

## Tree Ordination as Invented Tradition

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**Abstract:** The symbolic ordination of trees as monks in Thailand is widely perceived in Western scholarship to be proof of the power of Buddhism to spur ecological thought. However, a closer analysis of tree ordination demonstrates that it is not primarily about Buddhist teaching, but rather is an invented tradition based on the sanctity of Thai Buddhist symbols as well as those of spirit worship and the monarchy. Tree ordinations performed by non-Buddhist minorities in Thailand do not demonstrate a religious commitment but rather a political one.

**Keywords:** invented traditions, environmentalism, sacred ecology, Thai Buddhism, Eco-Buddhism

The practice of tree ordination, invented to save local forests from logging, has spread from its original home in Northern Thailand to Cambodia, Laos, and possibly Burma. On the surface, tree ordination is presented to the world environmentalist movement as a highly clever and original idea, using the widely respected symbol of monastic robes to make loggers hesitate to cut down trees. It also appears to have been created from scratch by a group of Thai forest monks called “ecology monks” (*phra nak anuraksa*).

However, this is only part of the story. If tree ordination were actually completely original, it would not be acknowledged. Military authorities could dismiss innovative rituals as the work of a fringe interest with no connection to mainstream Thai opinion. In fact, securing the legitimacy of the ecology monks’ antideforestation program required a connection to pre-existing symbols in the cultural landscape of Thailand. Because it relies on a vocabulary specific to Thailand, it is much more culturally bound than “universally” Buddhist in nature. In short, tree ordination is not meant to be an original eco-Buddhist invention, but an invented tradition that asserts itself as continuous with Thainess (*khwampenthai*).

Eric Hobsbawm distinguishes invented traditions from what he considers the “custom” prevalent in pre-industrial societies. Custom, Hobsbawm says, is an informal habit that individuals will adapt to social needs without any real attachment to prior practice; the power of tradition, on the other hand, comes precisely from that attachment to the past and desire for an “unchanging and invariant” practice handed down from a forgotten age. When a tradition is invented, its inventors do not popularize the new practice by appeal to a principle, but by appealing to comfort of familiar forms (e.g., forms of dress, song, folklore, architecture, cosmology, or even power relationships).<sup>1</sup> I argue that tree ordination fits this mold precisely.

### THE SPIRIT TREE

Buddhism in Thailand has traditionally been intertwined with supernatural beliefs that

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are generally called “spirit worship” or “animism.” Monks engage frequently with magic and supernatural beings, and are seen as preserving a metaphysical as well as material order in a Thai village. Although a positivist worldview represents Buddhism and animism as distinct philosophies, in fact it is hard to say in Theravada societies where the “pure philosophy” ends and “superstition” begins—tales of the Buddha’s previous lives, stories of his travels in Thailand, the sanctification of Buddha images and the Thai landscape, the homage paid by monks to *thewada* (kind spirits), and the relationship of humans to *devas* (gods) and other beings, are all bound together in a seamless whole.

In studying Thai religion, comparative religionists have too often neglected the ritual and practical realms of premodern Thai life, presenting Buddhist philosophy as its most beneficial product. Midcentury western anthropologists who lived in Thai villages, such as B.J. Terwiel and Stanley Tambiah, tended to focus on the structure of festivals and monastic life, and the overwhelming complexity of even these cultural products makes that focus understandable. But the basis for tree ordination is not found in any of these things, and was only recently documented in English, out of the same environmental concern that prompted tree ordination itself. This is the belief in spirit trees (*phi ton mai*), which are found on the grounds of Buddhist temples, in other inhabited areas, and in sacred groves.

Trees inhabited by spirits are not the object of any special ceremony or festival in Thailand, and recognizing these trees cannot be said to be a cultural *practice* as much as the trees themselves figure as living characters in the Thai landscape, as the homes of family and village guardian spirits. A spirit house can be erected in front of the tree, or old spirit houses can be left there instead of being thrown away, so that the spirits might find new residence within the tree. They are ubiquitous throughout the country, and are found even in Bangkok. Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel, in their short environmentalist article “Why a Tree is More than a Tree,” introduce the subject as follows:

Throughout Thailand from Bangkok to the remotest rural villages, one effortlessly sees colorful cloth wrapped around the lower trunk of a tree. A small spirit house with offerings such as candles, incense, and fruit may be located at the base of the tree. Local people believe that the tree is the residence of a spirit, usually from a deceased person. Generally such sacred trees are respected to the extent that they are protected. Anyone who harms such a tree might experience misfortune, sickness, or even death as the spirit takes revenge.<sup>2</sup>

Most spirit trees are notable for being large, old, or unique in the area. The Sponsels relate the stories of trees that appear to bleed, glow, and avoid lightning strikes. Bodhi, banyan, yang, and takian trees are also marked off. The first two of these are not native species to Thailand. Obviously, bodhi trees are revered because the Buddha reached enlightenment sitting under a member of their species; besides being wrapped in cloth, bamboo poles will be placed against them to support their weight. They are traditionally found in the courtyards of temples.<sup>3</sup> Even when traditionally taboo trees are cut down for firewood due to bad economic times, bodhi trees will remain unharmed.<sup>4</sup>

The banyan tree is an interesting case: it is a relative of the bodhi tree, and is mentioned in some Buddhist texts, but is more widely held as sacred in India. The yang and takian, too, have no Buddhist connection but are rather associated with wood nymphs (*nang mai*) and a male equivalent, although they are found on the grounds of temples that are rumored to be haunted.<sup>5</sup> This has led to the opinion of some Buddhists, such as Bhante Sathi of Minnesota’s Triple Gem Sangha, that the “spirit tree” is simply a remnant of Hindu culture, and the Sponsels allude to this. However, the practice of marking off the tree with a colored cloth

seems to be centered on Thailand, only occasionally stretching across national borders to Laos, Cambodia, Bali, and possibly Burma.

There are no divisions among Thais regarding the belief in spirit trees. Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists alike will honor the same trees and groves, by employing the same use of colored cloth. Sometimes entire forests are preserved in this way for hundreds of years. The interest in keeping these religions “pure” of traditional influence seems to have been secondary in Thai culture to continuing the everyday habits of village life, and indeed, in the case of Buddhism at least animism was openly endorsed as part of the cosmology.

Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel note that spirit trees can function as “part of a hierarchy of progressively larger ecological systems,”<sup>6</sup> and belief in the spirit tree as a powerful nonhuman force is certainly superior to the stereotypical “western” view that the wilderness should be subjugated to humanity. Yet the Thai worldview that recognizes spirit trees as part of the natural order is not explicitly environmentalist. Spirit trees set up a duality in which certain trees are forbidden from being tampered with, while the vast majority remain “ordinary” trees that can be used freely. The use of spirit trees to bring out a latent environmentalism was a conscious action on the part of Thai monks of the forest tradition, who combined a western ecological education with their own culture and their firsthand witness to deforestation to invent the practice of tree ordination.

#### INVENTING A TRADITION

Thai forest monks represent a unique combination of western education and local knowledge. Forest monks often witness deforestation in progress, including illegal logging, and can testify to its effects on ordinary villagers. Forest monasteries serve as a wildlife refuge and are often walled off with barbed wire to prevent loggers from entering. Monks are suspicious of urban society, spend most of their time walking through the forest, and are familiar with survival techniques such as whistling to ward off bears. At the same time, many are well-educated, and they come to the forest from throughout Thailand’s provinces.<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising, then, that forest monks have led the majority of environmental efforts in rural communities, both engaging in reforestation and connecting the traditionally hostile hill and valley communities (ethnically Hmong and Thai, respectively) through environmental consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

It is generally acknowledged that the first tree ordination, wherein a tree not already considered sacred was wrapped in saffron-colored cloth and given monastic vows, was performed in Thailand in 1988 by the monk Phrakhru Manas Natheepitak of Wat Bodharma in Phayao Province, Northern Thailand. Phrakhru Manas arrived at the idea after hearing the story of two highway workers who had been forced to cut down a bodhi tree, and thereafter were beset with misfortune.<sup>9</sup> Making the connection between forest preservation and spirit trees would not have been a great leap for him, because the two had been connected in Thai culture in the past:

In the old days when certain big trees were required for the making of the traditional royal barge or posts for the tall roof of a royal pire, an offering was made and a royal proclamation was read to the spirit before it could be cut down. This was a wise practice to preserve big trees of the forest from wanton felling by the simple folk.<sup>10</sup>

Phrakhru Manas simply had to turn this old story on its head. Instead of elites protecting the forest from commoners, now it was the commoners who had to protect the forest from the encroaching elites; instead of picking trees to be felled, the villagers were

now picking trees to be saved (ideally, hundreds of them at once). Also, although both an offering and a reference to the Thai king's ownership of the trees were included in the tree ordination ceremony, these two elements alone were not enough to combat the threat of deforestation. Villagers needed to become aware of why the forest needed to be protected, and loggers had to be sufficiently humbled before sacred symbols of Thainess.

While Phrakhrū Manas was concerned with his own forests in Phayao province, the other monks who followed his example, Phrakhrū Pitak Nanthakun and Phrakhrū Prajak Kuttajitto, were more interested in describing tree ordination as a pan-Thai procedure and gaining media attention. The practice of tree ordination was therefore systematized in a form that involves both spirit beliefs and scientific ecology, involving both illiterate villagers and the educated workers of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—a powerful force in Thailand—in the several days of events. The “folk” ceremony itself is combined with “modern” agricultural projects and environmental education, and NGO workers and villagers alike are invited to participate in both events. In the case of Phrakhrū Pitak, the educational portion involves a slide show of cartoons and data accompanied by his own speech filled with humor, Buddhist culture, and information about the importance of the forest. However, the tone of the entire event is one of “radical conservatism,” acknowledging the existing habits of rural life rather than creating new ones.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than performing a non-Buddhist ceremony to imbue trees with spirits, the ecology monks created a ritual that employed Buddha images, chanting of scripture, and monastic robes. Although the format was of an ordination ceremony, nobody believed the tree was actually a monk. Phrakhrū Manas said that he chose the word “ordination” to give the ceremony “more weight.”<sup>12</sup> According to Phrakhrū Pitak, the function of this was not to use the image of the spirit tree in a “proper” ritual, but to double the spiritual power of the ceremony: “It’s not true Buddhism to conduct such rituals. But in the villagers’ beliefs they respect the Buddha and fear some of his power.... In general, villagers also believe in spirits. Therefore, we set up a shrine for the guardian spirit together with the Buddha image. This led to the saying that ‘the good Buddha and the fierce spirits work together to take care of the forest.’”<sup>13</sup> The purpose of these Buddhist symbols is not to ground the ceremony in Buddhist philosophy (although Phrakhrū Pitak does seem to employ that philosophy in his speeches), but to endow the forest with the power of symbols with which local villagers, as members of Thai society, are already familiar.

As Isager and Ivarsson describe it, the actual ceremony of tree ordination is overwhelmingly Thai, and only Buddhist in the sense that the Pali scriptures and monks are sacred to the nation and providers of truth. At the ceremony they observed, before the monks arrived the local villagers made an offering of food to the “Lords of the Four Directions,” inviting them to the celebration. When the monks arrived they performed a rite of renewal (*syyb chataa*), in which they held a white thread (*saaj siin*) and chanted from the sutras, transmitting truth and therefore power throughout the forest. After the chanting, local spirits were invoked, as follows:

As part of the oath a call is made to the “gods” who regulate the weather (aakaad theewadaa), Mae Thorani (Goddess of the Earth), Mae Phosop (Goddess of Rice), and the spirits in the forest and mountains (caw paa caw khaw) to assist people in preserving the forest and punishing wrongdoers. Finally, it is noted that all the merit accomplished through efforts to preserve the forest is dedicated to the royal family in Thailand.<sup>14</sup>

At the ceremony he observed, Henry Delcore saw the same use of white thread, the rite

of renewal, and the Lords of the Four Directions. He also saw a sand stupa had been erected to invite friendly spirits (*thewada*) to the ceremony. This object, which he describes as “Brahman-Buddhist”, was also apparently erected for the sake of sanctifying the area in the eyes of the local people. Both the monks and the NGO leaders whom Delcore interviewed claimed, similar to Phrakhrū Pitak’s disclaimer, that the use of spirits, Buddhist symbols, and monastic robes around trees to create an image of sanctity was a “device,” “mechanism,” or “trick” employed for the purpose of “psychology” and not out of any Buddhist principles. The real purpose of the event, in their eyes, was to familiarize villagers with the basics of ecology.<sup>15</sup>

Delcore also noted a general, nonspiritual affirmation of the ceremony’s relevance to Thai values and the goals of the modern Thai state. The organizers introduced by name all the government officials present at the event, as well as the foreign students from a nearby university who had come to observe, demonstrating the relevance of the ceremony to Thailand’s global image. Phrakhrū Pitak’s speech after the ordination itself emphasized how Thailand’s natural resources, preserved by ordinary villagers, could become a more important gift to the king than millions of dollars donated by wealthy urbanites. After the speech, the king’s anthem was played.<sup>16</sup>

#### POPULAR RECEPTION AND MINORITY ACCEPTANCE

Phrakhrū Pitak adopted tree ordination, in his own words, because it was more effective than his own preaching and conservation efforts.<sup>17</sup> However, the practice had to pass several other tests as well if it were to counter deforestation at a national level. For monks to continue to use it, their sangha had to approve of the new ceremony. The news media had to interpret the ceremony correctly, or else it would be ridiculed. Finally, the intent of the ordinations had to be identified with the goals of the state, as embodied in the person of the king, because any movement running counter to the king’s wishes cannot last long in Thailand.

Both Phrakhrū Pitak and Phrakhrū Prajak involved their local sangha officials in the planning of tree ordinations.<sup>18</sup> Jim Taylor mentions a report made for the district monastic head (*cao khana tambon*) of Buriiram province, which not only approves of tree ordination but suggests that Prajak’s group should remain in Dongyai “and protect the forest from being destroyed. The area where the monks reside is primal forest and the area outside [is] now degraded...and generally in about ten years’ time the usefulness of monks living in forests will be seen clearly.” Taylor does not mention tree ordination being linked to any Buddhist philosophical principle. Instead, the monastic head seems to interpret tree ordination as supportive of the goals of the state and sangha development programs, further proof that the forest lineage can provide an important ecological education to Thai villagers.<sup>19</sup>

All of the ecology monks were initially criticized by the military and logging corporations, earning pejorative labels like “Russian monk” and “communist monk.” However, support for both monks in general and tree ordination in particular overwhelmed this smear campaign. Jim Taylor claims that “in accordance with Thai custom, as with an individual in robes, he is still outwardly treated with some veneration. Such veneration at least lessens the likelihood of a direct assassination. Had Prajak been a lay person, he surely would have disappeared by now.”<sup>20</sup> While this may have saved tree ordination in its early stages, it does not guarantee acceptance of the ecology monk movement; the military could silence the movement without violence by portraying the new ceremony as a threat to Thainess. More revealing is the way the ceremony is portrayed in a political cartoon reproduced by Taylor. The cartoon shows a monk in the act of worshipping a tree, with a lit bundle of incense at his

side. The combination of the robes, incense, and the visual form of a spirit tree make a scene that is undoubtedly Thai. Meanwhile, in the background, a group of military thugs drive through cleared forest on a foreign-made truck; the scene is surrounded with barbed wire. The cartoonist offers readers a choice between the monk “conserving the trees in the forest” and the military “conserving the forest area.” We see here that although not all Thais may believe in Buddhism or spirit trees, the power of their familiar and pious images still holds when put in contrast to an inhumane and thoughtless modernity.

Although it was created by a few lone forest monks, tree ordination therefore found widespread acceptance throughout Thailand. In 1997, the king officially endorsed the practice, and asked Thai citizens to ordain 50 million trees in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of his accession. With the assistance of Phrakhru Pitak and national NGOs, this proclamation became an active campaign, the “Program for the Community Forest Ordination of 50 Million Trees in Honor of the King’s Golden Jubilee,” which involved outreach to hundreds of villages. Not only did this legitimize tree ordination as a mainstream practice, but it also allowed groups whose Thainess had fallen into question to perform tree ordinations in order to reassert their citizenship as Thais.

For ethnic and religious minorities in Thailand, tree ordination was not seen as an exclusively Buddhist ritual. Instead, it was recognized as a *nonsectarian* way to assert the Thainess of the community and commit oneself to sustainable development. For these communities, royal support was key in transforming tree ordination from an outside event held by monks to a nonsectarian event that incorporated the village into Thailand as a nation. For example, Karen and Shan communities in northwest Thailand performed the ceremony without any monks involved, as an overtly political gesture. Instead of designating the Buddha and Thai *phi* as the protectors of the forest, the Karen used their own symbol, the Lord of the Land, when conducting the ceremony. In a Mien village, a local shaman was invited to provide the spiritual part of the ceremony. The more important connection was to the royal family and the national tree ordination campaign; even if villagers already felt they had a sufficient sustainability program, they joined the campaign out of support for the king.<sup>21</sup>

The village of Mae Malo, which is almost completely Christian, also performed a tree ordination in 1996, and used the same *syyb chataa* ceremony, chanting from Buddhist scriptures, only praying to God instead of invoking local spirits. In Mae Malo, this ceremony was seen as nonreligious. The reason that the villagers dressed in saffron and wrapped the trees in saffron robes is that they wished to present the trees to the king of Thailand as a gift.<sup>22</sup> Saffron is the color of the king as well as the color of Buddhist robes.

Hmong hill tribes in northeastern Thailand, who are not Buddhist and do not recognize spirit trees, have traditionally been discriminated against with labels like “not Thai” and “alien.” In the 1990s, the Hmong were blamed for deforestation, accused of both destroying ordained trees and not doing any work to plant new trees. In order to emphasize their Thainess and devotion to the environment, the Hmong therefore adopted tree ordination as their own, joining the campaign to ordain 50 million trees by conducting five ceremonies in their own region. This supplemented their sanctification of trees through the traditional *ntoo xeeb* ceremony, which they described as a show of ancient environmentalism.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I find, after Henry Delcore, that tree ordination is an invented tradition, that is, an original invention that gains legitimacy by taking on the forms of traditional practice. While forest monks may base their desire for the preservation of trees generally on Buddhist principles, the practice of tree ordination uses Buddhist symbols not for their philosophical

value but for the traditional power they have held, and furthermore combines them with animist symbols. Delcore quotes other authors to claim that this use of “indigenous wisdom” reduces tradition into a “bite-sized” symbol “slotted into western paradigms,”<sup>24</sup> but I do not think that tree ordination represents a step away from Thainess, because its legitimacy is determined by national media that inspect it for its allegiance to Thai values. Just as sacred trees were used in the past to prevent villagers from logging trees needed by the elite, their present adaptation to the environmentalist movement is not an arbitrary decision, but relies on acceptance by the general populace.

Belief in spirit trees meets several important conditions for being adapted as an invented tradition. First and foremost, most of the country recognizes spirit trees as sacred. If only the rural part of the country believed in spirit trees, they could be denounced as superstitious in the media. Secondly, belief in them is alive in Thailand, and is held out of fear and respect for great trees, which have supernatural abilities attributed to them, and not out of a feeling of quaintness or tradition, which could prevent Thais from taking tree ordination seriously. Finally, tree ordination did not remove the belief in spirit trees from its generally accepted context. It is difficult to say what Thais would or would not consider a legitimate use of the symbol of the spirit tree, due to a lack of theoretical description of animist beliefs in Thailand, but the success of tree ordination indicates that this environmentalist use was not confusing or disrespectful.

Because its legitimacy is determined by local tradition and not Buddhist principle alone, tree ordination will likely remain centered in Thailand. In neighboring Theravada Buddhist countries, even where spirit trees are common, tree ordination has not spread as rapidly, because of the ceremony’s political focus on the Thai monarchy and its use of the local symbol of cloth wrapped around a tree. In Burma, for example, spirit trees are usually indicated by erecting an altar. There is an unconfirmed report that one monk was wrapping robes around a tree, but more often monks will take simpler actions such as inviting ecologists to lecture in the village, volunteering for the Forest Department, or making an entreaty to the public not to cut down trees.<sup>25</sup>

In the twentieth century, Thailand faced a cultural modernization that devalued traditional forms of Buddhist education as well as local animist worship. Thai intellectuals have typically evaluated these cultural systems in terms of their perceived benefit to the general populace. One Thai intellectual, in his plan for economic development, had written that while Buddhism can be used to find a true purpose for industrialization, spirit worship “is quite clearly counter to a scientific way of life” and should “gradually assume an ever less important role” in Thai society.<sup>26</sup> Buddhism in this representation is essentially a philosophical system which must be reformed to erase its locally built-up superstitions, whereas animism, which is apparently nothing but superstition, has no value whatsoever for modern Thai society. In simplifying Thai culture to this duality, this author, who supports environmentalism in general, overlooks the possibility of adapting the powerful symbols of spirit worship for invented traditions like tree ordination.

Interestingly, this pits tree ordination against some of the proposed methods of western eco-Buddhism. Rather than giving up one’s attachment to unsustainable and hedonistic customs, the effectiveness of tree ordination lies in an attachment to tradition. Instead of being grounded in a general principle of sustainable living, trees are preserved through belief in the power of spirits and the Buddha. This has led to some concerns that villagers do not understand the purpose of conserving trees. Just as a story of loggers being punished through *karma* for felling a bodhi tree was the impetus for the invention of tree ordination, many villagers seem to fear that ordained trees have been imbued with cosmic power that

will sicken or kill those who try to cut them down, and that they cannot be harmed under any circumstances.<sup>27</sup>

**NOTES**

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5. Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, 306.
6. Sponsel and Natadecha-Sponsel, "Why a Tree Is More Than a Tree," 366-67.
7. J. L. Taylor, *Forest Monks and the Nation-State* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 224, 242-43.
8. Rigg and Stott, "Forest Tales," 105. See also the opinion of Phrakhrū Pitak given by Henry D. Delcore, "Symbolic Politics or Generification? The Ambivalent Implications of Tree Ordinations in the Thai Environmental Movement," *Journal of Political Ecology*, 11 no. 1 (2004): 15.
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13. Darlington, "Practical Spirituality and Community Forests," 348-51.
14. Isager and Ivarsson, "Contesting Landscapes in Thailand," 406.
15. Delcore, "Symbolic Politics or Generification?" 12-13, 16-17.
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