THE ROLE OF LUANG PU TUAD AMULETS AS A SOURCE OF MENTAL COMFORT IN THAI SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF MODERNIZATION

Weerapak Samsiripong ¹ and Boonyong Chunsivimol ²

1. An MA student, Master Degree in Southeast Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University
2. Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Chulalongkorn University

Abstract

This paper titled as "The Role of Luang Pu Tuad Amulets as a Source of Mental Comfort in Thai Society in the Age of Modernization" is the study on the relations between the national religious institution (Buddhism) and its member (Buddhist laymen) as a result of the charisma. In this paper, the author would focus primarily on Luang Pu Tuad amulet, the image of a popular Buddhist monk who passed away since Ayutthaya period, particularly Luang Pu Tuad amulet from Wat Chang Hai, which is the only kind of amulet that is prevalent in amulet market nowadays.

The sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad is an outstanding case study since the major attempt to produce his amulets started during the year of 1954. Mythology, rituals, and narratives are the sources for the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad amulet. As a result of the belief in the sacred power, the system of social action is created in order to respond to their mental insecurities in the age of modernization. In this contemporary period, Thailand is running through political, economic, and social dynamics, resulting in the collective insecurities among the members of the society. Religious Institution provides an instrument for its members to deal with these insecurities. In Popular Thai religious belief, holy monks have sacred power, which can be transferred into an object form (amulets), resulting in the 'defying potencies' of the amulets.

Key word: source of mental comfort, Luang Pu Tuad amulet, Thai Buddhism
Background

In this contemporary period, Thailand is running through political, economic, and social dynamics, resulting in the collective insecurities among the members of the society. The growing pace of life as a result of market capitalism is the fear that the citizens of Thailand have to experience. Members of the societies seek for an instrument to overcome these insecurities.

Religious Institution provides an instrument for its members to deal with these insecurities. Theravada Buddhism, in this context, is not only a state religion but also a cultural system that provides an instrument for the citizens of Thailand to deal with their crisis. However, the ideas and practices of Theravada Buddhism are largely diffused as a result of modernization. Therefore, the members of Thai society have innumerable methods to deal with their insecurities. While several people utilize Buddhist doctrines to deal with their insecurities, the popular group encounters their fears with the belief in sacred power in an amulet.

In Theravada Buddhism, the followers believe in both the teachings of Lord Buddha and the monks who reached a certain level of wisdom (Thera). This wisdom could also become a source for the sacred power of these monks. Therefore, there is a local Thai belief that the holy monks have sacred power. This sacred power can be transferred into an object form (amulets). As a result, the object form of sacred power has the 'defying potencies' (Phutthakhun) that protects them. There are three major kinds of ‘defying potencies’: amiability (Mahaniyama), invincibility (Mahatma), and averting evil survival (Weerapong, 2005).

In this sense, the belief in the power of amulet is a social phenomenon in Thailand. This paper will use the case of Luang Pu Tuad, a popular Buddhist monk who passed away since Ayutthaya period. The sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad is an outstanding case study since the major attempt to produce his amulets started during the year of 1954, which was merely the beginning of Modern Thailand.

In the case of Luang Pu Tuad amulets, the production was held by Luang Pu Tim (the abbot of Wat Chang Hai, Pattani) and was sponsored by Anand Kananurak (a wealthy Chinese man who communicated with Luang Pu Tuad in his visions). The form of Luang Pu Tuad that appeared in Anand’s visions – dreams and flashes – is the mainstream prototype for the reproduction of Luang Pu Tuad amulets in a following generation.
There are several beliefs in the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad. These beliefs became the reasons why Thai people have the faith in the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad to fulfill their wishes and protect them. Luang Pu Tuad, therefore, is a case where a strong relation is created between the religious institution and its members. On the side of the institution (Buddhist Sangha), Buddhist monks have created the belief that provides a mental comfort for its members. They are the only actors that have legitimate power to communicate with the charisma of Luang Pu Tuad to perform Buddhist image consecration ritual. On the side of the members (Buddhist laymen), the members contribute to the development of its religious institution as they consider charisma as if it was real. Such contribution does not include only the financial support but also the commitment on Buddhist moral principles, Buddhist rituals, and Buddhist collectivism.

The belief in the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad is therefore a worthwhile social phenomenon for sociological analysis. This paper will try to seek for a sociological explanation for the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad, as well as the social implications of this belief in Thai society.

**Objective/Research Question**

- To investigate the status of Luang Pu Tuad as a ‘holy man’ with ‘sacred power’
- To investigate the pattern of transferring the ‘sacred power’ of Luang Pu Tuad into an object form of amulets – the so-called ‘defying potencies’
- To analyze how the ‘defying potencies’ of the amulets respond to the needs of various individuals in contemporary Thai society
Research Methodology

Qualitative research methodology is a tool for an analysis on social phenomenon and collective behaviors in order to gain an insight on this matter and using two key research methods, including documentary research and field research.

1. Documentary research is an examination on previous written anthropological and sociological works, including books, manuals, articles, and documents on Luang Pu Tuad and key social theories, particularly Max Weber and Pierre Bordieu, which will be the bases for an understanding of Luang Pu Tuad and the role of religious institution to encounter with the collective insecurities in Thai society. The author would also look into local sources from Yanintr Petchsuwan and Weerapong Intrapanich, as well as the pamphlets from the temples, in order to develop a concrete argument in this paper.

2. Field research is an examination on the ongoing social behavior in a given society. As the author is well aware of the limited sources on Luang Pu Tuad, field research will be a useful method to overcome this research limitation.

The target group in this field research includes

2.1 Monks in Southern and central Thailand where the belief in the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad is bond with their local identity. The list of temples include: Wat Iam Woranuch, Bangkok; Wat Rakang, Bangkok; Wat Huay Mongkol; Huahin; Wat Chang Hai, Pattani; Wat Pako, Songkhla, and many more. The monks from these temples were affiliated with the production of Luang Pu Tuad amulets in the year of 1954.

2.2 Key Buddhist laymen who are closely affiliated with the belief in the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad for an in-depth interview, particularly those who are involved with the arrangement of Luang Pu Tuad annual ritual and those who are recognized in Luang Pu Tuad institutions. The samples of the interviews include Khun Lam and Khun Ram, experts of Thai Buddhist amulets, as well as Kananurak family members who were affiliated with the image visualization of Luang Pu Tuad in the production in the year of 1957.
Discussions

The belief in the sanctity of Luang Pu Tuad amulet is a reflection of social demands in Thai society in the certainty in material and spiritual terms. As science failed to answer the demands of the society, religion would provide an instrument to deal with such insecurities. Sacred object is an effective instrument that responds the social demands. Therefore, the belief in the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad amulet is a rational social action that are systematic and structured. Furthermore, it also demonstrates a system of relationships between the religious institutions and its members.

There was a system of ‘pattern-maintenance’ among those who believe in the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad. Such pattern emerges from the collective values on the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad. This ‘value’ has formulated minor beliefs to maintain the sacred power in the object, resulting in taboos, restrictions, and moral codes for the owners of Luang Pu Tuad amulets. These minor values are therefore basic commonalities of the believers, which results in the ‘institutionalization’ of the believers (Parsons, 1968: 173-174).

There is a system of ‘goal attainment’ among these believers. The believers seem to have a similar objective for the social action, which is the use of sacred power to respond to their mental insecurities. The rapid social change in the past is the cause for the quest for certainty in the material and spiritual world. The contribution of the society’s members is evidence that the religious institution has effectively responded the demand of the society in time of crisis (Parsons, 1968: 175).

However, there is an issue with the sacred power of the amulet; there is no concrete way to prove the power of the amulet. Therefore, there is a system of ‘adaptation’ among the believers. Some members of the society have alienated the object from the sacred power. As a result, these objects have historical, aesthetic, and economic values for the collectors. (Parsons, 1968: 176)

As the belief in the sacred power of Luang Pu Tuad is extended to a wider community, there is a reemergence of sub-social systems. This is evident in the proliferation of temples and foundations that seek to produce Luang Pu Tuad amulets to gain resources for religious and social development. As a result, there is a system of ‘integration’ that binds these sub-social systems altogether. In this sense, Wat Chang Hai becomes an important figure that regulates the system of coherent relationships among these various actors. The production of Luang Pu Tuad amulet is based on the model of Luang Pu Tuad visualized by
Anand Kananurak in Wat Chang Hai ever since. On the one hand, should Luang Pu Tuad amulets be different from this particular model, the members of the society would not believe in the sanctity of the amulet. On the other hand, should these sub-social systems find a certain relation to myth of Luang Pu Tuad and Wat Chang Hai, such amulets would possess much higher sanctity in the mindset of the believers (Parsons, 1968: 177).

Results

Mental insecurities are merely an implication of rapid social changes. Through a detailed sociological analysis, the belief in the sacred power of the amulet is a reflection of mental insecurities that are resulted by rapid changes in the religious and educational institutions. In the past, the religious institution plays an integral role in Thai education. The ancient educational system in the past was dominated by Buddhist cosmology and mythology. In this sense, the monastic education system trained Buddhists to live in both the material world and the spiritual world. However, religious institutions and educational institutions are dissected due to the influence of Western powers and the establishment of schools and universities. Such changes have progressively reduced the power of the religion in Thai society. Science has situated as a modern world view and replaced religious cosmology from the system. This is evident in the proliferation of religious purification during the colonial period. The emphasis of religion in this period was primarily on religious doctrines in the scriptures.

However, World War II had a significant role in Thai society. Science is no longer sufficient to meet the spiritual needs of modern Thai society. This process leads to the world views based on the religious cosmological system and popular Buddhism. This is evident in the proliferations of the belief in the crisis era during Buddhist half-millennia and the reemergence of holy monks and sacred power. This includes the emergence of the belief in Jatukam-ramadeva and Luang Pu Tuad. The charisma of these popular Buddhist figures are closely affiliated with the notion of ‘bodhisatva’, the savior in Buddhist cosmology.

Through sociological investigation in the abstraction of Luang Pu Tuad amulet, the sacred objects have encountered different procedures in order to gain sanctity. The case of Luang Pu Tuad amulet shows that mythology of Luang Pu Tuad prior to the amulet production is the potential source of sacred power. The myth and legends of Luang Pu Tuad
have concretized the idea that the spirit of Luang Pu Tuad is still prevalent in order to save
the Buddhists in the contemporary era.

The sanctity of the amulet relies primarily on rituals. The religious institution has
affiliated the belief in the charisma of Luang Pu Tuad with a Buddhist ritual. The image
consecration ritual (Phutthapisek) is the process that integrates the charisma of Luang Pu
Tuad with an object. However, such object also requires a particular germ that resembles to
the concept of Luang Pu Tuad for charisma endowment (Weber, 1993: 2)

As the object is endowed with charisma, the object will become sacred. These sacred
objects have an ability to intervene in one’s destiny and to create miracles. The myths of the
sacred power of the amulets might be re-told in the form of legends and stories, resulting in
the emergence of defying potencies (Phutthakhun), a particular magical feature of amulet.
Such defying potencies can respond to the demands for mental security among Thai
Buddhists.

Recommendations

The author believes that this study will be a concise analysis on the charisma of Luang
Pu Tuad and the impact on the contemporary Thai Buddhist society. Therefore, the author
would suggest the fellow researchers who have a great interest on the 'charisma' of Luang Pu
Tuad to conduct further sociological research on the 'charisma' of Luang Pu Tuad in other
areas where the belief of Luang Pu Tuad is present, particularly in Singapore and Malaysia.
The different social and cultural contexts might produce a contrasting social behavior that are
worthwhile for sociological research.
References


Parson, T., (1968), The structure of social action: a study in social theory and special references to a group of recent European writer (New York : Free Press)

Richardson, J., (Ed.). Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education (New York, Greenwood), 241-258


