

Something in the Air: A Study of Religio-Cultural Narratives of Optical Orbs in Thailand

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Abstract

This study examines print media narratives on orb photographs in order to understand how this optical phenomenon represents celestial beings descending to celebrate human affairs in the mind of Thai Theravada Buddhists. The findings indicate that the seemingly least religious phenomenon is incorporated into the religio-cultural landscape of Thai society with the aid of modern digital technology. Drawing on time-honoured references to the Buddhist cosmology, such as the Great Assembly, the karmic law and a variety of deities, Thai Theravada Buddhists have come to see orbs as a religious symbol. Such a narrative of orbs, which is disseminated by the mass media, envisions the metaphysical world of the Buddhist cosmology despite public concerns about the diminishing influence of the religion in Thai society.

Keywords: orbs, Theravada Buddhism, digital media

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In recent years, Thai people have been intrigued by mysterious balls of light in snapshots. The images of balls of light are often captured during rituals or in such a place as temples and cemeteries although they are invisible to the human eye at the moment of being photographed. Thai language daily *Thai Rath* (May 1, 2007, p. 1) published a photographic image of a ball of light in front of an actress who attended a religious ceremony on April 30, 2007 [see Figure 1].

Mysterious balls of light, or orbs, have been long known to photographers simply as an annoying optical phenomenon. Photographic film manufacturer Fuji Film (2007) comments that orbs are flash reflections of minute particles, such as dust, insects or moisture droplets which happen to pass in front of the camera. When a flash light is deployed, floating particles in the front of the camera become illuminated. Being in

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close proximity to the lens, their images are out of focus. This phenomenon became known to the general public when compact digital cameras became widely available in Thailand during the last decade. Because compact digital cameras have a shorter focal length than film-based cameras, they are more susceptible to this optical phenomenon, which is a blurred image of a floating particle².

Despite the scientific explanation, orb photographs have become something more than an optical phenomenon in contemporary Thai society. A university professor showed the author a picture of an orb which was taken at the Royal Flora Expo 2006 in Chiang Mai. When asked for her opinion of the orb, she voiced her belief that it is an image of a god or *thewada*. She argued that the distinctive pattern inside the orb resembles the halo of a *thewada*, which is depicted in religious arts in Thailand (personal communication, April 4, 2007). Similarly, a middle-aged lawyer claimed that orbs are the manifestation of celestial beings (personal communication, December 21, 2007). During a religious ceremony for his relative's business in the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat on April 14, 2007, and his following visit to the city pillar³ on April 22, 2007, he took a number of snapshots [see Figures 2 and 3]. To his surprise, he found images of orbs in several shots, which in his opinion resemble the image of the local guardian deity *Chatukham Rammathep*⁴. Despite minor variations in their views of orbs, both believe that mysterious balls of light are not merely an optical phenomenon but manifestation of celestial beings.

Some Thai Buddhists describe an appearance of orbs as “an assembly of celestials (*chumnum thewada*)”. This name is apparently a reference to the well-known Buddhist lore of the great assembly, which is said to have taken place more than two millennia ago. Nine months after the enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama, 1,250 monks and celestials were said to have gathered without prior arrangement in order to celebrate Siddhartha's enlightenment. Among three divisions of the Pali canon or *Tipitaka*, *Suta Pitaka* collects numerous discourses mostly delivered by the Buddha on various occasions. There is a section called *Maha-samaya Sutta* or *the Great Assembly* which contains a vivid description of this legendary event as follows:

There also came the Devas Metta-kayika and Karunakayika followed by their attendants. These ten groups of Devas of diverse hue, possessed of iddhi power, radiant, comely, and with a retinue of attendants, have come rejoicing to the forest to see the assembly of monks (Piyadassi Thera 1999, p. 87).

To Theravada Buddhists, this ancient event still holds a special significance. In Thailand, this assembly has been annually commemorated as the nationwide celebration of *Makha Bucha Day*, which falls on the full moon night of the third lunar month. Devotees pay a visit to a temple, and walk three times around the main building of the monastery with a lighted candle in their hands [see Figure 4].

In recent years, a number of Thai Buddhist scholars have expressed their concerns about the declining influence of Buddhism in society. One such scholar is renowned Thai monk Prayut Payutto. He argues that monks may be losing their credibility as moral and intellectual leaders of the society:

Buddhist monks consider that the younger people disrespect the religion and tradition. On the other hand, the younger people, fascinated with western culture, consider that monks are obsolete, speak an unintelligible language, and lack intelligence... My point is that the younger generation feel that monks lack quality as intellectual leaders (1987, pp. 22-23; author's translation from the original Thai).

Despite the mounting concerns about the current state of Thai Theravada Buddhism, Donald Swearer (2010, p. 4) observes that the religion still plays a vital role “in enhancing life’s meaning through the integration and interpretation of personal, social, and cosmic dimensions of life” in Thai society. To validate his observation, a number of researchers have sought to discover the resilience of Theravada Buddhism in present-day Thai society. It remains relevant in the society by incorporating non-canonical elements into its practice according to the adherents’ needs. Orbs, popularly called as “an assembly of celestials”, are one such non-canonical belief that has been newly incorporated to Thai Theravada Buddhist discourse.

Another facet of the recent surge of orb photographs is the complex relation between the religion and the development of the media and technology in Thailand. Although modern technology is considered as the engine of secularization, a growing number of researchers have found complex and sometimes unpredictable relation between the media and religions, which in some cases may lead to secularization, and in others, de-secularization. In contemporary Thai society, the mass media have been vital conduits of religion. The mass media promote religions, Theravada Buddhism in particular, which is one of “the three pillars of

the society” because they have been controlled by either the government or the army. In contrast, media sociologist Stig Hjarvard (2013), in his study of religions in contemporary Danish society, argues that the traditional religious authorities, such as the Protestant Church, are losing the dominant position as the chief conduits of religious beliefs to the mass media. The religious institutions are still represented in the media, but are becoming mere “providers of raw materials, which the media then use and transform for the purpose of the media themselves” (ibid., p. 102). He calls this process “mediatization”, through which a variety of religious imagery and beliefs intermingle in the media:

The liturgy and iconography of the institutionalized religions become a stockpile of props for the staging of media narratives. For example, popular action adventure stories about *Indiana Jones* in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or a television series like *Lost*, blend and recontextualize many different religious, pagan, and secular symbols in new and unexpected ways (ibid., p. 94).

As secular institutions like the Danish media play a more active role in religious issues, the line between the sacred and the secular is increasingly blurred. The media may further a re-sacralization of society; in others, they undermine the authority of institutionalized religion and promote secular imaginations, rituals, and modes of worship (Hjarvard 2013, p. 102). Either way, the role of the media cannot be overlooked to understand why orbs are becoming a religious symbol in media-saturated Thailand or, to be more precise, how orbs evoke in the mind of Thai Theravada Buddhists an image of celestial beings descending to celebrate human affairs. In so doing, this study will collect and examine media narratives of orbs. To this end, the following questions are posed: (1) What do orbs signify to Thais in light of the Theravada Buddhist cosmology? (2) What kind of impact do digital photographs of orbs possibly have on Thai Theravada Buddhism?

First, archival research was conducted to collect orb-related news and documents from various print media. From 2006-2007 issues of the widely circulated Thai language daily newspapers, i.e., *Thai Rath*, *Daily News*, *Matichon* and *Post Today*, and magazines, orb-related news items were collected. Although orb-related news is not limited to print media, it is extremely difficult to collect relevant news from other media, such as radio and television. In Thailand, the archival systems of electronic media resources are still inefficient. On the other hand, print media are more easily

accessible to researchers, and are widely circulated in Thai society. For example, the Thai language daily *Thai Rath* boasts the largest circulation (700,000) in the country while its rival *Daily News*' circulation is estimated to 400,000 (McCargo 2000, pp. 1-2). The Thai press is less subject to political and business influences than the broadcast media, which are largely under government control. Therefore, the Thai press enjoys a considerable level of freedom in reporting, and its impact is far-reaching. In order to supplement the archival research, a series of fieldworks were conducted in Chiang Mai Province from 2007 to 2009. Through archival research and fieldwork, 4 orb-related news items, 11 photographs and 2 booklets were collected.

The Function of the Supernatural in Thai Theravada Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism is so widely practiced in Thailand that it is considered as the de facto state religion although the Thai constitution does not stipulate it as such. Professed Theravada Buddhists in Thailand amount to about 94 per cent of the population while as many as 293,879 monks and 35,338 monasteries are officially registered (National Office of Buddhism 2012). In addition, the newly established National Office of Buddhism has been facilitating collaboration between the ecclesiastical administrative body of the Sangha Supreme Council [*Mahatherasamakom*] and various state agencies since 2002.

Many observers point out that non-canonical beliefs and practices continue to be practiced with little conflict with Thai Theravada Buddhism although the social elite and the Buddhist authorities have repeatedly tried to remove non-canonical beliefs and practices, which are lumped as “folk Brahmanism” or “animism” (Swearer 2010; Kitiarsa 2005; Terwiel 1979; Kirsch 1977; Tambiah 1970, 1984). One senior researcher observes the complexity within Thai Theravada Buddhism:

This intricate mix of indigenous and non-indigenous elements is not the religious pluralism of the West, a situation in which tolerance exists for a competition among a number of distinct and autonomous faiths for the religious adherence of the populace. Thai religious complexity is of the sort commonly characterized as syncretic, in which elements derived from several historically discrete traditions have combined to form a single distinctive tradition. In such a situation, individuals may simultaneously hold beliefs or practice rituals derived from different traditions, without any apparent sense of incongruity (Kirsch 1977, p. 241).

As for the role of the supernatural in lay communities, Marcel Mauss (1902/2005, pp. 174-175) argued from the functionalist point of view that supernatural forces maintain a vital role in fulfilling a practitioner's worldly desire:

While religion is directed towards more metaphysical ends and is involved in the creation of idealistic images, magic has found a thousand fissures in the mystical world from whence it draws its forces, and is continually leaving it in order to take part in everyday life and play a practical role there. It has a taste for the concrete.

To explain the complex religious landscape of the Thai society, Gananath Obeyesekere (1968, p. 28) similarly argues that lay Buddhists are motivated to rely on alternative sources for improving their here-and-now life. The karmic law states that one's current life is the result of one's past deeds and thoughts. In addition, only ordained males are allowed to participate in seeking the "true path" to enlightenment by abiding by the monastic codes and training. Therefore, the strict interpretation of canonical Buddhism prevents the lay followers from possibility of enlightenment. Lay Buddhists must seek for any non-canonical source for improving their present lives. Thus, there is a latent function in non-canonical beliefs and associated practices of Thai Buddhists, who are compelled to secure an alternative space for manoeuvre in worldly affairs. One of such spaces is the widespread beliefs in supernatural beings, which are said to improve one's prospects in life if they are tended with prudence.

On the contrary to Obeyesekere's analysis, there is a growing literature concerning ordained monks' involvement in a variety of non-canonical practices, such as tattooing (Terwiel 1979; Tannenbaum 1987), Hindu deities worship (Kitiarsa 2005), amulet blessing (Tambiah 1984; Jackson 1999) and spiritual healing (Muecke 1992). For example, talismans [*phrakhrueang*] blessed by revered monks are believed to fulfil the bearers' worldly desires, ranging from protecting them from both physical and spiritual harm to winning the lottery (Tambiah 1984; Jackson 1999). In fact, some rare talismans fetch millions of bahts from avid collectors.

Among Thai Theravada Buddhists, there is no lack of reformists who are critical of non-Buddhist elements. Siamese Prince Mongkut⁵ (1804-1868), as an ordained monk, attempted to remove popular but non-canonical traditions from the monastic life. Among other Buddhist reformists, Buddhadasa (1906-1993), who was best known for his radical interpretation of the religion, was also critical

of popular beliefs in the supernatural and associated practices in Thai Theravada Buddhism. During a sermon delivered in 1967, he denounced the widespread belief in the supernatural as follows:

Today, the occult arts are in steep decline. Yet, forgive me for saying so, in spite of the general decline, there remains a great deal of it in places of worship. Wherever there are altars, wherever people worship sacred things, there the occult arts, what I call the “science of the sleeper” persists. The occult arts are for those who are asleep. They are for the ignorant. We are taught these things as small children, without intelligence or reason. If you still feel that thirteen is an unlucky number, that’s occult. You’re still asleep. There are many other such things. It is better not to believe them; these kinds of things you see them as such (2008, p. 180).

Prince Mongkut and Buddhadasa’s views on non-canonical beliefs in Thai Theravada Buddhism are similar to James George Frazer’s observation of magic. In *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Frazer (1890/1993, p. 16) claims that magic has a flaw in reasoning, and remains valid only during the first stage of human civilization. Thai Buddhist reformers also tried to “purify” the religion according to the canonical tradition by removing non-canonical elements practised by both lay and ordained followers on an everyday basis. However, non-canonical beliefs and practices show no sign of decline in contemporary Thai society. On the contrary, they show a remarkable level of resilience.

However, Justin McDaniel (2011, p. 8) in his study of Thai Theravada Buddhism in relation to the time-honoured belief in female ghost Mae Nak and highly revered Thai monk Somdet To criticizes the binary view of Thai Theravada Buddhism in academia, which divides the religion into orthodoxy and heterodoxy:

Ghosts, various deities, magicians, astrologers, healers, amulets dealers, fortune-tellers are normative in Thai “Theravada” Buddhism, but they are depicted as marginal or as simply an “unfortunate” leftover of the past or unforeseen side effect of modernity by even the most progressive of scholars. This privileging of supposedly timeless elite state and scholarly knowledge(s) renders the particularities and material context of everyday Thai Buddhist knowledge(s) illegible.

To understand the complex religious landscape in Thai society, McDaniel proposes that researchers should stop seeing it as a collection of static pieces of evidence or historical curiosities frozen in time, such as institutions, doctrines, codes, and the canon, and instead holistically observe the complex and often contradictory religious landscape without privileging the normative elements of the religion. The ubiquity of non-canonical beliefs and practices, as well as the incongruous accounts of their own beliefs and actions made by both lay and ordained Buddhists, are considered as *repertories*, which constitute what we understand as Thai Theravada Buddhism. Repertories allow individuals to mobilize cultural resources in configuring new phenomena like orbs within contemporary society. Following McDaniel's approach, this research examines the sacralization of orbs through examinations of texts, rituals, and imagery.

Reporting Orbs

Thai media regularly report orbs, and try to associate them with *thewadas*. On June 11, 2006, *Daily News* reported on orb pictures taken during a celebration of the 60th anniversary of King Bhumibol Adulyadej's coronation ("*Hueha phap duangfai prisana*" [Excited about photographs of mysterious balls of light]). In addition to the aforementioned photograph of an orb taken on April 30, 2007, *Thai Rath* (May 1, 2007, p. 1) again reported an orb picture taken during a seasonal ritual for the Election Commission of Thailand during the 2007 Songkran festival or the Thai New Year ("*Nakhon si wun 'Sodsri' phaga! Songnamphra Chatukham phon nai tuk kokoto*" [Nakhon Si startled, "Sodsri" baffled! Chatukham appears in the Election Commission Office during a water-giving ceremony] on April 20, 2007 (Figure 5). On September 16, 2007, a *Thai Rath*'s columnist mentioned orbs ("*Thewada ma prod*" [Angels come to bless], p. 3). On October 7, 2007, a Thai language business daily reported orbs in two articles with five photographs taken by Thai monks in Bodhgaya, India (*Post Today*, "*Phapasachan ikkhrang*" [Amazing photos again], p. A1, "*Wisachana...phapasachan*" [Answer for amazing images], p. A3).

On June 11, 2006, *Daily News* included a lengthy interview with an amateur photographer who took four orb pictures during a celebration of the 60th anniversary of the king's coronation. In the article, orbs are described by the reporter as "*duangfai prisana*" [mysterious balls of light]. The photographer described with excitement how she had taken orb photographs:

My colleagues who also took pictures insist that all lights were turned off at the time [of taking the photographs]. They are certain that there was no light but candle lights. An adjacent factory was completely dark. The sky was clear. It was not raining, either. They do not know where the orbs came from. When the ceremony was performed, attending colleagues and local people were so moved that almost all of them could not hold back tears. They stood, singing the royal anthem while tears were rolling down. We were even more excited when we saw the orb pictures [author's translation from the original Thai].

In Thai culture, the term *duangfai prisana* does not always carry a positive connotation because it is often associated with the malicious spirit called *Krasue*. Nonetheless, the abovementioned photographer felt that photographing orbs was “amazing and auspicious” [*pen sing mahasachan pen mongkhonchiwit*]. Her comment indicates that she saw a possible link between the appearance of orbs and the 60th anniversary of the king's coronation despite her concession that orb photographs may be optical distortion or images of lights in the surrounding area.

Thai Rath's April 20, 2007 article carries a photograph of Election Commissioner Sodsri Satayathum during a ceremonial pouring of water on a Buddha statue on the 2007 Thai New Year's Day. Beside the commissioner is a large orb, which is identified as the guardian god of Nakhon Si Thammarat “*Chatukham Ramathep*”. Talismans of this deity were enormously popular among Thais at that time. The same article also mentions that the commissioner wore a *Chatukham Ramathep* talisman during the ceremony.

Besides lay followers, ordained monks also engage in the sacralization of orbs. Although their comments are often accompanied by a cursory concession that orbs can be an optical phenomenon, they argue that some are indeed the images of supernatural beings, which manifest themselves in response to auspicious activities. In one of two articles from *Post Today*, Arayawangso of Paphuttaphot Hariphunchai Temple in Lamphun Province details his view of orbs. Although he does not rule out the possibility of orbs as an optical phenomenon, he insists that some orb pictures are of supernatural origin:

For example, we can see the light of spiritual power in various colours and hues arising from well-trained monks.... It is emitted from some parts of the body. For example, the light in red and pink may arise from the head, which is

caused by the spiritual power of the monk, and can be photographed...[author's translation from the original Thai].

Arayawangso explains that orbs can be photographed by those whose spirits are “mature and courageous” [*kae kla*], “committed” [*athithan*] and “determined” [*tangchai*] (October 7, 2007, p. A3).

He concludes that “in Buddhism, there are many sacred experiences, and also a lot of dharma [the Buddha's teaching]. But orbs are in fact crystal balls of the dharma [*duangkao haengtham*], which emerge from the Buddha's glory, the dharma, and the Sangha [the monastic brotherhood]”. When Arayawangso calls orbs “crystal balls of the dharma”, he is associating orbs with the morality of the photographers and by extension the moral universe of Buddhism.

A booklet compiled by a group of Thai Buddhists (2005) features a photograph of Buddha statues with numerous orbs inside the ordination hall of Wat Rachasamrong Temple, Udonmichai, Cambodia. In one essay in this booklet, orbs are called “*duang winyan khong thewada thi raksa ong phra*” [spiritual balls of guardian gods] (ibid., p. 7).

At Wat Doi Saket Temple, located on the north-eastern outskirts of Chiang Mai city, a series of rituals were held in 2007 for the ailing abbot. According to a document written by an anonymous author, the attendants of the rituals witnessed the appearance of orbs during the rituals. This document, accompanied with two “*phap mahasachan*” [amazing pictures], provides another valuable insight into how orbs are understood by the monastery. Initially in order to prepare for a *Katin* ceremony⁶, the organizer consulted a female spiritual medium. She claimed that two *thewadas* who protected a relic in the monastery were about to leave in a few days. She also predicted the abbot's illness and hospitalization. She advised that the organizer should offer rituals for both departing and coming *thewadas* in order to save the abbot. In response to the medium's advice, a series of rituals were performed with the consent of the abbot. The first ritual was performed for the departing *thewadas* at around midnight on 21 June. During the ritual, the abbot was said to see two “*duang kaeos*” [crystal balls] flying over the relic. Nine days after the first ritual, a second ritual was performed in the presence of 9 monks for the coming guardian gods, which were said to protect the relic for the next 500 years. According to the document, the participants saw two orbs in the eastern sky at around seven o'clock in the morning. The document also reported a number of

miracles both during and after the rituals, such as a sudden weather change, an unusual intensification of sunlight and winning the lottery. During an additional ritual performed after the two initial rituals, the colour of a crystal ball turned golden and then silver in the medium's hands. The medium somehow identified the newly appointed gods: "*thep goen*" [A silver god], who protects the southern part of the relic and "*thep thong*" [a golden god], who protects the northern part. The medium later started selling crystal balls, which symbolize the two guardian gods.

The abovementioned document includes orb pictures, which were taken during rituals on an unspecified date. In one photograph, the female medium and the abbot seem to sit face to face in front of the altar. This photograph shows an opaque ball of light floating around the chest of the abbot [see Figure 7]. Another photograph also shows a number of orbs with the female medium and other attendants during a ritual [see Figure 8].

Of course, not all Thai Buddhists consider that orbs are of spiritual origin. *Thai Rath* columnist Kilen Pralongchoeng ("*Thewada ma prod*" [Angels come to bless], September 16, 2007, p. 3) pokes fun at a sudden surge of orb pictures: "Why are so many people around me so meritorious that they took not one but many photos of *thewadas*?" In the same article, he mentions that he has been familiar with orbs since the age of film-based cameras:

When I was young, I used film cameras. Taking pictures against the sun, I constantly captured images of balls of light, or varying lengths of columns of light. When finding miraculous images of columns of light, or [in their opinions] displays of psychic power of revered monks in meditation or during the blessing of talismans, the attendants [of religious ceremonies] eagerly asked me to publicise such photographs. [But] I just smiled [author's translation from the original Thai].

Opinions like this can trigger shock or sometimes resentment among Thai Buddhists. Although the columnist's scepticism is apparent, his column illuminates the cultural meaning of orbs that they are visual manifestation of celestial beings. Orbs, by coming to be known to the wider population in recent years via the media, are becoming into the cosmology of Thai Theravada Buddhism.

Technology of Re-enchantment

Thai Theravada Buddhists are familiar with the cultural meaning of *thewada* [*deva* in Pali]. *Thewada*, transliterated as “radiant one”, is believed to remain invisible to the human eye (Nyanatiloka 1980, p. 94). Although the most common translation of *thewada* is “god”, it can refer to any superhuman beings, and even sometimes persons of high status, such as a king and a priest (Lochtefeld, 2002, p. 183). The notion of gods in dharmic religions is different from the Judeo-Christian notion of “God”, which refers to the supreme power in the universe. For example, in the Buddhist cosmology, gods are not completely free from the law of karma and reincarnation even while they live in the realms of pleasure or heavens.

The choice of term *thewada* for orbs deserves a special attention because it reveals the signification of orbs vis-à-vis the Thai Theravada Buddhist cosmology. Apart from *thewada*, orbs are called in some similar but different names, e.g., *Chatukham Rammathep*, *duang kaeo* [crystal balls], *duang kaeo haengtham* [crystal balls of the dharma], and *duangfai prisana* [mysterious balls of light]. *Chatukham Rammathep* is a guardian god of the southern city Nakhon Si Thammarat whereas both *duang kaeo* and *duang kaeo haengtham* often refer to Buddha’s relics or the symbol of the dharma. *Duangfai prisana* can refer to any mysterious lights, but it is associated with the celebration of the king’s sixtieth coronation anniversary.

Although Theravada Buddhism is popularly regarded as an atheistic religion, its canon does refer to numerous supernatural beings and associated mythologies. For example, Theravada Buddhist cosmology is hierarchically ordered into three spheres of existence: “The world without form” [*Arūpabhūmi* or *Arūpaloka*], “the world of desire” [*Kāmaabhūmi* or *Kāmaloka*], and “the world of form” [*Rūpabhūmi* or *Rūpaloka*]. These three metaphysical worlds comprise 31 levels of existence, into any of which a human being or other creature may be reborn according to his or her karma (Davis 1984, p. 75). *Phis* or ghosts, dwelling at the third lowest level of the world of desire or “the sphere of ghosts (*Petavisayabhūmi*)”, are ambiguous existences. Some are believed to cause misfortune and calamity, ranging from domestic disputes to epidemics, while others are considered as more benevolent toward human beings, granting prosperity to those who propitiate them respectfully and observe the ethical codes (ibid., p. 76). In contrast, *thewadas* are regarded as benevolent guardians of worldly affairs, which are believed to appear in auspicious occasions [see Figure 9]. In some cases, the categories of *phi* and *thewada* may be used interchangeably. For example, northern Thai ritual texts refer to the Hindu

creator god *brahma* as *phi phom* while Thai Buddhists commonly address *phi* as *thewada* as a sign of respect during a ceremony (ibid., pp. 77-78).

Similar phenomena, such as ball lightning, are also well-known in Thai culture. They are often referred to as *Krasue*⁷, a type of malicious spirit which hovers in the air in search of prey, and emits light at night. Believed to attack pregnant women and their unborn children, mysterious balls of light have been long associated with miscarriage in Thai society. However, they are identified as *thewadas* in contemporary Thai society. As the examination of the collected accounts of orbs indicate, orbs are considered by Thai Theravada Buddhists as visual manifestations of gods. Heavily drawing on the time-honoured Buddhist cosmology, Thai Theravada Buddhists associate orbs with celestial beings descending from the heaven to celebrate auspicious occasions.

However, supernatural beings are voiceless unless human beings act as mediums. For example, the royal members of Lanna Kingdom⁸, despite being professed Buddhists, worshipped the guardian spirit of the city state or the *phi mueang*. Despite its name, the *phi mueang* is believed to protect the wellbeing of the inhabitants as long as it is properly venerated. However, if offended, it is believed to unleash wrath by causing calamities, such as natural disasters and epidemics. Until the early twentieth century, Lanna royals presided over the annual sacrificial ritual for the spirit. Believed to be able to communicate with them, Lanna royals were able to claim their divine right to rule the state as well as the population (Bock 1986, p. 340). For example, Lanna Princess Ubonwanna was a royal medium. She was summoned to communicate with the *phi mueang* when a grave problem occurred in the kingdom. Ubonwanna's political authority was underpinned by her monopolistic power to communicate with the spirit (Woodhouse 2009, p. 71; Cohen and Wijeyewardene 1984). Her gift was believed to be inherited matrilineally, as is usually the case with *ti nang* – a medium for clan spirits in Northern Thai society. Because she had an exclusive right to give a voice to the guardian spirit of the kingdom, both she and her family were able to maintain the political and spiritual authority around the invisible and voiceless spirit.

In contrast, everyone today can communicate with *thewadas* through a digital camera even without professional training, financial resources or exclusive rights sanctioned by religious or political institutions as aforementioned monk Arayawangso argues. Digital cameras enable Thais to incorporate the new phenomenon into part of the Buddhist cosmology. Although often considered as the

engine of desecularization, science and technology can re-enchant the modern world. In fact, *thewadas* are not the first supernatural beings to be “contacted” through modern technology. When cameras were invented in the 1820s, they were expected to visualize not only the physical world but also the spiritual world. Although there have been many claims of the supernatural beings captured by modern optical technology, perhaps one of the best known incidents was the Cottingley fairies case. In 1917, two teenage girls in Cottingley, England claimed to photograph fairies. In Hinduism, a number of studies suggest that modern technology, such as print, radio and films, has given rise to “the emergence of new and spectacularly successful forms of religious expression” (Hughes 2009, p. 94). In Thai society, Peter Jackson (2009, p. 364) considers that the modern media are important purveyors of the traditional authority of the Thai monarchy. He argues that the mass media, particularly the visual media, enhance King Bhumibol’s political authority by framing him within the Brahmanical idea of divine kingship (*devaraja*).

Popular beliefs in the supernatural simply cannot be reduced to lack of education or economic deprivation. For example, both American and British spiritualism movements in the nineteenth century crossed over socio-economic status (Kaplan 2008; Tromp 2006, p. 5). For example, some of the supporters for the existence of the Cottingley fairies were among the elite class in British society, such as Arthur Conan Doyle (2006). Across the Atlantic, Thomas Edison is said to have worked on a device called a *ghost machine* to communicate with the dead (Conrow 1968/2013). Similarly, the popular belief in spiritual orbs is shared by people from various socio-economic classes in Thai society.

Brian Turner (1992, p. xxii) explains that religious practices serve to create a social bond among the followers. For example, religious rituals can enact mythologies to create effervescence or a religious enthusiasm in a secular world. Participating in rituals, members of a religious group develop a sense of solidarity and norms that may require loyalty and sometimes even sacrifice. Thus, religious rituals organize social and political relations. In a similar fashion, Thai Theravada Buddhists’ belief in spiritual orbs has given rise to a collective consciousness that unites the believers. Through a series of individualized acts of travelling to sacred places, participating in auspicious events, and sharing tales of orbs with others, they have tried to form their identity as pious Buddhists. The appearances of orbs are considered as signs of divine approval for sacred sites, auspicious occasions and pious persons. Similarly in Hindu culture, the foundation myth of a sacred

site or temple is often associated with a *thewada*'s visitation (Williams 2003, p. 18). Although Thais have not developed such an elaborate system of "orb worship", which gives rise to religious rituals, temple worship, and even pilgrimage, their accounts on orbs provide us invaluable insights into a curious blend of modern technology and time-honoured beliefs in the supernatural. For both lay and ordained Buddhists in Thailand, orbs are becoming a positive religious symbol which visualizes the abstract and intangible religious sanctity.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that both lay and ordained Thai Theravada Buddhists attribute orbs to a variety of non-scientific factors, such as religious events, sacred sites and the moral status of those who are involved in orb pictures. Typically drawing on the well-known reference to the tale of the Great Assembly of the Buddha's disciples, the Buddhists believe that orb photographs are visual proofs of gods, which manifest themselves to celebrate auspicious moments. Their opinions of orbs, along with the visual images, are popularized in the circuit of the Thai media. In a sense, "talking orbs" is a form of re-enchantment of modern Thai society. People engage in the maintenance of Theravada Buddhism as they talk about orbs and participate in related activities.

Some people are concerned about the diminishing influence of Buddhism in Thai society in the face of scientific progress. However, digital technology and the mass media may contribute to the preservation of Buddhist cosmology rather than rendering the religion obsolete and redundant. This study indicates that Theravada Buddhism still maintains a privileged position in the minds of Thai people. Intriguingly orb photographs enhance "life's meaning through the integration and interpretation of personal, social, and cosmic dimensions of life" in Thai society (Swearer 2010, p. 4). In a sense, orbs became a new religious repertory, which visually proves the divine laws, and offers Thai Theravada Buddhists an opportunity of expressing their identities as pious Buddhists.

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Appendix



Figure 1. The photograph of an orb, taken on April 30, 2007 by a *Thai Rath* staff photographer during a religious ceremony held at Takong Temple, Nakhon Pathom Province for the local guardian god *Chatukham Rammathep*.



Figure 2. Photograph of orbs taken by one of the interviewees on April 14, 2007 at a fishermen's quay in Nakhon Si Thammarat during a ritual.



Figure 3. Photograph of orbs taken by one of interviewees on April 22, 2007 inside the shrine of the city pillar of Nakhon Si Thammarat.



Figure 4. Photograph of a *Makha Bucha* ceremony, taken by author on February 7, 2012 at Wat Suan Dok Temple, Chiang Mai.



Figure 5. This photograph shows an orb, which a staff writer calls *Chatukham Ramathep*, during the 2007 New Year's Day celebration (*Thai Rath*, April 20, 2007, p. 1).



Figure 6. A newspaper article on orbs in Bodhgaya Park, India (*Post Today*, October 7, 2007, p. A1)



Figure 7 (above) & Figure 8 (lower). Photographs of orbs and a female medium, which were taken by an anonymous person in around 2007 and exhibited at Wat Doi Saket Temple, Chiang Mai.



Figure 9. A mural depicting a visitation of *thewadas* in Wat Pa Darapirom Temple, Chiang Mai (2013).

Endnotes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the tenth International Conference on Thai Studies, Bangkok on January 10, 2008.
- 2 In order to reduce or avoid orbs from appearing in photographs, Fuji Film advises that users of a digital camera should (1) switch off the flash and take a photograph where a sufficient amount of light is available; (2) if the flash unit is detachable, take a photograph with the flash unit away from the camera; and (3) take a photograph where there is little dust or few moisture droplets in the air.
- 3 A city pillar (*lak mueang*) is installed by ethnic Tai groups, prior to the construction of a city. The pillar is believed to be the abode of a guardian deity and bring prosperity and safety to the ruler of the city.
- 4 In 2006, *Chatukham Rammathep* talismans became enormously popular in Thailand. In fact, the soaring demand for the talismans contributed to the booming economy of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.
- 5 Mongkut's contact with Christian missionaries led to the reformation movement and the establishment of the new sect *Thammayut* in 1833. Also known for his keen interest in natural science, he is called the father of science in Thailand.
- 6 This ritual is annually held at the end of the rain retreat. During the ritual, gifts are offered to monks.
- 7 There are widespread beliefs in similar ghosts in other Southeast Asian countries.
- 8 Lanna Kingdom was founded during the 13th century in present-day northern Thailand by King Mangrai. It was eventually annexed to Siam at the turn of the nineteenth century.

