

# **A Fast-Moving Cosmos: Multiplicity and Fluidity in Contemporary Thai Buddhist Cosmology<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article brings attention to the multiplicity of contemporary Thai Buddhist cosmology and to the fluidity of cosmological notions. An ethnographic focus on divination practitioners (*mo du*) in Bangkok suggests that Thai Buddhists are constantly involved in the construction of new and highly personal cosmologies, resulting in great cosmological multiplicity. Diviners' usage of cosmological notions additionally suggests that these cosmologies are fluid, their meanings changing in time and in different contexts. The findings problematize understandings of Thai Buddhist cosmology and cosmological notions as being static and uniformly-shared.

*Keywords:* Thai Buddhist cosmology, cosmological notions, creation of cosmologies, cosmological narratives, cosmological multiplicity

## **The Ethnographer's Headache**

Everything works very well in theory. In practice, however, things can be very different. This is what I realized when, between 2014 and 2016, I carried out ethnographic research among divination practitioners (*mo du*), their clients (*luk kha*) and their detractors in Bangkok. I had originally set out to conduct an anthropological inquiry into the ways in which Buddhist cosmology, politics and economy interact in contemporary urban Thailand. Enthusiastically deployed to the field, however, the idea of a Thai Buddhist cosmology – in the

singular, that is – crumbled before my eyes as each research participant engaged in cosmological narratives that were very personal and always in the making. This article argues that Thai Buddhists continuously engage in cosmological speculation, resulting in the production of multiple cosmologies, as well as in cosmological notions that are fluid and ever-changing.

## Diviners and the Creation of Cosmologies

Divination practitioners in urban Thailand are known as “*mo du*”. They normally divine (*du duang*) by means of combining a learned divinatory discipline (*wicha*) with insights from their embodied spirit guides (*ong/kru*). Normally concealed from the public domain, diviners play a prominent role in contemporary Thailand where they are sought by individuals of all social strata and age groups. The services they offer are varied and include making predictions about past, present or future events, as well as devising ritual strategies for their clients to improve their chances of success and avoid misfortune.

Thai Buddhist cosmology plays a crucial role in the activities of Bangkok diviners, serving as the theoretical backbone for the narratives of decline and success they offer to their clients. Thai diviners, who are laymen and women often employed in different professional sectors prior or next to divination, merge elements from Buddhist doctrine with their own experience of the contemporary world to create narratives that are relevant to the concerns of their clients. They, therefore, adopt information that has been available to them through previous education, readings they have done, television documentaries they have watched, exchanges with Thai, as well as foreign, interlocutors, and so on, and redeploy this information as they build new Buddhist theories of the cosmos that are as relevant and convincing as possible.

As Bangkok diviners go about offering their services, they always refer to a cosmological framework. A key cosmological notion that they invariably rely on is the law of karma (*kot haeng kam*). This is a cosmic law of causation that determines the fortune or misfortune individuals on the basis of their virtuous, rather than unvirtuous, past

action (*kan kratham*) (Keyes and Daniel). A diviner may, for instance, explain a client's happy romantic life with reference to merit (*bun*), or positive karma, acquired through good deeds in a past life. Similarly, a master may make sense of a client's illness with reference to their accumulated demerit (*kam*) or negative karma. The law of karma also serves as a framework for diviners to devise strategies aimed at addressing one's fortune or misfortune. A master may then suggest that a client leave an offering at a precise temple (*wat*) or shrine (*san*) in order to accumulate merit (*tham bun*) that will ultimately help them avoid meeting an undesired fate or achieve certain goals.

The law of karma is ever-present in the cosmological narratives of the research participants and its veracity goes questioned. Its workings, however, are open to debate. Whilst there is agreement with regards to the importance of engaging in merit-making for improving one's fortune, there is disagreement about what particular merit-making techniques are appropriate. One master recommends making food offerings to specific deities as an effective strategy for merit-making, while another one labels the very same strategy as 'superstitious' (*ngom ngai*) and, therefore, immoral or demeritorious (*bap*). There is even less agreement about what concerns the negotiability of karma. Some diviners claim that merit-making may counter a client's bad karma (*kam*), while others argue that karma is unescapable. Again, while some diviners may offer "karma-corrective" rituals (*phithi kae kam*) as a way to counter one's bad karma, others condemn the practice as ineffective or even counterproductive, going as far as associating it to a form of "black magic" (*sat muet*).

Governed by the law of karma, the Thai Buddhist cosmos is inhabited by deities. These are drawn from a variety of religious traditions and pantheons. Next to Thai deities (*thep*), including past Siamese monarchs, we find Indic gods, such as Vishnu (*Phra Narai*) and Shiva (*Phra Isuan*), and Chinese deities, such as Kwan Yin (*Chao Mae Kuan Im*). Contemporary Bangkok diviners, however, freely draw from other traditions. A master I worked with, for instance, included Satan in his cosmology. In recent years, photographs of an altar on which a Pokémon statuette was visible made the rounds on the internet. The existence of beings other than gods, humans and

animals in the cosmos, however, is open to debate. Ghosts, despite their inclusion in Siamese cosmological treaties, such as the *Traiphum* (Reynolds and Reynolds), and their prominence in contemporary Thai culture,<sup>3</sup> are not uniformly upheld as legitimate inhabitants of the Buddhist cosmos. While numerous diviners claim to be able to see them, a master I worked with stated that only “ignorant people” (*khon mai mi kan suksa*) believe in them.

The practice of divination itself is a controversial topic among diviners. Some masters categorize it as a form of merit-making (*kan tham bun chanit neung*) and claim that it enables them to help others. Some other masters, however, see it as a practice that may deceive individuals in believing they can escape their karma. As such, they claim that it may have serious repercussions to the diviner himself if not practiced with extreme care. Finally, even the cosmological status of monarchs – whether they are human, divine or “virtual gods” (Jackson) which one would imagine to be highly policed by state forces – appears to be a matter of opinion among diviners, regardless of their political affiliations.

## The Fluidity of Power

Part of the scholarly enterprise aimed at making sense of Thai Buddhist cosmology has focused on understanding emic notions of power. Peter Jackson, for instance, analyzed Thai categories for power like *amnāt*, which, he argues, denotes a “raw, amoral power that may be used for either good or evil and which is accumulated and maintained through sheer force”; *saksit*, which, he argues, denotes “the magico-divine power possessed by holy objects [...], spirits, or human beings linked to ritual authority”; and *barami*, which, he argues, denotes “the charismatic power possessed by morally upright, virtuous people” (Jackson 363).

One emic category of power that has received particular attention is *barami*. Such attention is legitimate, as *barami* plays a crucial role in Thai social and political life. As evincible from Jackson’s definition, *barami* is usually understood, perhaps following Tambiah, as a form of charisma that is acquired through moral behavior. In the Buddhist

canon, the term further encompasses the ten virtues that are perfected by the Buddha and virtuous leaders (Gray 31; Jory 52). While these definitions do not necessarily contradict contemporary emic usage, they appear reductive. The research participants used the category of *barami* to entail a number – if not, literally, an infinity – of things, depending on the contextual circumstances, as well as on the intentions of the speaker. *Barami*, in their usage, also seems to denote – or at least to entail – an entire process.

Generally speaking, *barami* denotes an individual's reservoir of merit, although there is disagreement among Bangkok diviners as to whether the term should be used to describe anyone's store of merit or only that of important individuals. Although such reservoir of merit is understood to result from moral action following the principle of karma, I have not encountered anyone using *barami* as a synonymous for virtue, or for the ten specific virtues – unlike in the Buddhist literary tradition. In the cosmological narratives of the research participants, *barami* is typically understood as a form of power that may attract “good things”. Numerous diviners, for instance, routinely recommend strategies for their clients to “top up” their levels of *barami* (*soem barami*) in order to improve their fortune. As a charisma-like form of power, *barami* attracts followers: a diviner who has a lot of clients, for instance, is deemed to have a lot of *barami*. Because clients bring finances and gifts, however, the category of *barami* may also be used as a shortcut term for a form of power that brings in wealth.

From here, *barami* may be used to designate a form of power that attracts “anything good” – including beautifully-white skinned, good-looking partners, expensive handbags, luxurious cars, doctoral degrees, holidays abroad, a fit body, and so on, depending on the speaker's inclinations. In this context, no clear-cut definition can possibly render justice to emic usage of cosmological categories such as *barami* with its meanings shifting and changing in time.

## A Fast-Moving Cosmos

The dynamic quality of contemporary Thai Buddhist cosmology results in cosmological multiplicity and in cosmological categories

that are fluid. Following Bertelsen, it can be argued that a view of cosmologies as “static, bounded, and self-reproducing” entities is anachronistic (215). Abandoning such views in favor of dynamicity undoubtedly leaves us with the daunting task of making sense of an incommensurable complexity. Headache aside, this, however, also opens up a new set of possibilities.

The dynamic character of contemporary Thai cosmology may, therefore, be brought to the foreground of research, becoming an object of inquiry. Questions may be asked with regards to the making of cosmological knowledge.<sup>4</sup> One may wonder how cosmological knowledge is constructed among Buddhist Thais; for what purpose; by what agents and may then delve into the political implications of this construction. These political implications necessarily interest both those who construct cosmologies, as well as those who *are being constructed*, including the less fortunate, the middle classes and the *status quo*, all of whom necessarily occupy a place in cosmologies. The hegemonic character and/or the resistance of multiple cosmologies must, therefore, be addressed, as well as the role of state forces. Is there any interest by “the state” in inhibiting or preventing the production of cosmologies from “below”? Is there any restriction to this production? To what degree is creative freedom tolerated? Are state authorities mobilized to promote certain cosmological narratives, and, if so, what are these narratives, and how successful is their promotion? How are these narratives assimilated, negotiated and/or resisted from “below”? One may even wonder, as suggested by McDaniel, whether a distinction between “above” and “below” makes sense at all.

## Conclusion

In this brief article, attention has been brought to the dynamic quality of contemporary Thai Buddhist cosmology by highlighting the existence of multiple cosmological narratives and the fluid quality of cosmological categories. By relying on data from fieldwork research among diviners in Bangkok, I have argued that cosmological multiplicity results from individuals’ access to a plethora of information of cosmological relevance. From the bigger narrative of cosmology,

the cosmological notion of *barami* was explored in order to show how this is fluid and able to denote a number of aspects depending on the intentions of the speakers. Finally, taking into account the dynamic character of Buddhist cosmology in contemporary Thailand opens new and exciting paths for future inquiry.

### Notes

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<sup>3</sup> See Klima, Alan. *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange with the Dead in Thailand*. Princeton University Press, 2002.; Johnson, Andrew Alan. *Ghosts of the New City: Spirits, Urbanity, and the Ruins of Progress in Chiang Mai*. University of Hawaii Press, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> See Barth, Fredrik. *Cosmologies in the Making: A Generative Approach to Cultural Variation in Inner New Guinea*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.

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