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# THE RELATIONSHIP OF BELIEF SYSTEMS TO BEHAVIOR IN RURAL THAI SOCIETY\*

STEVEN PIKER

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The sociology of religion begins with the supposition that a determinate relationship exists between the content of religious ideas and orientation to the mundane world. This initial premise, moreover, is often extended to state that religious beliefs are in some sense prepotent over ideas pertaining to nonreligious activities, and for this reason impart content or structure to the latter.<sup>1</sup> In support of the first part of the supposition, a number of correspondences between the content of Thai magico-animistic beliefs and the orientation of the Thai peasant to the mundane world will be outlined. I do not agree, however, with the extension of the supposition. Therefore, I shall draw further on Thai materials to suggest that the explanation for the observed correspondences lies not primarily in the prepotency of religious ideas, but rather in the ontogenesis of Thai peasant personality, which itself gives general content and structure both to definitions of mundane, interpersonal situations and to orientation to the world of the supernatural.

By any taxonomic reckoning, the Thai peasant is a Theravada Buddhist. His Buddhism notwithstanding, however, he also propitiates spirits, practices magic and divination, and fears ghosts and sorcerers. Simultaneous belief in a "magical" religion is not thought by the peasant to be inconsistent with his adherence to Buddhism. Indeed, Buddhist monks—the most respected practitioners of Buddhism in Thailand—emphasize through both their behavior and teaching that the lay villager is not expected to forego magical practices and spirit worship and follow more immediately in the footsteps of the Buddha. For the pivotal doctrines of retribution (*Karma*) and reincarnation teach that humans vary greatly with respect to religious potential, and that only a few—those whose accumulation of merit from past incarnations is extraordinary—will be able to set aside materialistic

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\*This paper is based on research carried out in Thailand during 1962-63 in the Central Plains village of Banoi, province of Ayuthaya. The field work was supported concurrently by two National Institute of Mental Health grants. I gratefully acknowledge this support.

<sup>1</sup>Diverse theories begin from this premise. See, e.g., R. Merton, "Puritanism, Pietism, and Science," *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1949); A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "Religion and Society," in: A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London: Cohen and West, Ltd., 1952); and Max Weber, *The Religion of India* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958).

concerns and make substantial progress toward Nirvana while living as humans. As for the rest, they can and should make merit by supporting the monkhood, for only in this manner can they improve their own karmic status, enhance their possibilities of rebirth, and eventually approach Nirvana. Meanwhile, they are not expected to relinquish worldly pursuits or their "lower" religious beliefs and practices, which will be of a "magical" nature and will in any event be directed primarily toward worldly problems and not toward concerns of salvation. The religion of the Thai peasant, then, is in this sense a mixture of Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements, and magico-animistic elements are among its most important ingredients. It is largely on these ingredients that I shall focus.<sup>2</sup>

*Thai Animism:* The magico-animistic sector of Thai religion contains a large, changing, and sometimes contradictory body of beliefs. Villagers may disagree as to which beliefs or agents deserve their attention and deference, and the content of any villager's belief may change over time. A general classification or enumeration can, however, be imposed upon this body of beliefs and practices which will sort them out sufficiently for the purposes at hand.

(1) Spirits or minor deities: Of the nature spirits believed to inhabit all corners of the world, those thought to be most important are the spirits of rice, land, the house, water, trees, and the wind. These spirits usually have specific powers and are not invoked in matters that fall beyond their limited purviews. Thus, the house spirit is propitiated—if at all—only in connection with the blessing or protection of the specific house or compound near which he resides, the rice spirit only in connection with planting and harvesting the rice crop, and so on. Rarely, however, a nature spirit attracts more general invocation: thus, one of the healers in Banoi calls upon the wind spirit, among numerous other agents, in performing his curing ritual.

(2) Spirits of special deceased humans (male: *čao phau*; female: *čao mae*): Extraordinarily effective humans are believed, upon their death, sometimes to assume the status of a minor deity. The criterion of recruitment is definitely effectiveness, not virtue. Although sex is irrelevant, the two spirits of this variety residing near Banoi are male. One, while alive, was a much revered monk (respected for magical, not meditative, prowess), the other an exceptionally successful thief. The powers of *čao phau* and *mae* are more general than those of nature spirits, although the former are not as a rule asked for assistance with problems (such as harvesting rice) that are traditionally within the province of the latter. Whatever powers may be ascribed to them, however, are thought to run down over time and

<sup>2</sup>No explicit mention is made in this essay of Brahman elements in Thai religion. They appear most prominently in some ceremonials (such as ordination and topknot cutting), some nature spirit beliefs, conceptions of kingship, conceptions of heavens and hells in which the soul reposes between death and rebirth, and some agricultural rites. The interpenetration of Brahman elements with both magico-animistic and Buddhist elements is extensive.

cease entirely after a number of generations, by which time, the villager assumes, the spirit has undergone reincarnation.

(3) Ghosts and sorcery: The villager believes in the immediate presence of numerous ghosts, and does so with considerable anxiety. All ghosts are the souls of the recently deceased, but some are much more dangerous and vicious than others. Particularly vicious are ghosts of people who have died violent or "unnatural" deaths, or of women who have died in childbirth. Popular opinion affirms either that every death yields a ghost or that so many deaths produce ghosts that the atmosphere abounds with them. Some "regular" ghosts—those of people who died natural deaths—may be as dangerous as other varieties, but most are not. Ghost possession is believed to be one cause of illness and death, and is greatly feared.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the villager fears the effects of sorcery, which are produced either through magical manipulation of inanimate objects or by capturing particularly vicious ghosts and sending them to possess the intended victim. Popular belief holds that ethnic Thai never become sorcerers nor, interestingly, do Chinese. Members of other minorities—particularly Laotians, Cambodians and Indians—may, however, qualify for this dubious distinction. The effects of sorcery, if not quickly and properly counteracted, may cause death, and even if properly treated they will invariably cause illness.

Villagers rely on numerous techniques, including amulets, certain avoidances, incantations, and blessings of monks, to ward off the effects of ghosts and sorcery, although no combination of techniques is foolproof. Most villagers invest more concern on a day by day basis in beliefs pertaining to ghosts and sorcery than in beliefs pertaining to nature spirits. Indeed, a number of villagers are so concerned that they never leave their houses at night, and virtually none—including two who normally reside in Bangkok and work at "Western" occupations—will go out alone at night if it can be avoided.

(4) Amulets: Almost all villagers, including young children, possess amulets—many of them in the form of Buddha images—for good luck, protection (from ghosts, sorcery or thieves), or to avoid illness or accident. The worth, i.e., power, of an amulet is largely determined by the "knowledge" of the person (often, but not always a monk) who has sanctified it. Specific amulets may become so highly reputed that they are beyond valuation in economic terms, although this is rare. More commonly, the villager carries amulets which he hopes will further his purposes, but in which he has no abiding faith.

(5) Religious practitioners: In a sense, all villagers (or at least all adults) are practitioners of the magico-animistic religion, because all propitiate spirits and all possess amulets or utter incantations to ward off the effects of ghosts and sorcery. In addition, some part-time specialists operate in this

<sup>3</sup>Most villagers lump all ghosts and spirits into the category *Phii*. A few exclude spirits of Brahman derivation from this category.

area, and they may be briefly noted. First, in most localities there reside a handful of *mau* (practitioner, doctor), who have learned techniques of limited effectiveness for dealing with such problems as illness or ghost possession. Each has his own approach—involving incantation, use of holy water, amulets, etc., in some combination—and each claims effectiveness for only a limited range of problems. All give only a small part of their time to their practice, they receive virtually no remuneration for their special labors, and little prestige affixes to the status. All, however, learn their techniques from a practitioner much more exalted than they, who, if his reputation and effectiveness are well established, may be dignified with the title of *khru*, or teacher. The techniques and purposes of the *khru* are approximately the same as those of lesser specialists, but his knowledge and effectiveness are far superior, and even Buddhist monks may defer to him in seeking to acquire some of his powers. If the knowledge of a *khru* can be passed on, however, the accompanying effectiveness is usually diluted in transition.<sup>4</sup>

Buddhist monks may become highly reputed practitioners of magical techniques but, because of their monkly status, they are not referred to as *mau*, but rather as *phra*. Competence in this realm is not inconsistent with membership in the order; indeed, a monk's reputation may be enhanced through proficiency with essentially non-Buddhist techniques. Only a small minority of monks, however, are highly reputed as practitioners of magic.<sup>5</sup>

(6) Thai magico-animistic beliefs and practices are exclusively this-worldly in orientation, and it is this feature that most clearly distinguishes animism from Buddhism as operative belief systems. But one partial qualification must be added. Although, as far as I was able to determine, the villager never turns to magic or the spirits for other-worldly concerns (i.e., reincarnation), he does invoke Buddhist "agents," as well as magic or the spirits, in pursuit of this-worldly goals. In a typical example, one village wife, before setting out to sell foodstuffs, invokes the spirit of the house in which she resides, a local *čao phau*, the spirits of her deceased parents, and the Triple Jewel (the Buddha, his teachings, and the order). Similar combinations of Buddhist and non-Buddhist agents may be invoked in the healing ritual, exorcism of ghosts, "good luck" exercises (preparations for gambling, traveling, seeking work in Bangkok, etc.), sanctification of amulets, and spirit propitiation for specific purposes (such as finding a lost buffalo). Clearly, then, the Buddhist sector is relevant both to this-worldly

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<sup>4</sup>A rare variety of *mau*, of whom there were none in Banoi or its environs, can capture ghosts and use them for their own malicious purposes. As with other varieties of sorcerers, no Thai is believed to be a *mau* of this variety, called *mau phii*.

<sup>5</sup>Other part-time statuses in the magico-animistic sphere include spirit media, through whom *čao phau* might speak (none in Banoi); midwives, who employ some magic and ritual; and special chanters, who sometimes officiate at spirit propitiation rituals. In addition, all villagers invoke the benign intervention of the spirits of their immediately deceased ancestors, who—from the point of view of the supplicant only—are not considered to be ghosts.

and other-worldly concerns, although the magico-animistic sector has not been up-graded to the point of being relevant to reincarnation problems.

(7) Although magico-animistic beliefs and practices may be employed in pursuit of a positive purpose, their primary focus usually is the avoidance of misfortune or calamity. This is clearly the case as far as beliefs in ghosts and sorcery are concerned. It is also true by and large of the ritual associated with agriculture, for here the villager by his own affirmation seeks primarily to reduce the danger of crop failure and consequent economic disaster. Similarly, much amulet use, invocation of ancestral or nature spirits, and other incantation seek avoidance of one or another misfortune—injury or robbery while traveling, illness, loss of possessions, or whatever. Healing ritual aims at undoing a misfortune that has already occurred, and birth ritual seeks to ward off the development of undesirable traits (such as the proclivity to abandon one's parents) in the maturing individual. A few exceptions to this pattern may be noted: amulets and divination are widely employed to achieve success in gambling and good fortune in occupational pursuits. Similarly, love magic is employed, strictly speaking, for positive purposes,<sup>6</sup> and ancestral spirits may be invoked in pursuit of riches or occupational advancement. For the most part, however, the villager looks first to patron-client relationships for the betterment of his position in this world; for improvement of his rebirth prospects, he makes merit. Magic and the spirits are invoked largely to maintain the *status quo*.

*General characteristics of Thai magico-animism:* I should like now to indicate general and important patterns of orientation and interpretation implied by this sector of Thai religion: (1) The magico-animistic sector of Thai religion embodies no explicit ethic for everyday behavior. The powers and agents of this realm may be induced to intervene benevolently in human affairs, or they may have to be persuaded not to intervene malevolently. In either event, however, the virtue of the supplicant is irrelevant: successful thieves are believed to be the benefactors of the benign intervention of supernatural agents.

(2) Benefit or harm, if forthcoming, appear in a *deus ex machina* manner, and a particularistic relationship with the relevant agent is a necessary condition for attracting either. Reward is contingent upon the ritual adequacy of the supplicant and the whim of the supernatural agent (a gift may be promised, or an appropriate incantation uttered—perhaps in a language, such as Cambodian, not understood by the supplicant), and a dependency idiom is usually apparent. Emphasis on dependency and the *deus ex machina* event, however, does not imply trust or commitment on the part of the sup-

<sup>6</sup>Love magic is employed, strictly speaking, for positive purposes—to win and hold the love of another. Female love magic, however, the only truly effective variety, involves the products of female genitalia. Any woman thought to have employed the technique is once and for all beyond the pale of respectability, and the man involved is thought to have been horrendously victimized.

plicant toward his potential benefactor: if propitiation is involved, the villager promises a gift *if* and *when* his request is granted. Similarly, although the villager hopes that his amulets or incantations will bring spectacular good fortune to him, he is not particularly sanguine about the likelihood of such an event.

(3) The premises which underlie Thai magico-animistic beliefs insure a good deal of creativity or innovation in this sphere. The universe is believed to be suffused with an impersonal power or mana that may impart extraordinary effectiveness to any object or person; but by the same token such power or effectiveness is believed to be temporary and unstable, however pervasive its source may be. It is uncertainty about the nature and source of extraordinary power that enables the Thai peasant to perceive it cropping up suddenly and unexpectedly all around him, and to ascribe superhuman causes to its perceived manifestations. The other side of the coin, however, is that beliefs and practices which once commanded widespread allegiance fall into disuse as they are perceived to be ineffective, and of course no one regrets their passing. Long-run stability in the content of specific magico-animistic beliefs, therefore, is unlikely.

(4) Thai magico-animistic beliefs embody an entirely *ad hoc*, piecemeal approach to the opportunities and crises of life. Superhuman agents must be approached anew for each exigency, and often in different combinations and with different techniques. Moreover, the intervention of a benevolent spirit in one instance implies no guarantee or even likelihood of comparable good fortune in the future. There are no postures the individual can adopt, no techniques he can employ, *vis-à-vis* his superhuman counterparts that conduce toward a stable relationship with them. They reserve the right to intervene in his affairs, but steadfastly refuse to be drawn into any kind of contractual arrangement with the villager that might enable him to perceive continuity in his relationship with them. Consequently, the solution of today's problems, assuming superhuman forces can be induced to cooperate, is irrelevant to those of tomorrow; and such anxiety as affixes to magico-animistic belief is atomized both with respect to its expression and its reduction.

An immediate derivative of this condition is the fundamental uncertainty with which the villager approaches this sphere of his existence. Hopes abound, but so also does a sense of pervasive interdeterminacy which renders the fathoming of regularities, or a systematic relationship between cause and effect, all but impossible.<sup>7</sup>

*Interpersonal relations:*<sup>8</sup> (1) One cannot help but be impressed by the spontaneity of the villager. In practice this means that wishes of the moment

<sup>7</sup>See Herbert P. Phillips, *Thai Peasant Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 80.

<sup>8</sup>For a description of Banoi, see: Steven Piker, "Character and Socialization in a Thai Peasant Community" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, 1964); and Piker, "Banoi: the Social Organization of a Thai Rice Village" (MS).

often take precedence over long-term interests in many areas of life: the casual ease with which encounters are initiated and terminated; the frequency with which a villager simply puts down his tools and walks off a job (wage work) if it doesn't please him or if he desires more pleasurable activity (economic need is no guarantee that the villager will work out his "contract," even though no other employment is in sight); the often unpremeditated initiation of brief or extensive pleasure-seeking (*sanuk*-ful) activities; the readiness with which patrons shift their favors to new clients, or with which erstwhile clients take their loyalty and subservience to more likely patrons; the eagerness of the villager to leap at apparent economic activity, even if only hazily defined, and his equal readiness to give it up upon the first frustration; and so on. This is not to suggest that the villager is solely a creature of whim, to the complete exclusion of other considerations. The strenuous labor he devotes to rice agriculture, as a landowner or wage worker, proves that life for him involves other ingredients as well. This notwithstanding, however, the villager in much of what he does shows little inclination to defer immediate gratification.<sup>9</sup>

(2) Closely associated with the above, the lives of most adult villagers are not tightly integrated by a single theme or purpose or occupation that dominates action patterns and imparts a unified, consistent content to them. The life cycle, of course, contains fixed points of reference: birth, education, ordination (for men), marriage and the establishment of a household, and perhaps a secure retirement. Within these broadly defined parameters, however, decisions are often made in a piecemeal fashion as exigencies arise, and few decisions have an enduring influence on the subsequent course of the villager's life. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in economic activity, and it should be emphasized that this is at least as much the result of the villager's preferences as of "objective" conditions which may render stable occupational careers problematical. True success is understood to mean the possession of sufficient wealth and influence to make unnecessary the regular observance of typical, restrictive commitments; and the occasional villager who secures relatively prized non-agricultural work (civil service, comfortable wage work in Bangkok) may throw it over with little provocation and no immediate prospect of doing better elsewhere. Even agriculture, which more than any other activity binds the impulses and energies of the villager to systematic pursuit of long-range goals, sometimes falls prey to the not uncommon fondness for drink, opium, or gambling, and thence to debt and sale of land.

If there is an enduring, unifying theme in the economic dimension of the villager's life, it is in the content of his aspirations. All villagers dream of wealth and influence, and define the good life largely in these terms. In search of these elusive quantities, however, as well as in pursuit of more immediate goals, the villager often proceeds in a scatter-gun manner, adopt-

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<sup>9</sup>Phillips, *op. cit.*, chapter II, esp. pp. 59-60, 77.

ing any and all expedients that appear to offer promise of success or reward, and dropping them just as readily if the payoff isn't quick and painless.

(3) The villager feels little confidence in his ability to deal with critical or unusual situations in terms of his personal resources or capacities. The *deus ex machina* event dominates success fantasies, the villager looks to a wide range of "luck" solutions to knotty problems, and he relies almost exclusively on patron-client relationships in his quest for socio-economic self-betterment. This last is particularly noteworthy, for Thai society—unlike, perhaps, many other peasant societies—provides few insuperable institutional barriers to social mobility through either government employment or entrepreneurial activity; nor do implicit negative sanctions—such as popular disapproval—affix to individual initiative and economic self-betterment.

Deprecation of personal achievement, however, along with heavy reliance on luck or the *deus ex machina*, should not be misconstrued as passive, fatalistic resignation. The question here is not *whether* the villager seeks socio-economic self-betterment, but *how* he seeks it; and, within the modes that he perceives as relevant, the villager may be quite active in his pursuit of wealth and power.

(4) In virtually all their interpersonal relations the villagers are wary of the intentions of others, repeatedly cautioning that, "one can never know what is in the minds of others." A corollary is their frequent assertion that whatever may be in others' minds probably bodes ill for oneself. Accordingly, the villager approaches interpersonal involvement with considerable caution and suspicion, and interpersonal relations are characterized by a relative absence of binding, mutual commitment.<sup>10</sup> This pattern of expectation implies a low likelihood that stable relationships—such as enduring cooperative groups, or dyadic friendships—will be invoked as aids in surmounting life's inevitable crises; nor is there any realistic basis to suppose that such could be the case. Here I refer to the widely noted Thai individualism, the structural dimension of which is the almost complete absence of enduring, functionally important groups in rural Thai society (exceptions are the Buddhist monkhood and the nuclear or slightly extended family).

Fundamental indeterminacy and attendant caution, then, are for the villager equally characteristic of the world of humans and the world of magic and the spirits.

All of the specifics of Thai peasant behavior cannot be subsumed by these four general characteristics. To the extent, however, that these generalized

<sup>10</sup>"Thai resist strong affiliation as do rejected lovers who fear suffering again . . . on the level of action and conscious decision, the moral for a Thai runs: invest not thy love in a shadow." L. M. Hanks, and H. P. Phillips, "A Young Thai from the Countryside," in Bert Kaplan (ed.), *Studying Personality Cross-Culturally* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 655-56. See also, Phillips, *Thai Peasant Personality*, *op. cit.*, for a lengthy discussion of the importance of the *quid pro quo* idiom in Thai social interaction.

patterns of expectation and interpretation prevail in individuals or groups, thought and behavior will be colored, and strongly so, accordingly.

What, if anything, is the relationship between Thai magico-animistic beliefs and the orientation of the Thai peasant to the mundane world? Consider first the parallels: With regard to *magico-animistic beliefs*, agents of this realm are perceived as creatures of whim, and the villager therefore despairs of fathoming their intentions vis-à-vis himself or of establishing stable relationships with them. He wishes, however, to harness their powers to his purposes. In attempting to do so, he adopts a piecemeal approach, assumes the role of dependent supplicant, and hopes for a *deus ex machina* resolution of his problem. His resource expenditure is minimal. Success or failure is not thought to be systematically contingent upon his own performance, and even if he profits from intercourse with the spirits, he does not feel that this is a basis for assuming a more confident relationship with them. As for the *mundane world*, the intentions of humans are equally unknowable, and the possibility of establishing stable and trusting relationships with them is believed to be highly problematical. The villager has definite purposes, but since he does not believe that he can achieve a systematic understanding of and/or control over the forces that determine success or failure, he often adopts an *ad hoc*, piecemeal program of action. Success is interpreted largely in terms of the benign intervention of an influential agent, and systematic or consistent performance is deprecated as a critical ingredient. Deferment of immediate gratification is not viewed as strategically significant.

These correspondences are too numerous and fundamental to be dismissed as chance co-occurrences. The interpretation of them suggested here begins from the following premises. The observer may validly distinguish between "real" objects and people to which an individual may orient himself, and the fantasy products of the same individual's mind. The subjective orientation of the individual, however, is solely to symbolic representations. That some of these representations have as their referents concrete objects (people, things), whereas others do not, in no way diminishes the reality of the orientation itself or of its effects on behavior. The individual's behavioral environment, therefore, is constituted by those symbolic representations he apprehends and to which he assigns varying degrees of relevance and immediacy.<sup>11</sup> In this view, a conception of heaven is as real as a conception of the corner tavern, and an image of a vicious ghost may be as important, and as real, as the image of an older sibling. This point of view suggests that the individual experiences (or "imagines") his behavioral environment as a continuous, interlocking, and mutually relevant series of symbolic representations, and not in terms of the "natural" vs. the "supernatural."

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<sup>11</sup>See A. I. Hallowell, "The Self and Its Behavioral Environment," in A. I. Hallowell, *Culture and Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955).

Derivatively, if an individual more or less consciously admits master principles that, in a general sense, define the operation of his behavioral environment (including, most importantly, his relationship to constituent elements), these principles will crosscut the boundaries that, in "objective" perspective, divide the "natural" from the "supernatural." Such master principles might be referred to as world view: thus, the stereotypic Prussian world view is said to posit strict gradients of authority between humans as well as the deference of all humans to a stern, authoritarian, transcendental God. I shall not, however, adopt world view terminology here, because it does not always carry the specific psychological connotations that I wish to develop.

This is not to suggest that beliefs defining the interpersonal world must for any individual be identical, down to the smallest detail, to beliefs pertaining to the "supernatural." I know of no study of any human society or individual that would support such a sweeping contention. But this point of view does imply important correspondences, or isomorphisms, between the manner in which the individual orients himself to other humans and the manner in which he orients himself to the "supernatural." And these correspondences, or isomorphisms, have to do primarily with the following: (a) the content, broadly stated, of the expectations leveled at others, human or superhuman; (b) the nature of the relationship that the individual understands to exist between himself and those forces or agents which embody, or produce, effectiveness—including, most importantly, the strategies the individual perceives as being efficacious for realizing his purposes; and (c) the degree of predictability of events that the individual believes can, in principle, be achieved, and the manner of achieving it (i.e., what kinds of "data" are relevant, and what "logic of extrapolation" is adopted in making inferences from these data). These guidelines for interpretation and expectation may be referred to as a series of enduring perceptual sets; and, if this assessment is accepted, it follows that these enduring perceptual sets are among the most important, immediate, and pervasive determinants of human thought and behavior.

The question remains: How do these perceptual sets, these general and comprehensive "definitions of the situation," acquire their content for specific individuals? And the answer provided by this point of view is that it occurs through socialization of the child. Briefly, the interaction of the child with his world yields a set of expectations or conclusions that effectively define or "determine" for him the world's general characteristics. These conclusions have to do most importantly with the likely consequences of various approaches to the world, i.e., with "strategies," and, derivatively, they specify for the child the workings of his world and his position in it. Because these conclusions are acquired when the child is quite young and, consequently, maximally impressionable, they endure and form a matrix in which subsequent experience takes on determinant meaning; on a high level of generality, they determine the manner in which the adult under-

stands the world to operate, and the position in it he assigns to himself.

What does this point of view say about the observed correspondences between the Thai peasant's orientation to the mundane world and his orientation to the world of magic and spirits? It says, in effect, that both derive from the same series of enduring perceptual sets which, in combination, define the broad outlines of the villager's orientation to his behavioral environment. The specific patterns of interpretation pertaining to the "natural" and "supernatural" worlds, respectively, co-occur in the same individuals not because one psychologically precedes the other, but because both derive from common and enduring (in the individual) perceptual sets, which in turn are the result of prevailing socialization patterns. If this is the case, however, inspection of typical socialization patterns should yield the likely antecedents of the perceptual sets in question. I should like, therefore, to turn briefly to socialization patterns in rural Thailand.<sup>12</sup>

(1) The first two to three years of life for the village child are dominated by almost unqualified indulgence, particularly by the mother, who urges her care and affection upon the child even when he evidences no desire for them. Indulgence is so complete that the child develops a markedly imperious attitude toward his world. (2) This virtually unqualified indulgence of dependency ends suddenly and, from the child's point of view, unpredictably, at the age of two or three, because of a new pregnancy or economic reasons. Harsh physical punishment is rare, but the child's often aggressive attempts to reassert his lost primacy are to no avail. Verbal parental threat is used increasingly, and this as well as other punishment is whimsically applied, being more systematically attuned to the mood of the parent than to the behavior of the child. (3) The second youngest sibling, then, is plunged into limbo: dependency is effectively ruled out, but no viable or attractive alternative to dependency is made available to the child. He is not encouraged to suppose that the achievement of some task or instrumental competence can be a partial functional equivalent to dependency with respect to winning parental (particularly maternal) affection or approval, and responsibility training at this stage of life is conspicuous largely by its absence.

Because of the early age at which these events transpire and the correspondingly restricted scope of the child's experience, the conclusions derived from the childhood socialization are widely generalized later in life. What, then, does the child "learn" from this pattern of socialization experiences?

(1) The high initial indulgence of dependency, followed by the unavailability of viable alternatives, engenders a strong proclivity to seek solutions to critical situations through dependency: the individual has experienced how immensely satisfying such solutions can be, and he has been provided

<sup>12</sup>This summary of socialization in Banoi is based on over 200 observations of young children in family situations, lengthy interviews with 35 mothers, and shorter interviews with 15 fathers. For a fuller discussion of socialization patterns in Banoi, see Piker, Thesis, *op. cit.*

with no experiential basis for perceiving that independence and its derivatives (personal achievement, mastery) may produce equally satisfying results. Dependency, as described here, involves most prominently the following: virtually complete reliance on a particularistic relationship with an influential patron; little necessity for deferment of gratification; benefits devolving in a *deus ex machina* manner; and, by extension, virtually no necessity for personal achievement.

(2) While the child's world provides no subsequent, viable alternative to dependency during the first few years of life, it eventually does provide ample experiential grounds for concluding that dependency—and all interpersonal involvement—is highly unreliable. The child consequently finds himself tied to a mode of behavior that he perceives to be a loser. This sequence has a number of implications for subsequent development: (a) First, an elemental distrust of the intentions of others is established. This rests upon the parallel suppositions that the purposes of others are inherently unknowable and, given the impossibility of certitude in this area, the best guess is that they intend to be rejecting and/or threatening. (b) More generally, the conviction develops that the forces governing one's fate cannot be systematically known and, by extension, one cannot rely heavily on systematic knowledge expressed in terms of generally applicable, universalistic principles in confronting life's crises. Whimsical application of parental threat and punishment reinforce the conclusion that the world is inherently unpredictable. (c) Finally, these considerations may clear up, at least in part, an apparent paradox with respect to Thai behavior: on the one hand, proclivities for patron-client relationships are conspicuously present, while on the other hand, the Thai peasant enjoys a reputation for tenacious individualism and self-reliance. If the interpretation adopted here is correct, the two traits are not as mutually incompatible as they might otherwise appear. Indeed, their co-occurrence is explicable in terms of the ambivalence toward dependency postures alluded to above. The instability of Thai patron-client relationships—sought after eagerly by the would-be client but, if established, not trusted by either participant—is also consistent with this interpretation.

(3) Finally, a number of derivative developments may be noted: (a) Since the intentions of relevant others are often believed to be the most important determinants of success or failure, and since these intentions are believed to be inherently unknowable and/or unreliable, a methodical life plan oriented toward long-range goals may seem pointless (the desirability of the goals is not affected, but the selection of means definitely is). (b) Since, however, it is also thought that good things often happen because particular, influential others will them to happen, and since such agents are known sometimes to befriend humans (although exactly when and under what conditions cannot be known), it behooves one to cover as many bets as possible. Hence the scatter-gun approach to many problems, according to which

numerous agents are called upon, although actual resource expenditure by the supplicant usually is slight. (c) Virtually all such agents, however, are believed to be whimsical and/or unreliable. Consequently, if results do not materialize quickly, the villager concludes that the momentary whim of the powers that be—which he cannot fathom—was directed elsewhere, and he gives up the approach as a bad bet (but one that didn't cost him much). Hence, low frustration tolerance in such matters. (d) This is not to suggest, however, that the Thai peasant is unwilling to work and work hard, for this certainly is not the case. But it is the case that "work" (self-denial, deferment of gratification) is viewed as an often necessary but almost always regrettable interruption of more pleasurable activities. In any event, "work" is not perceived as the primary instrumentality for the achievement of "real" success.

In *The Religion of India*, Weber writes:

There is no way from . . . this most highly antirational world of universal magic . . . to rational, inner-worldly life conduct. There were spells for every conceivable purpose . . . for the securing of wealth, for the success of undertakings. All this was either in the gross form of compulsive magic or in the refined form of persuading a functional god or demon through gifts. With such means the great mass of the illiteracy and even the literary Asiatics sought to master everyday life.

A rational practical ethic and life methodology did not emerge from his magical garden which transformed all life within the world.<sup>13</sup>

Weber has argued persuasively for the association of the "magical garden" with "irrational" life conduct, and in large part the analysis of Thai religion and behavior presented here proceeds from his insights and concepts. However, he also suggests that magico-animism is psychologically prior to "irrationality" in daily affairs (" . . . this magical garden which transformed all life within the world"), and it is at this juncture that my interpretation diverges from the Weberian point of view.

"A rational practical ethic and life methodology" were, in Weber's view, embodied most completely by the bearers of the Spirit of Capitalism, the ideal-typical Calvinists whose religion had "banished" the last vestiges of magic. The Thai peasant embodies a life pattern that approaches the opposite pole—Weber might have called it "irrational" or "unmethodical"—and, moreover, in the Thai life pattern "magic" and its associated mentality play a prominent part. If, however, the interpretation developed in these pages is valid, "magical beliefs" and "irrational" life conduct co-occur in the Thai peasant not because the former psychologically precedes the latter, but because both reflect enduring perceptual sets which define for the peasant the broad outlines of the world and his position in it.

This must be stated as exactly as possible: the specific content of magico-

<sup>13</sup>Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

animistic beliefs cannot be derived from these enduring perceptual sets. Specific beliefs are imparted to the individual through direct tuition. They are believed to the extent that the student respects his teacher and to the extent that palpable experiential disconfirmation is not forthcoming, and beliefs channel behavior to the extent that they are regarded as true statements about the real world. But the *mode* of interpretation that subsumes specific beliefs—the conviction, for example, that success or good fortune depends upon a *deus ex machina* event, that the purposes of relevant others (human or superhuman) are inherently unknowable, etc.—does derive from these enduring perceptual sets. Villagers may therefore abandon a specific belief about a specific *cao phau*; indeed, the perceptual sets which guide their interpretation of experience make it likely that the content of specific beliefs will be unstable. In the quest for alternative solutions to critical situations, however, the villager's thoughts will be directed by the implicit premises which for him explain the workings of his world and his position in it. Experience—as the villager is prepared to accept and interpret it—may disconfirm specific beliefs or generate new ones, but it is less likely to produce new *modes* of interpretation because it will not in most cases shake the premises from which interpretation begins.

*Conclusion:* This analysis has been addressed to correspondences in the content of Thai magico-animism and orientation to mundane situations, as well as to the establishment in the individual of underlying psychological elements—enduring perceptual sets—that help to account for the observed correspondences or, stated differently, for the co-occurrence of strikingly similar basic “definitions” in two separate belief systems within Thai culture. This argument is not directly relevant to an explanation of the historical origins of the attributes in question; nor does it explore the possibility that in the workings of adult personalities, elements of one system may serve as premises in a cognitive chain, the conclusions of which pertain to the other system (thus, *hypothetically*: since whimsical deities may intervene in human affairs, systematic planning with reference to long-range goals is pointless).

Magico-animistic elements have been considered without reference to Buddhist elements of Thai religion. Such analytic compartmentalization is of course arbitrary, for as Obeyesekere points out,

Distinctions of this order are at best based on diffusionist criteria. These beliefs may be Brahman and Buddhist (and magico-animistic) in a historical-diffusionist sense, but synchronically and behaviorally viewed they are ‘native’ Thai . . . , and an integral part of a living tradition.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Gananath Obeyesekere, “The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXII, No. 2, (1963), p. 140.

My thesis, moreover, urges a similar conclusion. Brief mention must be made, therefore, of the manner in which Thai Buddhist beliefs correspond to the picture drawn above, although detailed treatment of Thai Buddhism must be postponed.

The complementary doctrines of *Karma* (retribution) and merit form the core of both canonical Theravada Buddhism and the Thai peasant's conception of Buddhism. Two points here are of particular importance. First, the villager's paramount conscious motive for accumulating merit is the desire to enjoy in future incarnations those worldly privileges and prerogatives that have eluded him in this life. He knows of Nirvana, and has some comprehension of the ultimate significance of the concept for Theravada Buddhism. However, in most cases he makes merit in the hope not of attaining Nirvana but of re-entering the world of humans on terms more favorable to himself. Second, "terms more favorable to himself" almost invariably means his being more closely placed to substantial wealth and influence—i.e., real effectiveness.

The issue, however, is not just that the Thai peasant wishes to be rich and influential: most people in most societies no doubt wish they were richer and more influential than they actually are. We must determine what "influence" connotes to the Thai villager. I suggest the following: first, it signifies primarily the capacity to benefit, to give to, others to a substantial extent. Second, giving is perceived as the primary instrumentality for winning affection and/or loyalty from others.

It has been noted that the Thai peasant lives in relative personal isolation, actively distrusting the intentions of others vis-à-vis himself. There is, however, abundant evidence—in projective tests, romantic fantasies, special friendships, and the content of oft-expressed wishes—that the villager dreams of and wishes for a much warmer and more trusting world than the one he actually inhabits. However, he perceives virtually no likelihood that others will normally respond to him in a consistently warm and/or trustworthy manner—given what he assumes to be *their* orientation to all others, himself included. Consequently, he continually experiences the frustration of his fondly held but largely suppressed hopes for trusting interpersonal involvement. On these premises, the villager concludes that he can only hope to obtain loyalty and affection from others by creating extraordinary incentives for them to hold such attitudes toward himself. And if one's clients prove ultimately disloyal, wealth and influence render possible a degree of independence and comfort accessible to no villager.

For the villager, then, wealth and influence largely signify control over the responses of others. In contrast to many other culturally standardized definitions of influence, however, the Thai villager does not seek to use those he controls primarily for instrumental purposes—although this may be involved to some extent. He strives, rather, to control their emotional responses. He wants to perceive signs not of instrumental competence but of the loyalty and affection of others. Palpable signs of devotion do not suffice,

since the villager knows that he and his fellows are master dissemblers. Rather, to entertain the expectation of loyalty and affection from others, he must believe that sufficiently powerful incentives have been created to override typical human motives.

For the villager, then, merit and *Karma* together signify most importantly a mechanism whereby he may attain in future incarnations the influence and effectiveness that escape him now. Influence and effectiveness, in turn, are thought to provide the means whereby the individual can reduce the psychological discomfort (rejection anxiety, fear of others, uncertainty) occasioned by the dual conviction that stable relations with others are highly problematical and, in any event, the intentions of others vis-à-vis oneself are likely to be rejecting and/or hostile. If this interpretation is valid, the Thai villager understands Buddhist beliefs—at least in large part—to be a reliable guide to the future reduction of specific frustrations and anxieties he experiences in his present life. These frustrations and anxieties, moreover, are of one cloth with those that inform so decisively the villager's orientation to the interpersonal world as well as to the realm of magic and animism. Finally, this may help account for the villager's willingness to invest substantial time and wealth in merit making, in contrast to his unwillingness to invest heavily in magic and the spirits: even if he is successful with respect to the latter in one or more instances, this implies no basic alteration in his relationship to the universe. If, however, his karmic balance is substantially improved, this may lead to a rewriting of the fundamental ground rules of the entire game—a revision which insures not one transitory success but rather a higher degree of control over the mechanism that generates continuing successes.

Does this interpretation imply that the merit-*Karma* mechanism seals off perceived indeterminacy—even if the time required for its working out is normally more than one life span? For the Thai villager, the answer is no. Although he affirms that his fate in the here and now is at least partially determined by his karmic balance, two factors render this general conclusion useless to him as a basis for specific prediction: (1) non-karmic determined forces may temporarily reverse the effects of the karma-merit mechanism;<sup>15</sup> and (2) one may seldom if ever know with certainty one's current karmic balance. As Ingersoll notes, villagers “may ideally regard fate as an active influence but actually acknowledge fate only after the fact.”<sup>16</sup> As a result, popular Buddhist beliefs with respect to determinism agree with the indeterminacy formulation offered above, however greatly canonical Buddhism may suggest mechanistic predetermination.

<sup>15</sup>See L. M. Hanks, “Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order,” *American Anthropologist*, December 1962.

<sup>16</sup>J. Ingersoll, “Fatalism in Rural Thailand,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1966), p. 217.