri Lanka's "Piruvana pot vahanse" were instructed to be memorized. As a result, significantly more literature has been produced about the Suttas of Mangala, Ratana, and Karaneeya. Thai architecture is significantly shaped by Chinese design. Archaeologists assert that Thais have emulated Korean and Mongolian arts and crafts due to the influence of Mahayanists. Thai architecture is intricately connected to those of Tibet, Laos, and Cambodia. The Burmese temples were erected in the thirteenth century CE. Thai religious edifices are claimed to have been influenced by the Pagan city. Rooftops utilize specialized tiles, triangular tiles, and flat tiles.

The word "vedi" is used by Thai people to refer to stupas (pagodas). The word Pravedi, which means venerable stupa, is derived from the Pali word "cetiya." They have four different types of chetiyas: Pra Dhatu Vedi, Pra Bori Poka Vedi, Pra Uddesika Vedi, and Pra Dhamma Vedi (also known as Tipitaka Dhamma, Paribhogika, Uddesika, and Sririka). Although the Dhamma Chetiya is not practiced in Sri Lanka, Buddhists honor the Tripitaka texts. Pirith Poth vahanse is the name of Paritrana, while Jataka Pot vahanse is the name of the Jataka book. Professor G.P. Malalasekara believes that because the majority of Dhammas are memorized, Sri Lankan Buddhists have not regarded them as Chetiyas.

The Nakkhom Patthon stupa was constructed in the earliest stages, closely emulating the Mauryan-style design of the Sanchi stupa in India. Later influences from the Lankan style of the Sukkhodaya era and the Khmer style of Sri Vijaya are discernible. Construction of the stupa was done in seven (7) stages.

1. Moriya age (Swarnabhumi)
2. Thon age (Dvaravati)
3. Khmer age (Sri Vijaya)
4. Lanka age (Sukkhodaya)
5. Lanka and Khmer age (Ayodhya)
6. Burma age (Ayodhya)
7. Laos age (Ayodhya)



Image 1 - The First pagoda built in Thailand at Nakorn Pathom in central Thailand

Buddha statues were first built with the Mathura tradition. Later, Amarawati and Gupta styles have paved the way for the present day.

Professor Kamburupitiye Vanaratana says that the Prakav Morakot Buddha statue was built in Sri Lanka. There are a few more reasons to confirm his theory. The first Thai Buddha statue is of the Anuradhapura style. Historical traditions say that a statue called Sinhala Buddha Pratima was carried to Thailand in 7th century B.E.

There were 12 stages of the Thai iconography down the ages.

1. Anuradhapura style.
2. Amarawati style.
3. Gupta style.
4. Pala style.
5. Dvaravati style.

6. Sirivijaya style.
7. Uthon style.
8. Chian style.
9. Sukkhodaya style.
10. Nakkhon style
11. Sri Dhammaraja style
12. Ayodhya style.

The Buddha sculptures in Thailand display both the Ubhayansa and Ekansa styles of robe draping. All hand styles (Mudra) and sitting styles (Asana) are also visible. There are also variations in the materials utilized for icon display. Mr. Luang Borible Buribanda's work "Image of the Buddha" elucidates that several materials have been employed in the creation of icons. Buddha sculptures in the bhumi spasha mudra originate from the 7th to the 12th centuries. They are unmatched and comprised of metal or wood.



Image 2 - Seated Sukhothai Buddha

Historically, Thaaai Buddhism indicates that monks from Sri Lanka, during the Sukkhodaya period, erected temples and created artwork and sculptures in the Pollonnaruwa tradition. Sri Lankan Bhikkus depicted numerous scenes from the Buddha Carita on rocks, which were subsequently sculpted by Thai artists. The Vessantara Jataka is considered one of these forms of rock sculptures. The archaeologists have discovered rock drawings. Monks from Sri Lanka produced the blue and black line illustrations located in stupas. Additional instances of painted religious edifices are Vet Thev, Sri Santha, and Maha Dhatu Vihara.

The Thai play illustrates the cultural context of Buddhism. Consequently, artists have fervently portrayed religious themes throughout history.

The reinstatement of higher ordination in Sri Lanka during the 18th century (1746–1789) was the most pivotal occurrence in the relationship between Sri Lanka and Thailand. The Thai heritage is diminishing in Sri Lanka, and the Siamopali Mahanikaya was founded under the reign of King Kirti Sri Rajasingha.

CONCLUSION

The historical evolution of Buddhist culture in Thailand demonstrates its profound and enduring influence on the nation's social, political, and cultural framework. Buddhism has shaped Thailand's spiritual identity as well

as its art, architecture, legislation, and monarchy since its initial arrival by Indian missionaries and traders, and its establishment during the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya eras. The Theravāda tradition became deeply entrenched in Thai culture, functioning for centuries as a moral and religious guide. Notwithstanding foreign influences and political changes, such as colonial forces and industrialization, Thailand has maintained its Buddhist history with notable persistence. The symbiotic connection between the Thai state and the Sangha (monastic community) was crucial in preserving Buddhist principles and practices, hence maintaining their relevance in modern times. Examining Thailand's Buddhist culture provides insight into the nation's broader historical and cultural processes, transcending a mere exploration of religious evolution. Thailand's Buddhist past continues to underpin its national identity, ethical conduct, and social cohesion as it navigates the challenges of the modern world.

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