Forces of change
A theoretical analysis of syncretism between Theravada Buddhism and animistic indigenous beliefs in Thailand

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Abstract
Urak Lawoi is the name of one of the sea nomadic tribes which lives along the shores of Myanmar, Thailand and Malaysia. They are spread on many of the islands in the Andaman Sea archipelago and Ko Lanta is the main settlement. Urak Lawoi is regarded as the indigenous people of the island and they live there as a minority together with Muslims and Thai-Chinese. The traditional religion and culture of Urak Lawoi is built upon the animistic belief of their ancestors. In the last 20 years Ko Lanta has experienced a tremendous process of change caused by increasing tourism. The conditions of the Urak Lawoi and their way of life have dramatically changed. The fact that this process brings consequences for the traditional culture and religion is obvious, but in what direction is it developing? To be able to interpret and expound the material from my field studies among Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta in October-December 2009, I have done a literature search to investigate the animistic traditions and the syncretistic nature of belief in Thailand. I have also tried to find theories about the process of religious change and the forces working behind them. In this essay I am trying to do a theoretical analysis of the field study material using theories and parallel examples I have found in the literature.

Keywords
History of religion, anthropology of religion, animism, syncretism, anti-syncretism, sea nomads, sea gypsies, Urak Lawoi, Chao Ley, Thai Mai, spirit, ghost, indigenous people, ancestors, founders’ cults, spirit cults, Theravada Buddhism, Ko Lanta, Andaman Sea, Thailand.
Table of content

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 2
Keywords ............................................................................................................................................. 2
Table of content .................................................................................................................................. 3
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................... 5
1. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 6
   1.1 Background ...................................................................................................................................... 6
   1.2 Population ..................................................................................................................................... 8
   1.3 Settlements ................................................................................................................................... 9
      1.3.1 Sangkaou .................................................................................................................................. 9
      1.3.2 Hua Laem ................................................................................................................................. 9
      1.3.3 Klong Dau ............................................................................................................................... 10
      1.3.4 Nai Rai .................................................................................................................................. 10
      1.3.5 Tobaleou ............................................................................................................................... 11
   1.4 Questions emerging from the field study in 2009 .......................................................................... 11
   1.5 Aim and questions at issue in this study ....................................................................................... 12
2. MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS ............................................................. 13
   2.1 Method and material .................................................................................................................... 13
   2.2 Previous research and theoretical sources of inspiration ............................................................. 16
   2.3 Delimitations ................................................................................................................................ 17
   2.4 Disposition ................................................................................................................................... 17
3. THE SYSTEMS OF BELIEF IN THAILAND ..................................................................................... 18
   3.1 A brief history of religions in Thailand ......................................................................................... 18
      3.1.1 Animism ................................................................................................................................... 18
      3.1.2 Brahmanism ........................................................................................................................... 19
      3.1.3 Islam ....................................................................................................................................... 20
      3.1.4 Christianity ............................................................................................................................. 21
      3.1.5 Chinese culture ....................................................................................................................... 21
      3.1.6 Theravada Buddhism ............................................................................................................. 22
   3.2 Buddhism and animism – complementary or contradictory? ....................................................... 23
4. WORSHIPPING THE SPIRITS ........................................................................................................... 23
   4.1 The Buddhist concept of the spirits ............................................................................................... 23
   4.2 Ghosts and evil spirits .................................................................................................................. 24
      4.2.1 Phi ........................................................................................................................................... 24
      4.2.2 Inside/outside ........................................................................................................................... 25
   4.2.3 To continue relating to the dead ................................................................................................. 26
      4.2.4 Founders’ cults ....................................................................................................................... 26
      4.2.5 Ancestors worship .................................................................................................................... 27
   4.3 The Thai spirit houses .................................................................................................................. 28
   4.4 Mediums, magicians and spirit doctors ....................................................................................... 29
      4.4.1 Folk practitioners ...................................................................................................................... 30
      4.4.2 Spirit mediums ........................................................................................................................ 30
      4.2.3 To maw – the spirit medium of Urak Lawoi ........................................................................... 32
      4.4.4 Magical monks ........................................................................................................................ 32
5. ANIMISM ..................................................................................................................... 33
  5.1 Brief history of the term animism................................................................. 33
  5.2 Definition of the term animism ................................................................. 35
6. SYNCRETISM AND ANTI-SYNCRETISM ..................................................... 36
  6.1 Syncretism, ....................................................................................................... 36
  6.2 Anti-syncretism ............................................................................................. 37
  6.3 Different levels/stages in the syncretistic process .................................... 38
      6.3.1 Indigenous field of religious belief .................................................. 38
      6.3.2 Syncretistic field of religious belief ................................................. 39
      6.3.3 Parallel fields of religious belief ....................................................... 40
      6.3.4 Assimilated field of religious belief ................................................. 42
7. FORCES OF CHANGE – A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS .............................. 43
  7.1 Syncretism and anti-syncretism, multiculturalism and assimilation .......... 43
  7.2 To become Thai – obtaining a national identity ....................................... 44
      7.2.1 Language .............................................................................................. 44
      7.2.2 Money economy ................................................................................. 45
      7.2.3 World religions .................................................................................. 46
  7.3 Urak Lawoi: religious fields in transformation ........................................ 47
      7.3.1 Sangkaou: An indigenous field of belief .......................................... 47
      7.3.2 Saladan: A syncretistic field of belief ............................................. 48
  7.3 Ritual functions and needs of belief ......................................................... 49
8. SUMMARY ............................................................................................................. 51
9. REFERENCES ......................................................................................................... 53
  9.1 Written references ....................................................................................... 53
      Folders of information .................................................................................. 57
      Internet ........................................................................................................... 57
      Signposts and information sites .................................................................. 57
  9.2 Unwritten references .................................................................................... 58
      Interviews (Sex, age, place and date of interview) .................................. 58
      Field study diary (Places and dates for observations) ................................ 58
Appendix: Map of Ko Lanta Yai ......................................................................... 60
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1. INTRODUCTION

I had the privilege to be able to stay on Ko Lanta Yai for seven weeks during October-December in 2009 in order to collect data for my essay *Waves of change. Traditional religion among the Urak Lawoi, sea nomads of Ko Lanta, Thailand*. Since my last essay was built upon the vast material from my field studies I somehow wanted to use it in a wider study of animistic religion in Thailand. My first plan was to go back to Ko Lanta for another research period but our family economy didn’t allow it, so I had to stick to the old material and try to find relevant literature as a complement. Soon I discovered more similarities between animism among different indigenous people in Thailand and the Theravada Buddhism than I noticed when I first did my field studies. The tendencies of syncretism I discovered on Ko Lanta have reached different levels in different communities, according to the literature. I have tried to describe the Theravada Buddhism of Thailand, the animistic practices that have been adopted by it and the process of change in the blend of the tradition. Finally I have tried to outline the process among Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta in comparison with cases found in the literature.

1.1 Background

Ko Lanta is the name of two islands in the Andaman Sea. Ko Lanta Noi and Ko Lanta Yai. Ko Lanta Yai is the largest one of them, and the home of the Urak Lawoi people. The island is approximately 30 km from north to south, and it is about 2-3 km wide across. In the middle of the island small ridges of mountain, jungle and plantations cover the area. The west coast is almost one long beach, just divided by some small mountain ridges running out into the sea. On the east side the mangrove forest and the jungle dominates the coastline and terrain. Lanta old Town is the old centre point of the Ko Lanta, situated on the east side of the island. The new tourist centre Saladan is located on the north tip of Ko Lanta.

The Urak Lawoi is regarded as the indigenous people of Ko Lanta (Granbom 2007:36) but their origin is uncertain and disputed by many. Some information indicates that they were a part of a big tribe, “the Dyak” which moved from Borneo in Indonesia, up through the Andaman Sea (ILRSELA). Hogan claims that they origin from the Celebes, a mountain island in southeast Indonesia (Hogan 1972:218-219). According to some of my informants their
origin is the island of Sumatra in Indonesia. One informant told me a story that he heard from his grandparents about how the Urak Lawoi people used to live as Muslims on Sumatra but then left Sumatra and Islam and turned to the Andaman Sea where they started believing in “nature” instead (Interview 091101). The Urak Lawoi people used to live in the straight of Malacca in areas that have since become part of Malaysia (ILRSELA). According to information from the Sea Gypsy Cultural Centre in Sangkaou (SGCCS), the Urak Lawoi people left Kanungnray in the Kedah range in Malaysia about 500 years ago and headed for the Andaman Sea and Ko Lanta.

It is difficult to get a definite hold of when all these assumed travels and journeys would have occurred. To get a picture of the history of religions around the Andaman Sea it is possible to divide the time line into three different periods, the prehistoric age, the animistic age, and the Islamic age. The Islamic age starts when Islam begins to dominate the Andaman Sea, around 5-700 years ago. (http://history-world.org/islam7.htm). One hypothesis might be that most of the oral history descends from the last 5-700 years and that the Urak Lawoi during this last period settled down on many of the islands of the Andaman Sea. According to Granbom (2007:37-38) and one informant (Interview, 091101) the Urak Lawoi today lives in settlements on Ko Lipe, Ko Bulon, Ko Adang, (Satun province) Siehre island, Sapum, Ban Nua, Laem La, Rawi beach (Phuket province) Ko Jum, Phi Phi Don and Ko Lanta (Krabi province)

Information from ILRSELA shows that the Urak Lawoi people first settled down on the east coast of Ko Lanta, in the villages of Bonae and Hua Laem. The Urak Lawoi people are often described as a shy and timid people (Hogan 1972:312) and maybe that’s the reason why they moved away from their first settlements when Indian and Chinese people arrived to the east coast (SGCCS). During the last 100 years, more and more people did settle down on Ko Lanta. A lot of them were Muslims who made their living out of fishing, coconut and rubber plantations (Granbom 2007:36). About hundred years ago the first settlement in Sangkaou was done (SGCCS). Somewhere around this time, the people in Bonae had to move from that location to settlements around Saladan in the north (ILRSELA). In 1969 the Queen granted Urak Lawoi land in Sangkaou and in the Paansay area of Saladan (SGCCS). These areas are the main locations for Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta today.
The Urak Lawoi people usually are described as strand dwellers (Hogan 1972:215) a semi nomadic people who is regarded as good seamen, skilled fishermen and excellent divers (Wongbusarakum 2002:87). They sometimes show an aversion towards authorities (Granbom 2007:89) and shyness to foreigners (Hogan 1972: 213). Sometimes they seem to suffer from low self-confidence and shame of their cultural heritage (Granbom 2007: 73). Granbom (2007:94) claims that modern society integrates them as poor Thai people with a disappearing cultural identity.

Today the people are known by many different names, Chao Ley, Thai Mai, Sea gypsies, Sea Nomads or Urak Lawoi. When they describe themselves they use Urak Lawoi, Sea Gypsies or just Gypsies. Urak Lawoi is the name of the people and sometimes the name of the language they speak. The religion or belief system of Urak Lawoi has got no name; it just seems to be a natural part of the traditional Urak Lawoi culture. According to some of my informants they don’t consider their belief as a religion at all (Man 27, Interview, Nai Rai 091101).

1.2 Population

The population on Ko Lanta consists of Thai-Chinese, Thai Muslims, a tiny community western people and Urak Lawoi, all with their respectively cultural identity. I couldn’t get a figure of the numbers of Urak Lawoi inhabitants since they are not registered as Urak Lawoi. According to Granbom (2007:43) the Urak Lawoi population reached around 900 persons in the middle of the 1990’s. According to the authorities on Ko Lanta, 449 inhabitants lived in the Urak Lawoi village of Sangkaou in December 2009, but there is no further information about the Urak Lawoi population at large. Out of the information I got from Granbom (2007:43-44), 632 Urak Lawoi persons were staying around Saladan in 2004. The evaluations of my informants are that Hua Laem got around 75 inhabitants. Out of this rough figure my guess is that the total number of Urak Lawoi inhabitants on Ko Lanta is somewhere around 1150. With a total number of inhabitants of approximately 28 000 in the district of Ko Lanta (http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Ko-Lanta) the Urak Lawoi represent approximately 4% of the population.
1.3 Settlements

The Urak Lawoi locations on Ko Lanta are situated in the north around the main centre Saladan, in the villages of Klong Dau, Nai Rai and Tobaleou and in the south in the villages of Sangkaou and Hua Laem. Each village has got its own history and the villages show wide variations of styles of houses, construction, standards and locations. The character of the villages also differs a lot depending on the location relative to the tourist business, their mix of different cultures and religions, their affects of the tsunami 2004 and the rebuilding projects that followed.

1.3.1 Sangkaou

The village of Sangkaou is located almost on the southern tip of Ko Lanta. This is the only village with only Urak Lawoi families. The people live 30 km from the tourist boom around Saladan and are still mostly fishermen, even though many of the young people work in resorts, hotels or with tour boats for tourists. Sangkaou is seated by the sea and surrounded by jungle and close to the Lanta National Park established in 1990. World Vision’s orange project houses, built after the tsunami, dominate the village. The traditional culture is still strong among the people even if modern commodities like long-tail engines, television and motorcycles have become a part of daily life. The traditional worship of the ancestors is still in practice but the influences from Buddhism and Christianity is growing stronger. By the sea there is a Buddhist pre-temple building, monks come and educate the children at school every Friday and there is a new Christian community that get together every Sunday at school. When I visited Sangkaou in December 2009 the Christians there were about 50 persons (11-13% of the population). According to Jägerberg/Mayr many of the people claim to be Buddhists (2006:16).

1.3.2 Hua Laem

Hua Laem is a widespread definition of many settlements between Sangkaou and Lanta Old town. The Urak Lawoi settlement is seated near Lanta Hospital, just a few kilometres from Lanta old town, by the sea. In this part of the village Muslims, Chinese and Urak Lawoi live together in different areas, still side by side in the little settlement. The houses are more
traditional from simple constructions out of wood and concrete. Hua Laem is considered the oldest Urak Lawoi settlement on Ko Lanta. Even if people with different cultures have lived side by side for long, they don’t seem to have mixed their creeds. Some Muslims used to be present during the boat floating festival, but according to my informants no Urak Lawoi in the village has converted to Islam (Man 18, Hua Laem 091205).

1.3.3 Klong Dau
Klong Dau village is seated outside Saladan on the mountainside of the road. The settlement is located with some distance from Klong Dau beach with mooring for their long-tail boats and two grave settings. There is mostly Urak Lawoi who live in the village but also some Muslims and according to some informants a few Christians (Interview 091205). The buildings on the mountainside are simple shacks made out of wood and roof cover panel but some hotels, shops and a new church on the hillside are surrounding the village. Before, the village used to be seated near the sea but the expanding tourist industry has forced many people to leave their former residencies. Many of the houses in the village got Thai styled spirit houses on their site. When I asked people in the village if this really was the same as a *rumah dato’* (An Urak Lawoi spirit house), they said that it was, and when I asked if it was a Buddhist thing, they just said “same, same”. Still the people in Klong Dau also visit the Tobaleou shrine in Tobaleou. Just a couple of years ago the Christian church was built on the hillside of the village. Every now and then all Christians on Ko Lanta get together for meetings in the church of Klong Dau. According to my informants about 60 persons use to take part in the ceremony. Every one of them are Urak Lawoi (Interview 091104).

1.3.4 Nai Rai
Closer to Saladan, not so far from the beach is the village of Nai Rai located. Hotels and resorts surround this village. Some of the buildings are project houses made after the tsunami and some are simple constructions. Earlier many of the houses were seated even closer to the sea but many have sold their land and moved away from the beaches (Granbom 2007:56-57). The ones who had anything to sell were able to build concrete houses of good standard. A lot of people seem to be influenced by the majority Thai culture in this area. Many houses got Thai styled spirit houses on the site and people seem more integrated in the tourist business around Saladan.
1.3.5 Tobaleou

Near the pier of Saladan, on the other side of a tiny wooden bridge, the ceremonial centre for Saladan is located. This settlement has a history of only a few years and the buildings are simple constructions on stilts in the mangrove forest by the sea. According to my informants the population in this village consists of somewhere around 50 inhabitants, but many fishermen in Klong Dau and Nai Rai still keep their boats at this place. The original purpose of this location was to build a permanent residence for the Tobaleou shrine and the Boat floating ceremony (Granbom 2007:86-87).  

1.4 Questions emerging from the field study in 2009

Out of my last essay many new problems and questions emerged, such as: What will happen when the culture of the sea nomads on Ko Lanta get more and more weakened under the influence of aspects of modern society such as consumption and missionary activities? What will happen with their own belief system when they don’t even regard it as a religion themselves? Their own faith does not rest upon holy books or edicts that regulate the religious exercise. It rests upon tradition and cultural identity alone. But as they don’t regard their own faith as a religion on the same level as the ones with a church, temple or mosque they don’t see other beliefs as threats against their own culture. Its each and every persons own choice what religion they want to participate in, at least this is what the to maws of Ko Lanta tells outsiders. This makes the belief system of the sea nomads wide open for influences from other religions. The question is what the results will be. What makes the sea nomads say their belief and Buddhism is the same thing? What traditions and animistic components in the Buddhism on Ko Lanta are similar to the ones among Urak Lawoi? In what way does a fusion take place? What will the differences of such a fusion be, compared to the Urak Lawoi who have joined the Christian community? In what way will the traditional Urak Lawoi culture

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1 After some controversies with the authorities the land now belongs to Urak Lawoi and more and more people seem to build houses in the village. The village is located near the Buddhist temple outside of Saladan. According to Jägerberg & Mayr all interviewed in Tobaleou claimed to be Buddhists. (2006:16). At least a few had converted to Christianity in December 2009.
and religion, and the will to preserve the cultural identity, be able to parry these forces of change. What will a putative syncretism between Buddhism and Urak Lawoi culture mean?

It’s impossible to find answers to all of these questions within this essay. To dig deeper it would have been necessary to carry out another field study period on the island, which was unfortunately not possible. My hope is to find theories, patterns and models that will help me to interpret the tendencies I have observed.

1.5 Aim and questions at issue in this study

From the vantage point of the above, the aim of the present study is to research the forces of cultural and religious change among the Urak Lawoi by doing a theoretical analysis of the field study material from 2009 and by using other relevant literature. Particular phenomena to be investigated are animism and syncretism. In the course of the study, I will try to answer the following questions:

1. What animistic elements are discernible in the different belief systems of Thailand?

2. What forces of change are at work in the syncretism between Theravada Buddhism and animistic beliefs in Thailand?

3. What will happen with the culture and religion of the Urak Lawoi as a result of the ongoing meeting with Theravada Buddhism and modernity?
2. MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

2.1 Method and material
The material I present in this essay is based on observations and interviews from my field study on Ko Lanta in October-December 2009 together with a selection of literature I have studied. The field study was the main source of my last essay, *Waves of change - Traditional religion among the Urak Lawoi, sea nomads of Ko Lanta, Thailand*, which is an ethnographical narrative in the study of religions. To make this essay more theoretically oriented, I did a broad search for literature about animism and syncretism in Thailand. My intention was to reinvestigate the material from my field study in the light of theories about animism and syncretism in Thailand.

The wider theoretical perspective also gives me another opportunity to reflexively evaluate the interviews, the interview situations and the grounds which the conclusions where based upon. The material from the field study is still the same but the contextual presumptions have changed in the light of additional knowledge and with some month’s distance to the journey. This development resulted in a reanalysis of the symbols, actions and experiences, which led to a more holistic understanding of the phenomena studied (Wallén 1996:33-34).

When I did my field study on Ko Lanta it was natural to choose qualitative methods in order to be able to obtain the sought-for material. Qualitative methods like observations, gives the scholar opportunity to attend and experience genuine situations. In-depth interviews give much information from the informant and they give the scholar possibility to do follow up questions and find wider patterns. Still the qualitative interview also comprehends substantial consequences of the context, but the recorded version is discontextualized (Kvale 1997:147). To avoid misinterpretations and to capture “more than the words” my plan was to be prepared to take all kind of notes, like reflections and sightings (Ryen 2004:69), while I was doing the interviews. I realized beforehand that my approach in the contact with the Urak Lawoi and their attitude towards me as a *farang* (white foreigner) might affect the interviews and the information. The understanding of their culture is coloured by my own cultural preconceptions.
Another problem was the fact that I was dependant on interpreters. With an interpreter you get another layer (or barrier) of cultural or personal constructions. In the plan I made before my departure I ordered a lot of the work out of structures I got from the lectures on methodology in seminars arranged by the Swedish Mission Council in Uppsala (090826-090828). I wanted to have a distinct structure and time planning for my study. If something unexpected would occur (which often is the case) I would at least have something to recast. I also planned what categories of people I wanted to interview and what kind of ceremonies I needed to attend. The three categories I chose were:
1. Religious leaders (the to maw)
2. Young people (15-30 years old)
3. Old people (more than 50 years old).
I also wanted to strive for a balanced gender set-up among the informants.

From this planning I made guides of interview questions with standardized questions phased to my chosen interview categories. I tried to design the questions so that they would be both thematic and dynamic (Kvale 1997:121). My standardized questions were not meant to be followed strictly, but to serve me as a red line while conducting the semi-structured interviews.

During a field study it is hard to separate the important information from the unimportant. Things that might seem meaningless can in a later phase turn out to be key information. Therefore my plan was to take notes of everything I saw and experienced during my observations. For sudden happenings I had a notepad in my pocket and later on I transferred everything in to my field diary. For the same reason I bought a camera to be able to take snapshot pictures of everything that caught my attention.

In the major interviews I used a tape recorder so I wouldn’t risk losing any information. In those interviews I could have full focus on my informant (and my interpreter) and always be prepared with additional questions or to write down notes. Some interviews came more spontaneously and the situations didn’t allow me to arrange a recording. In those interviews I took notes which I transcribed fairly immediately afterwards. Then I often had a chance to ask additional questions to the person if something was unclear.
During my fieldwork I used three different interpreters for five of the interviews, and I made nine of the interviews myself. It is always a risk to use interpreters because a lot of the information might get lost or distorted in translation. In some cases the interpreters gave the answers by themselves and in these situations I tried to be persistent to get the informant’s point of view. When I made the interviews myself I had better control over the situation, but it might also have had an impact on the results to have eight English-speaking informants from a population where very few speak English. The small group of English-speaking people was in the same range of age and had tight connections with the tourism business, which most certainly had affected their way of life and belief. Still their answers showed that this was not the only parameter that affected their statements.

Anyhow, in my situation interviews with all the English-speaking I met was the only way to get enough interviews, as most of the people able to interpret where very busy during my stay. After two weeks, when only one out of five scheduled interviews had been realized, I started to book interviews every day to make things happen. During one critical period I had a hard time to stay in contact with and to schedule and reschedule my interpreters according to the changes in the situation. Luckily I managed to find some new contacts the last two weeks who were able to help me with the missing information.

During my field studies I stayed on Ko Lanta from the 23rd of October to the 9th of December. I had 14 interviews with ten different people, I stayed one week in an Urak Lawoi family and I had small pieces of information from a dozen other informants. I visited the villages many times and all the grave settings on the island. During my time on Ko Lanta I rigorously made notes about the situations where the observations and interviews where done. All these small pieces of background information have been invaluable when I six month later once again have been working through the material.
2.2 Previous research and theoretical sources of inspiration

There is not much written about Urak Lawoi. There are just a few books that describe the Urak Lawoi people on Ko Lanta. There are some articles and shorter descriptions as well, but almost nothing about the religion. I have used most of the literature as references and not as sources of information. My main sources have been from two books: David W Hogan’s *Men of the Sea: Coastal tribes of south Thailand’s west coast* (1972) and Ann-Charlotte Granbom’s more up-to-date work *Urak Lawoi: Sea Nomads in the Andaman Sea* (2007).

David W. Hogan, missionary and linguist, travelled in the Andaman Sea in the 1960s and 1970s and made a brief summary of the Urak Lawoi people. Since he was a linguistic he put most of his effort in documenting and analyzing the language and Urak Lawoi is only one of the tribes in the Andaman Sea he wrote about. The book briefly describes the religion and the ceremonies 30-40 years ago. Hogan’s documentation has therefore been valuable to me as an important view of the situation before the entrance of the tourist industry. I found out that a lot of things have changed regarding religious practice during these years, impacts from other religions have contributed and the To maw knowledge has been reproduced.

Swedish anthropologist Ann-Charlotte Granbom has focused on Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta in her writing. She describes the whole life situation for the people and especially the changes that the tourism and the modern world have caused. The information in the book is mostly based on her field studies on Ko Lanta 2002-2004, but she has also complemented the book with some supplement notes about the situation after the tsunami. Granbom writes about the pressure and exposure from the modern world that Urak Lawoi is living under and how it has made them to adopt the culture of the Thai majority.

On the issue of animism, the history of the term and a useful definition of it, the book *Animism. Respecting the living world* (2006) by Graham Harvey has been very useful. To describe syncretism and the opposing phenomenon anti-syncretism, I have mostly used *Syncretism/Antisyncretism. The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, edited by Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, as well as *Religious syncretism* by Eric Maroney.

To get some examples of syncretism between Buddhism and animistic beliefs in Thailand and what forces that are involved in the act of transformation I have used a couple of different
sources. Nicola Tannenbaum, professor of Anthropology at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, has contributed with a couple of useful books: her own *Who can compete against the world?* (1995) about the Shan people, and as editor together with Cornelia Ann Kammerer, *Founders’ cults in Southeast Asia* (2003). In the latter, Yoko Hayami and Yukoi Hayashi have contributed with relevant texts about Karen and Thai-Lao. Both books give examples of other indigenous people’s situations and the outcome of the meeting with state powered Buddhism, administration and modernity.

To get a better picture of the spirit world of South-east Asia, which seems to be a syncretistic spot in the integration between animism and Theravada Buddhism, I have to a large extent used the books *Traditional Thai medicine* (2007) by C Pierce Salguero and *Thailand, Spirits among us* (2007) by Marlane Guelden.

*Civilizing the margins*, (2004) edited by Christopher R. Duncan has helped me find patterns in the way the Thai state and other states in South-east Asia treat their groups of indigenous people and the way they try to assimilate them into the national state.

### 2.3 Delimitations

My aim is to get answers to my key questions through a theoretical analysis of the literature, with the material from my field study as the starting point. I have tried to find similarities, differences, patterns and forces of change in the interaction between animism and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and from the results see possible consequences for the Urak Lawoi. I have not tried to get a complete picture of the Urak Lawoi religion or any other belief or religious practice of the peoples or religions I mention, but have just focused on the areas where comparisons could be done.

### 2.4 Disposition

This essay constitutes of nine chapters. The Introduction offers problem framing, questions and background information of the Urak Lawoi and my previous work. The second chapter gives a description of the applied methods and the material from my previous field study. It also gives an overview of previous research and of my theoretical sources of inspiration. In chapter three I present a review of the systems of belief in Thailand, where I try to explain the
animistic tradition as part of a complex religious landscape. Chapter four deals with the multifaceted concepts of the spirits within different groups in Thailand. I also try to describe the role and function of the folk practitioners and spirit mediums. In chapter five I give a brief history and a definition to the term animism. Chapter six contains brief history and definitions of the terms syncretism and anti-syncretism. In this chapter I also give examples and a theoretical description of different levels/stages in the syncretistic process. In the seventh chapter I develop a theoretical analysis about syncretism, anti-syncretism, multiculturalism and assimilation, where I try to compare the material from the field study with the theories and examples from the literature. Chapter eight is a summary and the last chapter is a listing of the sources I have used for this essay.

3. THE SYSTEMS OF BELIEF IN THAILAND

3.1 A brief history of religions in Thailand

One could easily picture the religious system of Thailand into two different patterns. Firstly, there are the systemized organized religions of Christianity, Islam and the majority religion of Theravada Buddhism. Secondly, there is a vast field of other traditions, practices and beliefs. Some of these practices are regarded as Buddhist rituals others as Chinese or Brahman. Other examples are difficult to sort out because of the mixing that has occurred between different traditions over the ages, which has turned them into syncretistic versions of many traditions. Still, in this chapter, I will try to give a brief history to these traditions.

3.1.1 Animism

According to Guelden (2007:10), varieties of animistic beliefs was the religious practice of most of the indigenous people in south East Asia before the impact of the organised widespread religions of empires and states. In many places in Thailand local spirit cults are still practiced or are part of the practice in everyday religious life. Still it’s difficult to make any conclusions about the way these traditions did work before the religions of power influenced them. A lot of the minorities of Thailand have moved in from contiguous areas during the last hundreds of years and they have not made any documentation about their twists of faith. There are only some oral reproductions of a hazy past. What is certain is that Buddhism adopted some animistic practices along the way and that the belief in spirits is an
established practice within the Buddhism of Thailand today. There are traces of spirit cults which go back to 1292 in the Buddhist canon where king Ramkhamheng in an inscription is worshipping a mountain spirit, which is an example of the way Buddhism has developed its syncretistic nature in Thailand and south East Asia (Kirsch 1977:241). But there are still examples of groups, which have kept their tradition without involvement from any of the organized religions. Akha is a Tibeto-Burman speaking people in the northern highlands of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, China and Burma. In Thailand live approximately 32000 Akha. This highland people is not Buddhist and therefore not a part of the “single total field” (Tambiah 1970:2) where Buddhism and the animistic beliefs the divergently practice is the standard. The indigenous belief of the Akha is the only belief. (Kammerer 2003:41). There are also many examples where the different animistic groups of people have lent and incorporated components from each other (Hayami 2003:142). Another matter is that a lot of the minority groups have travelled all over South East Asia during centuries, meaning that the circumstances regarding their survival probably have changed a lot from time to time. Elements of the animistic beliefs, such as different kind of spirit mediums and rituals with the prime function to cure deceases, avoid bad luck, perform ceremonies and deal with different kinds of spirits or ghosts surrounding people or manifest in nature, are nowadays integrated with Buddhism.

3.1.2 Brahmanism

Brahmanism is a remnant of traditions and practises originating from the entrance of the Khmer empire in the north of Thailand during the late 14th century. The Brahman practice from this era is a Hindu/Indian element in the Thai Buddhist society. Kirsch (1977:252-253) divides the tradition into two different areas, Court Brahmanism and Folk Brahmanism. Court Brahmanism developed around the king’s court and the elite of the society while Folk Brahmanism has spread around amongst the common people. Folk Brahmanism works all through the Thai system of religious belief, if not comprehensively. Brahman practise include the deeds of seers, soul-tying doctors, advisors or mediums that help in finding lost possessions (Kirsch 1977:253). It takes time to learn the Brahman skills and an old monk often handles the education during the monk period of every Buddhist man. Because of this close bond and the fact that the two traditions share the same Buddhist worldview, there is no rivalry between Brahmanism and Buddhism. In some cases a Buddhist monk can do the
Brahman ceremonies for the people. But unlike the Buddhist monks who live in privacy, Folk Brahman practitioners do their work in the same places where they live (Kirsch 1977:256).

The perpetrators are often highly respected people with the same personal qualifications as you expect from a Buddhist monk. Folk Brahmanism is a resource for common people in matters concerning daily life like wealth, happiness, luck, marriage and relations, or in times of transition. It works like an everyday practice for dealing with problems in the same way as formal Buddhist theory can give guidance to ordinary people (Kirsch 1977:254).

3.1.3 Islam

Around 1450 the conversion to Islam of southern provinces of today’s Thailand, Satun, Narathiwat, Yala, Pattani and Songkhla began. In just a few years’ time most of the inhabitants adopted the faith, but the sea nomads’ autonomous communities maintained their animistic rituals (Gilquin 2002:11). Islam highly influenced the southern part of Thailand with some differences. In the three southern provinces the language is Yawi which is cognate with Malay. This has got significance because of the fact that the language ties this southernmost area (Narathiwat, Yala, Pattani) of Thailand more to Malay influences and traditional Islam religion. In Songkla and Satun (where Ko Lanta is seated) the Muslim majority speaks Thai and they are more integrated into the Thai state. In some areas in Satun, the Sea Gypsies² were converted to Islam long time ago, but animistic customs are still present under the surface, according to people in the area, while the Sea nomads of Ko Lanta seem to have been living side by side with the Muslims almost without any conversions or syncretism. Islam is the biggest religion on Ko Lanta. According to different sources of information the Muslim population is somewhere around 85-90%.³

² The Sea Gypsies around the Andaman Sea can be of different heritage. Hogan writes about three of them: Moken, Moklen and Urak Lawoi (Hogan 1972). The Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta claims no expressed ancestor relation with the Muslim Sea Gypsies to the south of them.

³ I couldn’t get any official statistics from the authorities on Ko Lanta. The information I got from my informants, from guided books and from Internet says everything in between 85 and 96%. As Urak Lawoi probably represents 4% (see chapter 3.2.7) and Ko Lanta has got a Thai-Chinese community around the same range the number of Muslims can’t be larger than 90%.
3.1.4 Christianity

The first Christian Catholic missionaries came to Siam (former Thailand) some 400 years ago without making any progress in converting the Siamese people (Keyes 1993:269). In the nineteenth century Protestant missionaries entered the country and tried hard to convert people in the royal court as well as people in the highlands (Keyes 1993:270). The results have been most prominent among the animistic hill tribes in the north, but very few Thai Buddhist people have converted into Christianity. According to Keyes the main targets of the Protestant missions have during the twentieth century been the “tribal people” of northern and western Thailand (Keyes 1993:270-271). According to Keyes, between 1/3 and ½ of the “tribal people” of Thailand had turned towards Christianity in the 1990s (Keyes 1993:272). The Christian activities on Ko Lanta seem recently to have been administrated from Phuket and Trang, and after the Tsunami catastrophe through help organizations like Suphamit and Worldview. The Christians were about 50 persons (11-13% of the population) in Sangkaou in December 2009. Every Sunday a community of 60 people meet in The Christian Mission Centre Lanta behind the village of Klong Dau on Ko Lanta. According to the Christians I spoke to, these 60 persons only include people from the Urak Lawoi community of Ko Lanta. This means that approximately 5% of the Urak Lawoi community on Ko Lanta converted between 2004 and 2009.

3.1.5 Chinese culture

There has been a Chinese migration into south East Asia for many hundreds of years. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up to the second-world war, the migration increased and so did the influences from Chinese culture and religion. The Chinese population is today the biggest minority in Thailand and they contribute to the religious and cultural mixture of Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and ancestor worship. (Keyes 1993:263). Thai of Chinese descent are strong believers in the power of deceased relatives to provide prosperity and health (Guilden 2007:27). Chinese merchants arrived to Ko Lanta about 100 years ago (Granbom 2007:36) and they constitute today approximately 5% of the population on the island.
3.1.6 Theravada Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism arrived to South East Asia around 400 B.C. (Salguero 2007). By the thirteenth century many Thai-Buddhist kingdoms had developed around Buddhist monuments and they where supported by Buddhist monasteries. At the end of the fifteenth century most of the Thai-speaking people of today’s Thailand had become Buddhists (Keyes 1993:263). Buddhism has since then developed and grown stronger in co-operation with, or in sovereignty over, other traditions. Theravada Buddhism is today the dominating religion in Thailand and it has a certain function in the Thai state building (Kirsch 1977; Duncan 2004; Thörnvall 2006).

To a Buddhist, life is suffering, and the goal is to avoid being reborn. *Karma*, the belief that one’s good or bad actions determine a person’s next existence, is fundamental. You get what you deserve according to your actions in previous lives. To get good *karma* you need to make merits—and do the right things during your lifetime, which gives you the chance to climb another nod on the ladder of reincarnation and in the end enables you to reach Nirvana, putting an end to all suffering (*dhukha*) and reaching the point of extinguishing, (*nirvana*).

The Thai monarchy is tied to this system, the King has to be a Buddhist and he is the protector of the Buddhist fate. Being the king naturally means that he reached an advanced position out of his actions in previous lives. Kirsch describes the Thai belief system as a lay-on lay-system built on an animistic base. Theravada Buddhism is situated at the top in this complex system of many different traditions and beliefs (Kirsch 1977:242). Underneath is a conglomerate of different animistic beliefs and local cults, Brahman practices and Chinese traditions, with Islam and Christianity working separately, in co-operation, in syncretistic blends or under domination of it.

Buddhist religion and culture have been a part of Ko Lanta for a long time. Especially around Lanta Old Town, with its large Chinese population, it has been prevalent. The old Buddhist Temple in Lanta Old town was built some 100 years ago and a new bigger temple was built just some years ago. As a part of the dominant state, Theravada Buddhism has a vast impact on the island. Still, in contrast to central and northern Thailand, Buddhism is a minority religion on the Muslim-dominated Ko Lanta.
3.2 Buddhism and animism – complementary or contradictory?

One way of viewing Buddhism and animism in Thailand is to look upon them as two contradictory religious systems. Because in one way the belief in spirits give people the opportunity to deal with their daily life through rituals targeted to spirits, who can interact with one’s life situation in a more immediate way than the merit making and the law of karma can. Buddhism, on the other hand, is a moral religion that advocates moral behaviour, while the spirits are believed to be amoral, only being concerned about rituals and receiving respect. (Guelden 2007:16) The belief in the survival of the human soul in a parallel dimension that affects and integrates with our, is a central part of animistic traditions. The parallel dimension can be manifested in nature itself, in places, or in objects like rocks or trees. There is a difference in this view compared to the Buddhist view where the ordinary illusory reality is just another perspective of the karma RULED, perfect religious reality. (Spiro: 1978) But the belief in karma as an instrument for predisposing a person’s future and the belief that spirits affects our life are not incompatible (Guelden 2007:16). Because while the sum of our good deeds (bun) and our bad ones (bap) affects the next life, rituals and ceremonies targeted to the spirit world can affect the previous (Kirsch 1977:246) That is the way worshipping of the spirits has become an important part of the everyday practice in Thai Theravada Buddhism alongside with merit-making and donations. On Ko Lanta the situation is a bit different. The animistic Urak Lawoi people have lived side by side with mostly anti-syncretistic Muslims, not being that influenced by the Thai-Chinese population or State Theravada Buddhism projects, until recently.

4. WORSHIPPING THE SPIRITS

– [...] this road has dead people, and when you walk at night [...] you feel them.

(Interview 091119)

4.1 The Buddhist concept of the spirits

Under the consideration that there is not an all-comprehensive Thai religion, but a dominant Thai state Buddhism it is important to note that there is not only one concept of spirits, but many. Still, the belief in spirits seems to be one of the common grounds where different traditions are able to meet and sometimes melt together. Theravada Buddhism itself gives
acceptance for the belief in the existence of spirits. In the Buddhist canon, spirits such as *thewadaa* (angels) *yag* (giant demons) and *phi prêt* (hungry ghosts) amongst others are recognisable (Guelden 2007:15). These ingredients are probably themselves heritages from the pre-Buddhist era. The common Buddhist belief about the soul in Thailand is that every person has got two souls or spirits. The *khwan* soul is the lifetime soul. An individual is build by 32 *khwan* that regulates the balance. But they are also very volatile and unpredictable and sometimes need to be reversed to the body. A *mo su khwan* (a soul-tying doctor of folk Brahman tradition) can restore the *khwan* and reintegrate it into the body. If a *khwan* gets lost it can cause fear, sickness and depression (Kirsch 1977:253). The *winyaan* soul is the afterlife-soul that carries the merits and finds a family with the correct amount of merit and there enters the mother’s uterus. When the child is born the *winyaan* withdraws and the *khwan* emerges to mature with the child. The origin of these ideas of the soul is hard to track down (Guelden 2007:17). The notion of the *khwan* might be of Chinese heritage but it’s more likely to be an early indigenous concept (Guelden 2007:17). The examples from the perceptions concerning the concept of the spirits and souls within Theravada Buddhism of Thailand are just a little part of the whole belief system in Thailand.

### 4.2 Ghosts and evil spirits

#### 4.2.1 Phi

There is a strong belief in spirits in Thailand and Southeast Asia, and it is important to remember that there is not one spirit world but many, since there is a great variety of different groups in Thailand. There are beneficial spirits from deceased ancestors and evil spirits of misfortune and spirit lords of land and water. Traditional Thai separate the bad spirits from the other ones by calling them *phi*, “ghosts” (Guelden 2007:38). The conception of bad spirits and ghosts seems to come from a variety of sources: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and animism (Guelden 2007:39). People in general see the ghosts as sources of misfortune, illness and bad luck. The ghosts’ existences are often the result of sudden and unnatural death causes. A violent death like a traffic accident can produce a dangerous ghost, *phi taa hoong*, which will cause trouble for the people (Guelden 2007:38). The spirit doesn’t understand that the body is gone and stays in contact with the human reality (Salguero 2007:73, Kammerer 2003:48, Guelden 2007:37).
A spirit which has been exposed to violence or murder may refuse rebirth and instead decide to stay and cause humans damage as revenge. (Guelden 2007:37, 2007:41) There are ghosts present on grave settings, in trees, rocks, ponds, houses et cetera, and on places where people have met a sudden death. If the deceased lacks male offspring the spirit can become a “hungry ghost”, phi pret, which causes misfortune, disease and death. Other traditions say that a pri pret is a person not bad enough for hell, not good enough for heaven (Kammerer 2003:48, Guelden 2007:49). The ghosts are able to cause headaches, dizziness, diarrhoea, sudden loss of weight, sudden painful swelling, menstrual complications and other symptoms that do not respond to medications (Salguero 2007:74).

The situation for many Thai-Buddhists in this blend of ideas concerning spirits is that they are unable to categorize the spirit of a deceased person as being either a fearful symbol of death or a desire for a favourable reincarnation. According to Golomb, the spirits of those who where disliked or even feared or hated in life are usually spoken of as animistic evil phi, while the spirits of the ones whom were loved and respected often are perceived more sympathetically as Buddhist winyaan. Contradictory, the spirits of beloved ancestors and founders in animistic tradition are also often referred to as phi (Golomb 1985:107). Phi puta, the owner of the village in the spirit cults among the Thai-Lao of northern Thailand, is one example.

4.2.2 Inside/outside

Among some groups the cosmology is much about outside and inside. Inside is the village where the people and the domestic animals live. Outside is the surrounding unpredictable jungle with wild animals, spirits and ghosts. To the Karen, Akha and Thai-Lao people the world is divided into the safety of the village and the unpredictability of the forest. To Karen the cosmology is divided into Pga “outside” and zi “inside”. Zi is the village, the society, and the home of humans. Pga is the outside, the wild, unknown, chaotic forest which provides humans with material and food, but in itself are the opposite to the security and order in the village (Hayami 2003:138, Kammerer 2003:49). Among the Akha people there is a difference between the spirits who live inside the village and the spirits from the outside. An “inside spirit” lives inside the boundaries of the village together with the people and the domestic animals. These spirits are from human heritage and are mostly the spirits of the ancestors. The “outside spirits” live outside the village boundaries in the jungle with the wild and
uncontrollable animals. These spirits do not decent from humans but from nature (Kammerer 2003:48-49). Still, to Thai-Lao existence is depending on the relationship with a converted outside spirit, phi phuta, into a guardian spirit and its piece of the forest made into safe and human occupied area (Hayashi 2003:192). This outside/inside perspective is not obvious but still discernable among the Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta. The jungle is sometimes described as the home of ghosts, but the evil powers might as well come from the sea. To protect the villages from evil forces, Urak Lawoi puts up gaju padak crosses during the Boat floating festival (Hogan 1972:216-217).\(^4\) The belief in malevolent phi seems to be profound in Thailand. In times of social change and influence from Buddhism, science and modern society, the fear of malevolent phi from outside is still present and need to be restricted with protection and rituals.

### 4.2.3 To continue relating to the dead

To Akha, spirits can be ancestral in two senses. Ancestral spirits are deceased forebears, while inherited tutelary spirits are ancestor spirits or non-related spirits that belonged to those forbears (Kammerer 2003:49). To Urak Lawoi it seems to be much the same. One of the common things seems to be to pay respect to the decedent parents or grandparents, but the most important spirits are non-related spirits who still hold a high status among the people. Some of these spirits are said to have been “the first man on the island” or “the protector of the island”. Following this description, the belief of Urak Lawoi is not far from the founders’ cult of northern Thailand.

### 4.2.4 Founders’ cults

The founders’ cult among the Karen, Akha and Thai-Lao people is a term that intimates the perpetrators belief and worship of ancestors who once upon a time closed a deal with the spirit of the land and got permission from the spirit to cut down trees and cultivate the soil. There is a close version of this in the spirit cults where the people are worshipping the spirit of the land. Founders’ cults exist in many different variations and are found among people in both low- and highlands of Thailand (Tannenbaum/Kammerer 2003). The guardian spirits’

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\(^4\) The crosses are made out of wooden sticks, which are about 2.5 metres tall and have got fringes on top and in both ends of the horizontal stick. The crosses are put up as protective powers to prevent evil forces from “outside” to enter the village. The practise is still part of the boat floating festival of the Urak Lawoi.
cult among the Thai-Lao in North-eastern Thailand, is one example of spirit cults where the village has an agreement with a territorial spirit of the land or with the ancestors who once upon a time closed the deal with the spirit. The Thai name for the spirit cult is Phi puta. The definition of the Phi puta differs from village to village. In some villages the spirit seems to be ancestral, but in others it seems to be more territorial (Hayashi 2003:185, 190). The close relationship to the area and the founder makes the heritage from the founder very important. If there is no legitimate inheritor who is able to maintain the relationship with the founder in Karen villages, it has happened that communities have been resolved and had had to move. The rituals are important to appease the protecting spirit but also to keep the social balance in the village. Quarrels, disorder, gambling, improper sexual behaviour can make the guardian spirit agitated and the ground gets “hot” which causes diseases and bad harvests. The ground then has to be “cooled” through a ritual that cools and heals it (Hayami 2003:145-146).

4.2.5 Ancestors worship

*To be an ancestor is to continue relating* (Harvey: 2006:125)

The traditional culture and religion of Urak Lawoi is based upon their animistic belief in their ancestors. The human reality is linked to and dependent on the contact and relation to the spirit world. The spirits are present in the daily life and are able to guide and help the people. Much of people’s effort is focusing on gaining good luck and avoiding bad luck through rituals directed to the ancestors. The whole social system of the Urak Lawoi people is based upon their tight bonds to the family members. The elder are supposed to look after the younger and when they die they keep on caring for their offspring. At the same time the spirits want attention from the living, they need to be invited and honoured in different ceremonies, and they still want to have their favourite clothes, food and drinks after their death. If some ritual is done in the wrong way or at the wrong time it means bad luck. The Urak Lawoi people live with the belief of the spirits of their ancestors. The spirits can affect their situation and help them with things they want. The Urak Lawoi families have very tight bonds to each other in the families and to the other people in the village. They want to stay together and they dislike the idea of living somewhere else but with the rest of the family. The parents and the grandparents take care of the family and the Urak Lawoi believes that the ancestors keep on doing this after their death.
Whether as peccaries or givers of gifts, caved houses or venerated bones, healers or protectors, fared bringers of sickness and watchers of property, ancestors define “spirit” not as “spiritual” disincarnating, but as transformed agency and activity.

(Harvey 2006: 127)

4.3 The Thai spirit houses

The most obvious presence of spirit traditions in broad Thai culture is the small spirit houses (san phra phum) outside each and every Buddhist home. The origin of these spirit houses is probably found in animistic customs in many groups in Southeast Asia. The spirit house is often located on the outskirts of the settlements, for the founder of the village and the custom was then adopted to accommodate different kinds of spirits (Guelden 2007:66).

Thai spirit houses are parts of an old animistic belief still present in Thailand that has been integrated with Buddhism. The use of them is very common and you can find spirit houses outside every Buddhist house in Thailand. People are worshiping spirits in a way that is very difficult to separate from the way Urak Lawoi do. The difference I could find was that in Thai spirit houses they were worshiping the Spirits of the house or the Spirit of the garden etc. and not their ancestors like Urak Lawoi do. On the other hand it was hard to find out if Urak Lawoi adopted the whole tradition when they started using the Thai styled spirit houses, or if they used them to be able to keep on worshipping their ancestors.

To Thai people the spirit in the Thai spirit house is the one who protects the house and the plot. It ensures wealth and prosperity. There are two different traditions that are represented in the spirit houses. One of these is jao thii (Lord of the space), probably a tradition from the time before Buddhism, that later has been influenced by Chinese traditions. Jao thii is staying in a wooden house on a pillar above ground. The Thai Chinese reveres a similar Lord of the space living in spirit houses painted in red and gold. These houses use to be placed on the floor of houses, shops and workplaces (Guelden 2007:67). Phra phuum (Lord of the land) is an angel derived from Brahmanism. Its home is often made of concrete standing on a pillar. The lord of the land is sometimes combined to one word, phra phuum jao thii (Guelden 2007:68). The Shan people got altars for tsao ye tsao huun (Spirit lord of the house) and tsao

5 See for example this page: http://www.chiangmai-chiangrai.com/spirit_house.html
naam tsao lin (The spirit of the land) and one altar for paw tao mawn mae tao (offering for generalized ancestors) in their houses (Tannenbaum 1995:60).

A close version of this tradition is found in different groups in Thailand. The Akha people got their cadastral spirits: Lord of the land and Lord of the water. These spirits are not placed in individual spirit houses but have got offering platforms enclosed by bamboo fencing for each village (Kammerer 2003:54). The place in the village where Urak Lawoi go to give heavy offering to the spirit is the rumah dato’ (spirit house). People go to the spirit house during the day, on special occasions or celebrations and bring food, drinks, cigarettes, pieces of fabric, betel nuts, candles etc. to the altar. The use of private “Thai styled” spirit houses placed on a pole, is very common outside Urak Lawoi houses around Saladan in the north of Ko Lanta, but not as common in Sangkaou in the south. When I asked people if the “Thai styled” spirit houses really were the same as a rumah dato’, they said that it was, and when I asked if it was a Buddhist thing, they just said “same, same”. So in contrast to Hogan (1972:216) I found that the Urak Lawoi houses do have small spirit houses and I also saw spirit shelves in a lot of the homes I visited. This matter could be a fallacy from Hogan or, more likely, a result of a process of integration into the Thai culture during the last 35 years. It might also just be a way for the Urak Lawoi to fit in with the Thai majority and get an easier life, as Granbom points out in her book (Granbom 2007:73).

4.4 Mediums, magicians and spirit doctors

A shaman’s activity has meaning only in relation to other people. (Vitebsky 1995:7)

The spirits are often regarded to be dull, jealous or even evil entities that are more than ready to attack people if they misbehave or don’t handle the ceremonies and rituals in the proper way. The spirit mediums try to get in contact with the spirit to find out why it has attacked somebody with sickness. They then try to find out how the spirit can be appeased and what sacrifices would be appropriate for the situation (Kirsch 1977:258). There are in the different animistic traditions of Thailand many different names and characteristics of the mediums that establish the contact with the spirits. There are also some Western terms of the role person. The most common name in the literature is shaman, used to categorize the person who can
communicate with the spirit world in different kinds of indigenous cultures around the world. Another word is medicine man, often used in description of the roll person in the tribes in northern America. Another term is spirit doctor, which has become a popular transcription of a person with multi-talented skills for healing in Thailand today. Salguero divides the persons in the Thai context, who have the ability to manipulate or/and communicate with the powers, into two groups, folk practitioners and spirit mediums (Salguero 2007:71-75).

4.4.1 Folk practitioners

The first group is mo ratsadon/mo tjaloe, the folk practitioners. Within this group Salguero put a vast field of healers, such as fortune tellers and astrologists (mo du), diviners (mo song), and the controllers of magical powers (mo wicha). Other practitioners can be Buddhist monks or Brahmans. It seems like the bottom layer animism in Thailand keeps this practitioners busy in every kind of society. Among the Karen people s’ra teu or si s’ra is men with magical powers who knows how to use spells in combination with herbs. They may perform rituals and cure illnesses, protect against bullets and knives, but also do somebody harm. The spells must be used in the forest not to disturb the harmony in the village, the “inside”. The spells may have different origin and come from Karen, Lawa, Shan, Khamu, etc, and are examples of the borrowing of practices that occurs between the groups (Hayami 2003:141-142). Within the Urak Lawoi community of Ko Lanta there is an undefined category of practitioner working beside, under or separate from the spirit medium, the to maw. According to my material, some people called the persons to maw as well, but they were just able to do some few practices like fortune telling and curing some particular illnesses. Some of them helped the to maw with communal ceremonies and rituals as well. These are just a few examples of the vast supply of folk practitioners working among the people in Thailand.

4.4.2 Spirit mediums

*Spirit mediums are mediators; they mediate between the diverse oppositions and possibilities of their culture.* (Harvey 2005:149)

In the other group Salguero puts mo phi, the spirit mediums. They are responsible for the good relation between the humans and the spirits. They maintain the connection with the spirit
world and they inform the humans of the messages from the spirits. The spirit mediums have
different names in different communities and the variation seems to be infinite. These spirit
mediums Salguero divides into three different sub-groups. These three different categories
show once again the complexity and mix of different tradition and practices that constitutes
the religious field of traditional Thai medicine and animistic belief (Salguero 2007:73-74).

Mo phi pob
A mo phi pob helps people who have been possessed by spirits, by rituals that force the spirit
out of the body through the use of for instance water or blowing. There is a difference
between the makhi or shamans who get possessed and use their own bodies as a tool to
communicate with the spirit world, and the people who gets possessed by a spirit against their
own will. The mo phi pob captures or drags out the evil spirit by exorcism.

Makhi
A makhi gets in contact with the spirits by granting his own body to the spirit. The makhi
don’t remember anything after the take-over. The cam is the medium for the Thai-Lao Owner
of the land and the Phi puta, in Thai-Lao communities. Usually the cam is a middle aged or
elderly man who gets possessed by the spirit and talks out his will through the cam. The cam
intercedes with the spirit in annual rites and when requested by a member in the community
(Hayashi 2003:194).

Makhin
A makhin makes a spiritual journey to the spirit world. The makhin stays unconscious during
the whole contact period and cannot remember it afterwards. Still there are different levels of
consciousness in this group and there are mediums that stay in full consciousness and work
more like interpreters. When the spirits get invited it often concerns matters of elements and
weather yields. The medium touches the ground to invite the spirits, intrudes smoke or
bubbles, pours water or lights candles. The spirits often manifest themselves as a gust of wind
that get the fire or the candle to flare (Harvey 2006:123). The spirit medium or “village head”
among the Tibeto-Burman speaking Karen people in Thailand, is the hi kho. The hi kho
handles the contacts between the human settlers and the spirits (Hayami 2003:134). The
powers of the *hi kho* are inherited on the paternal line and descend from the first man who opened up a patch of the forestland and established a relationship with the spirits. The *hi kho* maintains the good relations with the spirits to maintain the wellbeing and fertility of the people, livestock, crops as well as the social order (Hayami 2003: 139-141). Among Akha different practitioners share the communication with the spirits. *Dzoe ma* is Akha’s ritual and rural leader. He is the village leader and enforces adherence to *zah*, the oral tradition, and the knowledge which was given to the various peoples long time ago. He is officiating the ceremony that makes renewal of the village gateway. The *boe maw* or *pi ma* (spirit priest or reciter) performs oral chants, rituals and makes the sacrificing of animals. *Nyi pa* are spirit mediums who are said to “die” as they travel in trance to the spirit world. The *nyi pa* are selected by the spirits, frequently after an illness. They work more individually than communally. They play no official part in calendrical spirit cults. Together they uphold the communication with the spirit world (Kammerer 2005:43-44).

### 4.2.3 To maw – the spirit medium of Urak Lawoi

The spirit medium in the Urak Lawoi community is called the *to maw*. *To maw* is Thai for “spirit” and “people”. The *to maw* is the link between the spirit world and the Urak Lawoi people. He can be seen as a doctor or a medicine man (Granbom 2007:44). Hogan calls him witchdoctor or *bumol* (Hogan 1972:216). According to Salguero's typology the *to maw* is a *makhin*, a spirit medium who stays in full consciousness, is the keeper of the communications and interprets the messages from the spirit world. The *to maw* has a spiritual, ceremonial, medical, and advisory role in the Urak Lawoi community. Out of this contact the *to maw* can get answers from the spirits about sick people, the future or any other matter. Usually there is one great *to maw* in each area of Ko Lanta, and then he might have a few or many other *to maws* to help him. In the Urak Lawoi community like in many other small communities it is the spirit medium that stands for the tradition and maintenance of the religious practices and beliefs.

### 4.2.4 Magical monks

Under the influence of animism, Brahmanism and other Southeast Asian traditions, some Buddhism monks have developed skills in various practices not different from the ones performed by folk practitioners and spirit mediums. A magic monk refers to any monk who
has acquired these skills. The magical monks give away blessing amulets, lottery numbers, blessings but also combat black magic, exorcise spirits and deal with spirits of the dead. But in contradiction to other spirit mediums, the monks cannot be possessed by a spirit because they have reached a higher spiritual level than the spirits. The monks cannot use harmful black magic and their actions must benefit others (Guelden 2007:117). The fact that many of these practices are similar to a lot of the practices spirit mediums do, in one way makes the monks (and Buddhism) an alternative way of interacting with spirits, ancestors and ghosts. According to Kirsch the spirits live in a distinct level of the paranormal reality that is responsive. But this level is not always open for contact, which does the communication with the spirits uncertain and unpredictable. While the Buddhist monks and the Brahman practitioners work with the assurance that their actions works on a level where they automatically is effective, the spirit mediums express an uncertainty about dealing with the spirit powers. The spirit mediums can only mediate, they can’t control the world of the spirits and they can only sometimes do journeys to “the other side”. This can be the reason why the animistic practitioners, in societies with a mix of many different traditions, usually get contacted only when the Buddhist and Brahman possibilities are exhausted (Kirsch 1977:258).

5. ANIMISM

*We got no religion, we believe in nature.* (Interview 091101)

5.1 Brief history of the term animism

During the short time of its use the angles, purposes and attitudes to the phenomena and people around it has changed drastically. Some think that the term has lost its legitimacy and should be buried with other imperialist tainted vocabulary. I will try to define and explain in what significance it will be used in this essay.

*Animism, the belief in spirits, the belief that everything material is inspired.*

(http://www.ne.se/sok/animism?type=NE)

The term “animism” goes back to 1708 when physician and chemist George Stahl theorised about a physical element, *anima*, (living stuff) which vitalises living bodies. Living things are full of it and dead objects have none. In some situations, Stahl claimed, material things could
be animated too. Stahl’s theories didn’t influence academics at his time, but in the nineteenth century Edward Tylor adopted the term animism, for another theory in the anthropological field. Tylor saw animism as a part of his definition of religion in general. Tylor’s theory was that mankind and religion in general had evolved from an undeveloped level full of superstition into “higher” forms of religion and in the end in the belief of a supreme god (Tylor 1958). But Tylor, at the same time, saw religion itself as a historical human error that evolution would wipe out with objective scientific facts (Harvey 2006:3-6). The term animism became during this era of early anthropology, colonialism and Christian mission equalised with savageness and primitive beliefs among the people in colonized areas of the world. This old usage of the term animism refers to western, scientific and Christian preconceived perceptions, about the indigenous people that were patronized. However, according to Harvey (2006:28-29), this attitude among scientists and anthropologists has moved from assertions of primitive superstition to an attempt to understand animistic beliefs in their own relational context.

In the early mid-twentieth century Irving Hallowell formulated a new definition and understanding of animism from his field studies with Ojibwe in southern central Canada (Hallowell 1991). His experience and redefinition about other-than-human-persons did influence a lot of anthropologists to try to understand the concepts outside a cultural western pre-understanding of body-soul duality, the significance of nature and the meaning of spirits and human persons. The term “persons” can in this “new animism” definition apply to a much wider community than humans and human-like-beings.

*The new animism names worldviews and lifestyles in which people seek to know how they might respectfully and properly engage with other persons.* (Harvey 2006:xiv)

In this essay I try to apply a neutral approach to the term. I am aware of its history but still find it useful to describe one of the religious fields or layers that are present in the complex religious system of Thailand. And as it is difficult to do vast generalizations about people’s beliefs from a term like animism (or Buddhism), it is important to try to see the twists of the different animistic traditions as much as it is to see the similarities. It is in sense the use of the term animism is used in this essay.
5.2 *Definition of the term animism*

With the re-defined approach to the phenomenon animism it is still difficult to separate animism from other beliefs in Thailand. The religious map of Thailand shows a conglomerate of religious practices and beliefs often in cooperation with the religion of the state, Theravada Buddhism, itself not that uniform and blended with practises from other heritages. According to Tannenbaum, Buddhism was imported from Nepal and got mixed with local traditions in a variety of ways across the country due to differing ethnicities and cultures (Guelden 2007:17). Therefore some scholars claim that it is impossible (and not fertile) to find out what parts are “animistic” and what are “Buddhist” (Guelden 2007:17). But as my main focus is upon one specific group, the Urak Lawoi of Ko Lanta, and their culture, identity and religion is in the beginning of a transformation, I still think it is important to definite the basic elements I found for Southeast Asian animism.

Animism in the use of this essay includes:

- A belief in and worship of spirits that manifest in nature, or/and that originate from ancestors or decedents.

- A quest for good luck, protection, health and prosperity through offerings, rituals and ceremonies directed to the spirits.

- A behaviour aiming at not jeopardizing the relations with the spirit world causing bad luck, diseases and poverty.

- A spirit medium who keeps in contact with the spirit world by visiting it or by translating messages from it.

- Special places or spirit houses for head-offering.

- No churches, temples or mosques.

- No belief in one almighty god.
6. SYNCRETISM AND ANTI-SYNCRETISM

Syncretism is found in nearly every religion. (Maroney 2005:16)

6.1 Syncretism,

The definition of the term syncretism is, according to Shaw and Stewart vague, contradictory and multifarious (Shaw & Stewart 1994:3-4). In different times the term has been used with various meanings. There are a lot of negative synonyms connected to it, such as contamination, bastardization, infiltration and corruption, indicating that there are pure and original traditions. Syncretism has for a large part been a negative term in both Christian and Muslim circles as well as in anthropological. But anthropologists have in recent years developed a more neutral or even positive approach to the subject. In a post modern view the syncretistic process is basic not only to religions and rituals but to culture in general. The critique from recent anthropologists has mostly been about the use of terms like authenticity, purity and originality in description of cultures.

The semantic-roots of the term are probably from the Greek syn, which means “with”, and krasis, “mix” or “blend”. The term has during history been charged with both negative and positive meaning. During Renaissance Erasmus of Rotterdam used it to describe how the ancient Greek influenced the Christian tradition. During the syncretistic controversies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it attained a more negative meaning within the Protestant church. The proponents of syncretism wanted unlimited access to each other’s rituals, communion and baptism. The opponents saw it as a chaotic compound of different religions. During the nineteenth century the term was part of a negative description of disorder and confusion connected to the Roman Hellenistic world when the Roman Empire incorporated and assimilated faiths of conquered people. Some scholars used the term in a religious evolutionary scheme as a pre-stadium to monotheistic Christianity. Since then syncretism has been an expression for condemnation of all mixture between Christianity and other religious traditions. Most commonly the term has been used in contexts of missionary activities (Shaw & Stewart 1994:1-6).

The definition of Maroney is that syncretism is a kind of borrowing, but a kind of borrowing that reform the part that borrows. In smaller groups the change can be big and permanent and
in the long run create something completely different from the original but also quite dissimilar from the tradition the influences came from. In bigger systems the syncretism can create local differences in the vast patchwork, or something that will be corrected within time. All depends on in what stage the syncretism occurs and in what religious system it happens (Maroney 2006:6). Syncretism is a reconciliation or fusion of different religious systems, or parts of systems, where the result can be very different and unlike the original components. It can be the matter of two different religious systems working on different levels at the same time. The longer the systems work together the thinner the line between them gets. Depending upon the situation, everything between the extinction of the traditions to a mixture into something new is possible to occur. And at last it’s important to remember that there probably is not such a thing as a pure original religion without any influences from other traditions (Stewart & Shaw 1994).

6.2 Anti-syncretism

Anti-syncretism is the antagonistic position to syncretism, evoked by groups, institutions and authorities who want to protect the pure religion and tradition from infiltration and maculation. The term authentic doesn’t need to be the same as original, and none of the terms need necessarily to mean pure or unblended. What makes a tradition authentic and valuable has to do with discursive matters like absolute power, ambition and rhetoric. Both presumed pure and presumed syncretistic traditions can be labelled authentic if a group of people claim the tradition to be specific and their own exclusive historical property.

Political anti-syncretism is common within the national tendencies where groups strive to define a sharp ethnic or regional identity. Fundamentalism and nativism are examples of typical anti-syncretistic discourses (Shaw & Stewart 1994:8). Besides Christian and Islam practices it’s hard to find clearly anti-syncretistic contexts in Thailand. Theravada Buddhism seems to be very tolerant and incorporative to other traditions. The vast field of animistic traditions among the different groups in Thailand shows no visible anti-syncretistic tendencies. The basic mutual belief in spirits, similarities in practices and functions and the broad-minded approach to religiosity have made Thailand a favourable melting pot for the forces of change.
6.3 Different levels/stages in the syncretistic process

Looking at the religious system of Thailand as a layer on layer system, a top veneer, a conglomerate or as two contradictory belief systems, the local variation between full Theravada Buddhist identity with some hidden customs of animistic ancestry, and animistic groups still not in syncretistic blends with Buddhism, is vast. A belief system where Buddhism and a spirit cult together build a syncretistic belief system is what Tambiah calls a "single total field" (Tambiah 1970:2). I will here refer to it as a “syncretistic field”. In other communities the animistic beliefs and Buddhist (or Christian) practices live side by side and the people in the community don’t necessarily participate in each other’s ceremonies. I label this situation a belief system of “parallel fields”. A belief system in which communities still practice their animistic ceremonies without any obvious external influences is termed “indigenous field”. Villages or communities that display the full Buddhist identity I will label “assimilated fields” of religious belief. According to Kammerer the “indigenous field” belief systems are still common among minority groups of the highlands of Thailand while the syncretistic blends of the “syncretistic field” is common among groups in the lowlands where the villages live closer to the authorities (Kammerer 2003:41). But even in communities that on the surface seem to be fully converted to Buddhism the old practices seem to remain at least to some extent. These variations can be difficult to recognize, much because of the preconceived comprehensions of the outsiders, that is anthropologists (Tannenbaum 1995). Other practices are present below the surface. Animistic rituals are still present below the surface in Sea gypsy communities in southern Ko Lanta, which have been Muslim for hundreds of years.6

6.3.1 Indigenous field of religious belief

The indigenous field type of group has kept a religious belief built up on cults and worships of local founders, ancestors or natural spirits. They live separated from the domination of the Thai Buddhist society and have not adopted any Thai-Buddhist customs in their personal or communal practice. The Akha people are an example of a group living in Thailand still practicing the traditional spirit cult without any involvement from Theravada Buddhism. Akha are Tibeto-Burman speaking highlanders in northern Thailand. The Akha belief circles around the zah, the rules, customs, etiquette, traditions and ceremonies given to their fathers

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6 The Field study diary
long time ago. Christian missionaries and opening of national language village schools still transmit knowledge of zah orally despite the introduction of scripts for the Akha language (Kammerer 2003:43). The Akha culture contains magical practitioners like reciters, spirit mediums and blacksmiths, who deal with the spirits through rituals and ceremonies. The Akha understanding of spirits is that spirits and humans were originally children of the same mother, but according to the oral tradition they got separated after a dispute (Kammerer 2003:48).

The spirit world of the Akha contains nyi neh, outside spirits or forest spirits (no kin, strangers) and koe neh, inside spirits (often ancestral). The spirits, which are connected with a certain phenomenon, (animal, locations, crafts, crop, class, the sky, village leaders, money, bad deaths etc.) is called yaw sah, meaning owner or sometimes lord (Kammerer 2003:48-50). Through ceremonies, offerings, rituals and blessings, fertility in humans, rice and domestic animals, wealth and well-being is hoped for (Kammerer 2003:47).

6.3.2 Syncretistic field of religious belief

In a group characterized by a syncretistic field of religious belief, the original spirit tradition has been mixed with Theravada Buddhism and transformed it into one syncretistic field of belief where the animistic traditions and the Buddhist practices cooperate and/or have transformed into a new version of both. One example is to be found among groups of the Shan people. Power protection is Tannenbaums (1995) description of the syncretistic blend of animistic beliefs and Theravada Buddhism among the Shan people.

In every village there is a tsao muong (The cadastral spirit) which protects the village through a he (barrier). It also protects from robbers, ghosts/evil spirits, and submersion. In return the tsao muong receives offerings on certain ceremonies (Tannenbaum 1995:70-71). Every hamlet has its own tsao muong. In the tsau waan (the heart of the village), in the middle of the villages, a ceremony to protect the village (“repairing the village”) is held by Buddhist monks to keep famine and disease away from the village. In their houses people keep Buddhist alters or the spirit lord of the house (tsao ye tsao huun), the spirit of the land (tsao naam tsao lin) as well as one for making offerings for generalized ancestors (paw tao mawn mae tao). In the villages monks and Buddhist temples are to be found alongside Shan medicine men (sara) and spirit mediums (phu muong).
The animistic worship to get power protection and the law of karma are not in opposition, they work together. The Shan people is supporting the monks, temples and celebrating Buddhist holy days but simultaneously make different kinds of offerings to spirits associated with fields, households and villages (Tannenbaum 1995:11). They rely much on different folk practitioners and spirit mediums who communicate and maintain contact with the spirit world. From a Shan point of view, power protection helps here and now and results in good karma, which also helps to explain why there are still differences between people. The power protection gives control which limits change and suffering. At the same time it is the three Buddhist fundamentals that keep the belief system together. The monks have achieved the same function and status as in any other Thai-Buddhist society. Tannenbaum's conclusion is that the Shan people have reinterpreted the triple gems of Buddhism to fit in with their traditional belief in power and protection. Together they constitute one syncretistic field of religious belief (Tannenbaum 1995:183).

6.3.3 Parallel fields of religious belief

Another version in the variations of syncretism is the Thai-Lao founders’ cult in north-eastern Thailand. In contrast to cults among Karen and Akha, this type of cult is more interlaced with Buddhism. The Thai-Lao have until recently lived in relatively autonomous communities but are today dominated and influenced by world market economy and external state power (Hayashi 2003:186). The ancestors of these societies started the establishment of the villages with the building of a forest spirit shrine to the owner of the land. The spirit was invited and then become the guardian spirit of the village. After this ceremony the Thai-Lao where allowed to cut down trees and work the soil. Though, the forest around the shrine is sacred and cannot be cut down Hayashi (2003:189-190). Phi puta is the Thai name of this spirit and owner of the villages. The spirit houses are symbols for the survival of the people and the village.

The spirit can be territorial or/and ancestral and it differs from village to village (Hayashi 2003:185, 190). The villagers need to be united in the ritual practice to get the protective power of phi phuta. The villagers do different ceremonies and offerings (like tobacco, liquor, betel nut, chicken etc) to honour the phi puta. If the phi puta is displeased it can cause trouble for the village. The phi puta spirit appears through the cam, which is a middle aged or older
man who works as the ritual and ceremonial leader and acts as the intermediary for the phi phuta. The spirit possesses the cam and then speaks through his voice. The cam conveys requests from the villagers to the phi phuta in matters about cures for illnesses or protection for travelling “outside”.

Both Thai and Lao authorities ordered the Thai-Lao villages get rid of these cults in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but they are still present; reshaped, developed and working in syncretistic blends or in a parallel field with Buddhism (Hayashi 2003:186). In some villages among the Thai-Lao the villages still keep the phi puta spirit cults but in the same village the “protection” is partitioned with Buddhist powers centred in a lak ban (village post), bu ban (“heart of the village”) or a ahak ban (village guardian) erected by a mo tham (specialist in dhamma, for instance a monk or village elder) or a forest monk (pha pa) (Hayashi 2003:198-199).

There are examples where villages have separated areas, which the phi puta protects from areas protected by the mo tham (Tambiah 1970:322). The group lives divided with two different belief systems working parallel in the society. The people take little (or no) part in each other’s ceremonies and rituals, but they are not necessarily in conflict (Hayashi 2003:198-199). The guardian spirit cults of the Thai Lao often complement each other in different fields of their belief system. The village guardian spirit, literally the spirit of both paternal and maternal grandfathers, often called phi puta, stands for the settlement as a joint unit while the Buddhist temple stands for the moral code that exists beyond the village territories. But in the matter of getting rain and agricultural fertility, they both interact (Tambiah 1970:346). There are different levels of parallelism, from divided communities to shared practices. There are among the Akha people examples of beliefs that have been internalized without being appropriated. Such examples are the lord of the land and lord of the water, which belong to the spirit traditions of Thai heritage. Akha don’t claim the Thai-traditions to be their own, they have just added it to their own system of belief. Another example from Akha is Buddha, who is regarded as a “helper” to Poe mi yeh’s, the creator (Kammerer 2003:63).
6.3.4 Assimilated field of religious belief

The groups in this category have abandoned their old faith and have converted to and been assimilated into Thai Buddhist society. Old traditions and rituals might still be present in some ways but are now suppressed below the surface. In some Thai-Lao villages, people have totally abandoned the phi puta cult and turned to Buddhism decades ago (Hayashi 2003:185). No phi puta was abolished before 1930 (Hayashi 2003:199). At the same time forest monks (pha pa), incorporated within the state-controlled sangha, started to wander around and influence northern Thailand with “buddhicized” protective power. Misfortunes like flood, cholera, drought occurred in the 1930s and 1940s and might have caused some of the villages to lose their faith in the protective power of the phi puta and instead turn to Buddhism (Hayashi 2003:199-200).

During the same time, land tax systems and land owner certificates where introduced by the provincial administration of the state. In the 1950s many villages extended their land to plant cash crops for the market. People in these villages today rely on Buddhist protective powers and believe that people should not rely on any spirit at all because they are regarded as dangerous. The term phi has come to mean fear. Buddhism gives a new order to the universe and corresponds to the world beyond the boundaries of the village to a more and more intrusive outside world. It includes members from other villages and not just the own village community, just like the phi puta cult did at the time when the Thai-Lao people got more and more affected by state power policies and global money economy.

*It reflects the pluralistic situation of the village life-world associated with rapid social change.* (Hayashi 2003: 200)

In these villages, the spirit houses have been replaced with Buddha images, and the sacred forests around the former spirit houses have been transformed into private fields or public land. Where the phi phuta cult still exists, it becomes more and more an individual belief and not the community keystone as a founders’ cult and condition for the survival of the village as previously. As a consequence of the opening of the village boundaries to the malevolent outside, the fear of evil ghosts seems to have increased (Hayashi 2003:205) In line with being more and more influenced by normative Thai-traditions, new types of individually oriented tutelary spirits and Buddhist saints serve to handle affliction in everyday life.
7. FORCES OF CHANGE – A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

*Turn the savage into the civilized, turn the other into us.* (Duncan 2004:5)

7.1 *Syncretism and anti-syncretism, multiculturalism and assimilation*

Multiculturalism, integration and assimilation are up to date topics in most globalized societies. Multiculturalism doesn’t necessarily need to be an anti-syncretistic tendency, but both syncretism and anti-syncretism can be tools to reach authenticity and cultural identity. It all depends on whether the context is a global, regional or local discourse. In secular states the perspective moves from religion to national culture, from syncretism to multiculturalism and from conversion to assimilation (Van der Veer 1994:198). Thai society is far from secular and it’s definitely multicultural. Thai authorities allow religious freedom, but strive to achieve a strong Thai national identity. Even if freedom of religion rules in Thailand Theravada Buddhism is the religion of the state. As a united force the state, Theravada Buddhism and the Royal family work together to reinforce Thailand as a strong national state with solid economic progress.

Buddhism acts as a stabilizing and moral principle in the country. It helps to explain the differences in wealth between people (Kirsch 1977, Jackson 1989, Thörnvall 2006 etc.) and it gives everyone opportunity to improve one’s starting position by merit making. Buddhism legitimizes the social differences, the monks always appear as moral patterns and the king is the symbol for the Thai nation. The king also balances the political groups in the country. Buddhism is the middle way and it prevents people from engaging in political extremity. All and all, this is supposed to establish loyalty to Thailand and its project of modernisation (Thörnvall 2006:77-78). Buddhism and the Sangha are also the meanings and symbols of civilization, law and order. When people in small groups in the lowland of Thailand label themselves as Buddhists, it is often because they want to be associated with civilisation rather than a standpoint regarding their religious belief. It identifies them as civilized on the same level as other groups belonging to other world religions, in contrast to the “hill tribes” in northern Thailand who have “no religion” (Tannenbaum 1995:10). In many ways, Buddhism stands for an attractive identity to the small ethnic groups of Thailand. The impact from the
unitarian Thai state and the assumed sympathy towards Buddhism from western tourists are powerful influences for every indigenous group of the country, including the sea nomads of Ko Lanta.

**7.2 To become Thai – obtaining a national identity**

Most countries in Southeast Asia have got developmental programs to assist the indigenous groups and incorporate them into the national state. Over the years different methods and practices for integration and assimilation have been administrated. For the national states the main thing is to withhold these groups their autonomy. Modernisation and social development are keywords and the will to evocate a national identity as a base for economical development is the propulsion (Duncan 2004:1-17). According to Duncan there are mainly three forces that work in the process of change (Duncan 2004:3) and they are all clearly recognizable among the Urak Lawoi on Ko Lanta.

**7.2.1 Language**

*We’re changing, not [...] culture but [...] lifestyle. And the language. Before everybody could speak gypsy, but now they cannot speak.* (Interview 091114)

The schools are important to control the population and to be able to influence the youth. Since education generally is managed on the language of the majority, a verbal conversion is achieved in the younger generations. On Ko Lanta this process is obvious. All informants I met told me about how their traditional language was about to disappear and they expressed the feeling that this process was unstoppable. The children around Saladan hardly understood Urak Lawoi language. In school, the language used is Thai and even if I heard of three Urak Lawoi persons who had become teachers (one in Sangkaou, two in Saladan) I didn’t recognize anything about Urak Lawoi culture in the classrooms at the schools. The transition from the traditional language into Thai is most obvious when people talk about their traditional culture and religion. A lot of the old Urak Lawoi words for ceremonies, objects and persons seem to fade away in advantage for Thai and even English descriptions. Whether aware of this or not, many Urak Lawoi used the Thai words and when they were asked to use the Urak Lawoi word they had to think for a while to remember it. The loss of the traditional language might have the consequence that names and knowledge of rituals, ceremonies, symbols and other
phenomena change and get more and more “Thai-ized” and “Buddhicized”. In that way, the language itself is an important carrier of the culture, tradition and belief.

7.2.2 Money economy

Money becomes the modern spirit. It comes from the outside and sometimes makes us happy as if it were a benevolent spirit but more frequently makes us poor and sometimes brings death as if it were malevolent. (Hayashi 2003:204)

The capitalisation of activity and to make every citizen a consumer ties all classes of population to the nation and the society. In many countries in Southeast Asia, great efforts have been done to turn minority groups of the population into producers of the national market. To achieve a demand within the groups, television is an important tool to implement standards and commercials. Two important reasons to couple the groups to money economy are to make them dependent on having an income and in that way get a wider basis for taxation. Many indigenous groups have become incorporated in the Thai state administration under the pressure of cash crops reforms, modernisation projects, Buddhist and Christian mission (Hayashi 2003:199-200, Hughes 1984:327-328) and even speculation and threat (Granbom 2007:57).

On Ko Lanta the Sea Nomads in an effective way have become dependent of money economy and their capacity for self-sustentation from the traditional way of living has rapidly debased. At the same time as the tourists discovered the island, the national park in the south of the island and in the archipelago outside was established. The consequences for the people in Sangkaou who practically live in the national park were huge. They are no longer able to grow rice in the jungle and they need to travel far out on the sea to be allowed to do fishing. Due to this they are more in the need of money to buy the rice they before could grow, and to buy gasoline to be able to fish. Every household today has a TV and even in Sangkaou people seem to be very aware of the Thai standards. Money economy doesn’t affect people’s religious beliefs directly, but as one of the forces of change it surely helps to transform the whole concept of identity.
7.2.3 World religions

*The Buddhists believe in nature like us, we are very much the same.* (Interview 091101)

In the quest to nationalize indigenous groups, activities of missions are actively supported by the authorities. The point is to incorporate the people in the wide national belief system (Duncan 2004:1-17). These kinds of mission projects have occurred during a very long time. The lack of success for Christian missionaries among the Thai-Buddhists made them focus on the indigenous groups of Thailand a long time ago (Keyes 1993:270). Forest monks started wandering to the hill tribes in the 1930s (Hayashi 2003:199-200) and later on the Karen people, for example, has been under the influence of the Thammarrrik Project which aims to “Buddhicize” and thereby “Thai-ize” the population through religion (Hayami 2003:136).

It’s difficult to state how actively the authorities have supported the mission on Ko Lanta. There is no doubt, however, that after the tsunami catastrophe in 2004, the need for help aid was huge and the contributions from Christian help care organisations was substantial. The actions from the Thai state seem contradictory because they have also helped Urak Lawoi to restore their ceremonial places. Even if the strategy probably has been to attract tourists and develop the local economy, it has helped Urak Lawoi to preserve their traditional culture after the tsunami. At the same time, they get registered as Buddhists and, like other indigenous groups of people in Thailand, are labelled *Thai Mai* (New Thai).

It’s impossible to say how deep the integration between the traditional religion of the Urak Lawoi and the Theravada Buddhism goes into people’s beliefs. The will to assimilate into Thai citizens, makes people say they are Buddhists and do the same things as Thai Buddhist do (Granbom 2007:73). The similarities between parts of Thai Theravada Buddhism and Urak Lawoi animistic beliefs and the syncretistic approach in Theravada Buddhism enables integration to proceed in the same way as it has done among other animistic groups in Thailand. The similarities seem to be more than enough for Urak Lawoi to recognize and value Buddhism as “the same thing”. Even if the old traditions still stand, surely people on Ko Lanta have adopted a lot of Buddhist/Thai traditions since Hogan visited the island some 30-40 years ago. The similarities between the belief systems and the pressure from the

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7 When I visited Ko Lanta from October to December 2009, I was told that the “authorities” had rebuilt the grave settings and the ceremonial platforms by the grave settings.

8 Many of my informants expressed the thought that Buddhism and their own belief had much in common or was “same, same”.

46
majority culture and tourist industry seem to be enough to make it happen. The two other
world religions represented on Ko Lanta, anti-syncretistic Islam and Christianity, have not
been part of this kind of fusion. The influence from Islam is not noticeable and the reason for
the advancement of Christianity is most likely fruits of the help aid and mission given for the
distress after the tsunami catastrophe. The main reasons for conversion seem to be the help
aid and the conviction that the Christian God had greater power than the spirits. During
difficult times and social change, people are probably more inclined to doubt their old faith
and the benignancy of the spirit world. According to Hayashi, some of the Thai-Lao who had
abandoned their phi puta claimed that it had caused misfortune, was dangerous and
irresponsible (Hayashi 2003:199). The Christian informants on Ko Lanta said that God had
helped their relatives to get well from illness, which corresponds with information from
indigenous people in Thailand who have converted into Christianity.

It seems that most of the people who turned to Christianity did so because they saw God
as having great power, greater power than that of the local spirits.
(Hughes 1984:327-28)

7.3 Urak Lawoi: religious fields in transformation

7.3.1 Sangkaou: An indigenous field of belief

Urak Lawoi is a part of this Southeast Asian animistic field of belief, even if they don’t share
cultural roots with the other people considered animistic in this essay. But in many ways they
seem to be a typical example of Thailand. Having moved in from the southern part of the
Andaman Sea a couple of hundred years ago, they found some solitude spots to live their
strand-dwelling lifestyle upon. But during the ages, the presence of other cultures has become
more and more obvious and with the exploding tourism, starting some 20 years ago, they have
more and more come under the influence and pressure from the Thai state, other religious
traditions and money economy. Due to the complex situation on Ko Lanta and the different
characters of the Urak Lawoi settlements, it is difficult to evaluate the status of the Urak
Lawoi within these categorized levels. Starting in south the village of Sangkaou was until the
tsunami the least affected village on the island (Granbom 2007), but after the tsunami they

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9 See my previous essay Waves of change - Traditional religion among the Urak Lawoi, sea nomads of Ko
Lanta, Thailand.
came under the influence of both governmental/UN aid programs and Christian mission. Today they still seem to have kept their original culture and religion solid without any mixing with the Buddhist creed. On the other hand, 11-13% of the population has converted to anti-syncretistic Christianity and has therefore been forced to abandon many of the old customs and ceremonies. Theravada Buddhism is present in the form of a pre-temple building\(^\text{10}\) by the sea and Buddhist monks who come to the school in Sangkaou every Friday afternoon.

Among the Karen people who have been the subject of the Thammacarik Project, controlled by the authorities and the sangha to “buddhicize” and ”Thai-ize” the people, a ritual to shut out the spirits of the ancestors has occurred. One purpose seems to have been to change the rituals and ceremonies into more Buddhist standards and thereby more “Thai” (Hayami 2003:136). I couldn’t see any mission activities in Sangkaou or any activity in the pre-temple building during my visit. According to my informants, no one in Sangkaou ever visits the big temple in Lanta Old town. On the other hand, some people in Sangkaou sometimes call themselves Buddhists when they get the question from an outsider (Jägerberg/Mayr 2006:16).

It’s difficult to decide whether this is a true statement out of belief or if it is a way to fit in the norms of the Thai majority culture. In relation to Buddhism the traditional animistic belief probably still stands as an “indigenous field of religious belief” but in relation to anti-syncretistic Christianity it forms “parallel fields of belief”, without any obvious conflicts. Still the forces of change work around Sangkaou and it is likely to assume that the impact from both Christianity and Theravada Buddhism will increase.

### 7.3.2 Saladan: A syncretistic field of belief

In the north around Saladan the situation is different. The traditional culture and religion seem to get more and more mixed up with each other. The expansion of the tourist industry has transformed Saladan from a sleepy village to the tourist centre of the island. The core of habitation thickens. New buildings, hotels and stores surround the Urak Lawoi settlement. Almost everyone is involved in tourist business in one way or another. So the influences from the normative Thai culture and other religious tradition are a lot stronger than in Sangkaou. Outside Saladan on the hillside of Urak Lawoi settlement in Klong Dau, a new church has been built and there is a Buddhist temple not far from Tobaleou. Some of my Urak Lawoi

\(^{10}\) A building planned to be a temple sanctioned by the Buddhist administration in the future.
informants lived with one Urak Lawoi and one Thai-Buddhist parent and they seemed to take part in both traditions. If somebody wants remain in the Urak Lawoi belief and still participate in the Buddhist rituals it is compatible with the Urak Lawoi belief. You don’t really have to choose or change, but can do as you please, according to both sides. In some of the Thai-Lao villages where the phi puta cult is cooperating with Buddhism, the cam takes five flowers, sin ha (the five precepts\textsuperscript{11}) and candles to the spirit house of phi puta on the Buddhist holy days (Hayashi 2003:202).

In the same syncretistic pattern, the To maw of Klong Dau follows the Buddhist calendar and performs rituals in the shrine in Tobaleou on the Buddhist days. And when the To maw is not available to deliver offerings and gifts to the ancestors, it happens that a Buddhist monk performs the ritual (Interview 091206). The situation around Saladan seems in many ways to be more in line with a single field system of belief regarding the relation between old traditions and Theravada Buddhism.

\textbf{7.3 Ritual functions and needs of belief}

So in conformity with Granbom I found that the change of life style was greater for the people in the north, due to the expansion of tourism. Some informants talked much about the new gypsy mentality around Saladan (Granbom 2007:30). According to that, everybody acts individually; people want to choose a new way of life, new habits, new thoughts and even a new way of eating. The children just understand a little of the Urak Lawoi language, in school they only learn Thai and nobody has the time or interest to learn the To maw culture. Through my interviews, I get the understanding that there is profound change in progress on Ko Lanta, but that it looks different in the two main areas. In the north the population has been most influenced by tourism, money economy and media, which is tearing the sea nomad society apart. In the south the community is more traditional and united, but still under the influence of new regulations, poor fishing and the Christian mission.

Other examples from the meeting between modernism/Thai state Buddhism and other indigenous groups in Thailand, show that the consequences for Urak Lawoi religion may be diverse. With an intensification of the Buddhist influences and a diluted to maw-culture, it is

\textsuperscript{11} The five precepts are commitments to refrain from killing, sexual misconduct, stealing, lying and intoxication. The five precepts is part of lay Buddhist initiation and regular lay Buddhist devotional practices.
possible that Buddhism and the monks will be more involved in the religious practice among
the Urak Lawoi. Such examples of syncretism can be seen in Shan (Tannenbaum 1995) and
Thai-Lao (Hayashi 2003) communities. The variations of the religious fields might differ
much from village to village due to consequences of leadership, influences of mission
activities and individual choices. The decline of the to maw-culture is probably the largest
threat against the old traditions. Without the roll and function of the to maw, people will
probably turn to other mediums and practitioners in order to have their needs filled. The
beliefs might not change that fast, but the practices will. Hence, the situation will be similar to
that of Karen; people might take help from other traditions to be able to maintain their
religious practices.

In many Karen communities the hereditary line of the hi kho (spirit medium) is dying out and
the absence of the hi kho becomes both cause and effect in the process of change within the
explains:

> We don’t have a hi kho in our community any more, but, now that we have this temple,
the temple keeps the community cool. The monk and the Buddha images in the temple
help us even though we have no hi kho. (Hayami 2003:150)

Karen try to keep their identity, culture and religion, and at the same time they are dealing
with the authorities to find an approach to the religion of the state. Different hi kho have had
different strategies and the consequences have turned out quite differently for the villages
(Hayami 2003:146). There are examples in which the main part of the original culture is has
been kept and others in which Buddhism has replaced it. One interesting conclusion which
can be made from the studies of the meeting between animistic traditions and Theravada
Buddhism is that Buddhism seldom fully replaces the old traditions; it rather overtakes the
functions of the old beliefs and in one way helps to preserve them.

In Karen societies, which have joined the Thammacarik Project, people still have a need to
protect themselves from the evil on the outside and a Buddhist monk can perform a
community ritual, phiithi songkhrau, for the society to shut off evil spirits and protect the
village as a common unit (Hayami 2003:151). The need for protection is still present. Even if
the hi kho tradition is gone, people find ways to fulfil their needs of belief. If the to maw-
tradition keeps fading away for the Urak Lawoi, they will probably find other officiates to
perform the necessary rituals to make them secure. It is contradictory that the same Buddhist forces that get imposed on people by mission or projects, sometimes seem to help them perform ceremonies that keep the village as one ritual spiritual unit. In that sense, a comparison between Urak Lawoi who have converted to anti-syncretistic Christianity and those who more and more get integrated with syncretistic Theravada Buddhism would be interesting. Syncretism with Buddhism might be devastating for the Urak Lawoi religion and culture, but in one way it might keep them in touch with their culture and identity in a way that would be impossible if they convert to anti-syncretistic Christianity.\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{quote}
But repeatedly through history, the people – the folk – have mixed their creeds to suite their needs, and they have done this despite attempts by religious authorities to impose a foreign orthodoxy and conformity (Maroney 2006:5)
\end{quote}

8. SUMMARY

The field of syncretism in Thailand seems to be vast. The system of beliefs can be viewed as a layer on layer-system with different traditions in different layers, and with animism in the bottom layer. The top layer is the religion of the state, Theravada Buddhism. Within this conglomerate of traditions, a lot of the original animistic beliefs have been mixed with Brahman practices and Buddhist traditions. Many states in Southeast Asia have striven to reach a stronger national identity and to assimilate their indigenous groups of people. The tools have been to impose the official language, integrate the people into the money economy and convert them towards world religions. In Thailand the indigenous peoples have been: labelled \textit{Thai Mai} (New Thai); forced to learn Thai in school; integrated into the money economy and; assimilated into Theravada Buddhism through projects and missions. As Theravada Buddhism is encompassing and syncretistic in nature and has some overlapping areas common with the animistic traditions, the indigenous fields of religious belief seem to be easy to include without conflict.

\textsuperscript{12} Syncretistic or parallel practices within Christianity do occur in-officially in many cultures. See Shaw & Stewart (1994) and Maroney (2006).
The traditional religion of the Urak Lawoi still plays an important role for the Urak Lawoi people. Even if some of them do not regard their belief as a religion, most of the people still live with the old beliefs and traditions. This picture is rapidly changing, however, due to the introduction to modern society. People get new influences and live more independently. The last 20 years, traditional religion has faded in importance and is not valued to the same extent. The impact from the tourist industry, the domination of the Thai language and missionary activities, put the traditional culture and beliefs under constant pressure. The forces of change are strongly affecting the culture and religion of Urak Lawoi.

The situation for Urak Lawoi is not unique. Other indigenous people in Thailand are facing the same process of change. But the consequences for the traditional religion and culture can be very different from place to place. Some groups still hold their indigenous field of religious belief, while others have abandoned their traditional belief and turned to Buddhism or Christianity. In some cases the villages have been divided into parallel fields of religious belief and in others the different traditions have melted together in syncretistic mixes. A key question seems to be if the role and tradition of the spirit medium can be maintained.


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Woman 25, Nai Rai 091118
Man 27, Nai Rai 091119
Man 33, Panorama Restaurant Sangkaou 091127
Woman 20, Klong Dau Beach 091203
Woman 23, Klong Dau Beach 091203
Man 18, Hua Laem 091205
Woman 39, Nai Rai 091205
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Woman 39, Saladan 091208

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Tobaleou 09-10-24
Nai Rai 09-10-24
Sangkaou 09-10-25
The grave setting outside Sangkaou 09-10-25
Sangkaou 09-10-28
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Tobaleou 09-11-01
Nai Rai 09-11-01
Klong Dau 09-11-01
Lanta Old Town 09-11-02
Tobaleou 09-11-03
Sangkaou 09-11-04
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Nai Rai 09-11-10
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Hua Laem 09-11-12
The grave setting outside Sangkaou 09-11-13
Hua Laem 09-11-15
Tobaleou 09-11-18
Nai Rai 09-11-18
Tobaleou 09-11-19
Nai Rai 09-11-19
Sangkaou 09-11-26
Sangkaou 09-11-27
Hua Laem 09-11-29
Sangkaou 09-11-29
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Nai Rai 09-11-30
Klong Dau 09-11-30
Tobaleou 09-11-30
Sangkaou 09-12-02
The grave setting outside Sangkaou 09-10-02
Tobaleou 09-12-03
Nai Rai 09-12-04
Hua Laem 09-12-05
Nai Rai 09-12-05
The northern grave setting on Klong Dau beach 09-12-06
Appendix

Map of Ko Lanta Yai