

THE GOOD BUDDHA AND THE FIERCE SPIRITS: PROTECTING THE NORTHERN THAI FOREST

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Holding a tree ordination, establishing a shrine for the guardian spirit and placing a Buddha image as the 'chief' of the forest to forbid cutting trees are all really clever schemes. It's not true Buddhism to conduct such rituals. But in the villagers' beliefs, they respect the Buddha and fear some of his power. Thus we can see that there is nothing so sacred or that the villagers respect as much as a Buddha image. Therefore we brought a Buddha image and installed it under the tree which we believe is the king of the forest and ordained the tree. In general, villagers also still believe in spirits. Therefore we set up a shrine for the guardian spirit together with the Buddha image. This led to the saying that "the good Buddha and the fierce spirits help each other take care of the forest." This means that the Buddha earns the villagers' respect. But they fear the spirits. If you have both, respect and fear, the villagers won't dare cut the trees. (Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun, quoted in Arawan Karitbunyarit 1993, 11; author's translation)

... belief in sacred objects ... is losing its effectiveness because the current, modern generation has declared these beliefs foolish and has tried to teach villagers to stop believing in them. (Payutto 1987, 83)

Rituals can be powerful tools for social change, or for acceptance of the *status quo*. Their power emerges not only from the spiritual meanings imbedded in them, but also the social contexts in which they are performed. In Thailand, a small number of self-proclaimed 'environmental monks' (*phra nak anurak*) use ritual to challenge state-led capitalist development and to encourage a lifestyle that promotes environmental conservation, in keeping with their interpretations of Buddhist teachings.¹ Facing criticism and even physical threats, these monks struggled for well over a decade to get Thai society to recognize the urgency of the environmental crisis and the value of using Buddhism to deal with its roots. Ironically, as they became successful in overcoming most of the opposition to their work, the same public acceptance threatens to undermine its effectiveness. Rather than being radical tools for social change, rituals such as tree ordinations

have become mainstream and, in various contexts, implicitly support the *status quo* the monks themselves critique.

Environmental monks

Since the late 1970s, environmental monks have performed rituals designed to capture people's attention, to get them to think seriously about environmental degradation and its roots in human behavior (particularly the greed, ignorance and hatred the monks see as driving capitalist development and consumerism), and to reinforce the value of spirituality for dealing with such problems. These monks implement projects dealing with environmental degradation through such activities as forest conservation, establishment of wildlife sanctuaries, and promotion of sustainable agriculture. Their primary motivation is to lessen the suffering of the villagers with whom they work that arises from environmental problems such as drought, lack of natural resources, and pollution. Their second incentive is to keep the religion relevant and alive.

Their best known ritual is the tree ordination, through which monks consecrate community forests and emphasize the interconnections between people and nature. Some monks, such as Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun of Nan Province, allow villagers to incorporate spirit beliefs with the larger ritual process due to the strength of such beliefs (Darlington 1998, 2003b). These monks regard this approach as one of skillful means, meeting villagers where they are spiritually, and using the process to teach core values and principles of Buddhism.

The Sangha hierarchy and many members of the middle class criticized these rituals as not being true Buddhism. Some critics see tree ordinations as violating the Vinaya since only humans can be ordained. While the rituals are not ordinations in any formal sense (the texts recited do not come from a bhikkhu ordination ceremony), the image of sanctifying trees and the forest through the ritual has gained national (and international) attention, raising awareness about the difficulties people dependent on the forest face. The shock value of using ritual to highlight social problems and challenge social power provided environmental monks with an effective tool to meet their goals.

Since the first tree ordination performed for forest conservation in 1988, however, the rituals have become increasingly accepted and popular across Thailand. The best example of the impact and popularity of tree ordinations came in 1996–1997. During that time, a coalition of non-governmental, people's and governmental organizations initiated a program to ordain 50 million trees in honor of the fiftieth year of the King's reign (Delcore 2004; Isager and Ivarsson 2002; Tannenbaum 2000).

It would appear that the environmental monks met their major objectives, at least in part. While threats to the forest still exist, they succeeded in raising awareness of the seriousness of deforestation. At the same time, they created a powerful, visible means of keeping Buddhism relevant in society, showing its applicability to dealing with social issues.

Yet the growing popularity of tree ordinations and their appropriation by mainstream society threaten their potential to effect change and help people deal with suffering. The contexts for the rituals have changed. Rather than pushing people to question modern, consumerist values as causes of environmental destruction and human suffering, they are increasingly used to support national agendas and to undermine the power of the rural people whom environmental monks aim to help.

The case of environmental monks illustrates the complexities of the connections between religion and environmentalism, and the challenges faced by monks who believe that engaging in social problems is a responsibility of the Sangha. 'Phra nak anurak,' the term applied informally to these monks, literally translates as 'monks who conserve.' I translate the term as 'environmental monks' rather than 'ecology monks' or 'conservation monks' because, as with environmentalism more generally, their activities place them within political debates. They do not merely conserve nature, nor do they generally have a deep knowledge of the science of ecology. Their actions, aimed at relieving the suffering of the villagers with whom they work, challenge the political and economic powers they believe encourage material development, consumerism, and greed, ultimately resulting in suffering (Darlington 2003a). They are held to a higher standard than most monks, as they are constantly under close scrutiny by both the Sangha administration and lay society.

Environmental monks worked hard to gain acceptance by both the Sangha and the laity, showing the value of their work as grounded in Buddhist teachings. As their actions, particularly tree ordinations, became more widely accepted, these monks may have unwittingly undermined the effectiveness of their projects. Once accepted into the mainstream, the actions lose their shock value and become expected practice for many monks. They are performed frequently, and often without attention to educating the lay participants or a genuine commitment on the part of the Sangha or the laity to follow up on the protection of the land and trees involved. Environmental monks are now often recognized for their work through ecclesiastical promotions, and have considerable administrative responsibilities, leaving them little time to invest in conserving the forest or initiating new projects.

Good Buddha and fierce spirits²

An example of a monk negotiating the process of gaining acceptance by both his superiors and society while emphasizing the Buddhist and environmental aspects of his work is Phrakhru Pitak Nanthakhun, the monk who coined the phrase 'the good Buddha and the fierce spirits' in relation to protecting forests. Like most environmental monks, Phrakhru Pitak did not intend to engage in controversial environmental work when he ordained at the age of twelve. He grew up in a remote mountain village in Nan Province in northern Thailand, one of twelve children. His parents sent him to study at the temple in a district village

as there was no school in his village. Returning home in 1975 after a ten-year absence, he was immediately struck by the degraded condition of the forest. Logging commissions in the area took significant amounts of trees, followed by people clearing additional land for agriculture, cutting firewood and individual logging. People complained about the lack of water for farming and household use. Phrakhru Pitak closely associated these problems with the deforestation surrounding the village.

As the new abbot for the village, Phrakhru Pitak began preaching about people's interdependence with the forest and nature, and their responsibility for caring for the forest. As the droughts worsened into the 1980s, he sought more effective ways to deal with them. He organized the villagers into a conservation committee, and divided the village's remaining forest into six conservation areas in 1987. The committee drew up regulations for use of the forest, and patrolled the areas to monitor use and discourage encroachment. Villagers' commitment to this project was minimal, however, and they continued to cut the forest for new fields. The government agricultural bank encouraged people to grow feed corn as an export cash crop. Corn required more land, fertilizers, and pesticides than the traditional dry rice crop, and also contributed to soil erosion. Many villagers soon found themselves in debt.

The conservation project was both strengthened and threatened the same year by the declaration of the area around the village as National Forest Reserve Land (NFRL). The central government had passed the National Forest Reserve Act in 1964 and periodically used it to claim land for protection. The Act's aim was to protect what was left of Thailand's rapidly diminishing forest cover, declaring reserved land as restricted for permitted use only, which, ironically, in places included logging concessions or monoculture plantations. The program was not without controversy, however. The land claimed as NFRL was not all primary forest cover; much of it was occupied by people, some of whom had lived there for several generations, although often without legal title. According to Santita Ganjanapan, '[The] legal definition of forest is land which is not owned by anyone under the 1941 Forestry Act, regardless of presence or absence of vegetation cover. Therefore, completely deforested land continues to have the status of forest' (Santita Ganjanapan 1996, 261). Some land declared as forest reserves had no natural forest cover, only monoculture plantations, such as eucalyptus, or no vegetation at all. The Royal Forest Department also gave permission in many 'protected' sites to companies that wanted to log the forest or establish new economic forests of eucalyptus trees, often displacing people who lived there.

The NFRL declaration lent stronger sanctions to the informal regulations of the village's conservation association. Yet, because legally people are not allowed to live in forest reserves, the villagers were also afraid that the government would use the declaration as an excuse to take their land. They feared that they would be forced to move before they could benefit from any trees they planted or anything else done to improve the land (Arawan Karitbunyarit 1993, 9). Phrakhru Pitak similarly worried that, using the legal definition of NFRL, the Royal Forestry

Department would grant permission to businessmen to plant commercial trees in the area if it determined that the area was degraded. He used this argument to encourage the villagers to take care of the land and the forest, which would then help conserve their water supply.

Gradually, villagers reported that water began to flow again, although they still struggled without enough. Other problems remained as well. Some people still secretly cut and sold trees. Many villagers hunted animals within the protected areas even though Phrakhru Pitak wanted to preserve the whole environment, not just the trees, following the Buddhist precept against killing. Ongoing tensions existed in the village between recognition of the benefits and urgency of protecting the forest and people's more immediate livelihood needs. Despite his best intentions, Pitak had not yet found a way to bridge these tensions. Searching for new approaches that might help resolve the competing pressures of short-term subsistence needs and forest conservation, he turned to the ideas of other activist monks.

Phrakhru Pitak spent several months in 1990 visiting other monks across the nation concerned with social and environmental issues. He spent two months at Suan Mokh, the meditation center in southern Thailand of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a predominant scholar monk whose extensive writings and lectures argued a vibrant place for Buddhism in the here and now.³ He also visited Phrakhru Manas Natheephitak in Phayao Province, the monk credited with performing the first tree ordination to promote forest conservation. Phrakhru Pitak returned home and initiated a stronger conservation and sustainable agriculture program in his village, culminating in the tree ordination described in the opening quote.

Performing the tree ordination, preceded by the villagers requesting the permission and support of the village guardian spirit, added a spiritual element to the conservation program. During the preceding three years, the villagers had cooperated only half-heartedly, mostly because they were asked by the abbot. Phrakhru Pitak at that point, however, lived in Nan City, about 25 miles away. He was formally abbot of a temple in the city as well as in the village, and split his time between the two. Leading up to the tree ordination, he spent more time in the village, working with members of several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in Nan Province to educate the villagers about the problems with cash-cropping, the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and the connections between overuse of the forest and environmental problems such as drought. They also declared the protected area around the village as a community forest, a controversial concept that challenges the government to recognize the rights of people living in the forest to use and care for it (Anan Ganjanapan 2000).

Enacting the spirit and tree ordination rituals used the power of ritual and people's beliefs to gain their participation and commitment to the project.⁴ While the largest tree in the forest was not formally ordained as a bhikkhu, as only men can undertake ordination, the ritual consecrated much of the forest surrounding the village. People respected the sacred forest, and, for the most part, abided by the rules for caring for it. Two years later, they claimed that protecting the forest

was effective and the water and wildlife were returning. Although no documented evidence of this existed, villagers believed it and most of them continued to abide by the community forest regulations.

Given that they had requested the village guardian spirit to help protect the forest, villagers also feared the spirit's wrath if they violated the community forest regulations. In the two years following the ceremonies, several incidents reinforced the spirit's power. Four people died and several became ill after allegedly violating the community forest regulations. Villagers claimed these people were cutting wood or hunting within the protected area. Village spirit specialists determined the incidents resulted from the anger of forest spirits, offended by the people's disregard for the community forest.⁵

Sixteen years later, in 2006, I revisited the village. While problems maintaining the community forest existed, the forest itself was still standing, lush and green. Villagers regularly harvested renewable resources from it, such as mushrooms and grasses to make brooms. Just outside the boundaries of the community forest, corn plots covered the denuded hills. The contrast between the sanctified, protected forest and the surrounding agricultural land underscored the value of the community forest.

The current condition of the forest indicates the effectiveness of the 'good Buddha and the fierce spirits' in protecting the forest. Nevertheless, one aspect of this combination, the Buddha, is a national symbol that, I will argue, has been appropriated by a range of actors to support their agendas. The spirits, on the other hand, remain place specific. The use of local beliefs may ultimately be more powerful than national symbols in maintaining the effectiveness of environmental Buddhism as they are more difficult to appropriate on a large scale.

Emergence of tree ordinations

One of the monks Phrakhru Pitak visited as he sought alternative means of dealing with the environmental problems was Phrakhru Manas Natheephitak, the abbot of Wat Photharam in Mae Chai District, Phayao Province. Less well known than Phrakhru Pitak, Phrakhru Manas has quietly worked on similar problems since the 1970s. He initiated creative ritual responses early on, but did not gain national attention until the early 1990s, as tree ordinations gained in popularity.

Phrakhru Manas first used a ritual to deal with problems of drought in 1979, before environmental issues were popular across Thailand. He adapted a northern Thai ritual, *suep chata*, or long-life ritual, for local waterways. Monks generally perform long-life rituals for people who are old, ill, or face misfortunes in their lives. Originally a Brahman rite, the ceremony uses various objects symbolizing good life piled into a pyramid shape formed by long sticks (symbolizing long life). The participants incorporate offerings to the Buddha and various deities, including rice, clay animal figures, betel nut, gold, silver and white flags, all objects often found in northern Thai Buddhist rituals. After accepting the pyramid, the officiating monk chants the story of a young man who extended his life through

kindness to animals, followed by a popular Jataka tale and a dhamma lecture (Wells 1975, 209–13). Several monks told me that they personally do not believe in the ritual, but perform it for two reasons. First, it carries great meaning for the lay participants, who do believe in its ability to offset illness or misfortune. Second, the chanting provides an opportunity to expose participants to the teachings of the Buddha.

In Phrakhru Manas's case, he adapted the long-life ritual for a stream that was running dry. The symbolism of the stream suffering illness and misfortune emphasized the importance of water for life generally, and the livelihoods of the villagers specifically. Phrakhru Manas saw the ritual as an opportunity to bring villagers together to reflect on the problems they faced and to find ways to help each other. He wanted to use Buddhism and local beliefs to help the villagers, something he saw as his responsibility as a monk.⁶

Before the ceremony, Phrakhru Manas invited villagers affected by drought to participate in cleaning the area along the stream. He described the activity as a form of merit-making for a better life and future rebirth. Everyone, young and old, joined. They reflected on the value of water, and ways they could care for it and the life it supports. No one questioned the authenticity of performing the ritual for this purpose.

After the first long-life ceremony for the stream, people in other parts of Phayao invited the monk to perform long-life ceremonies for other waterways, including the wetlands that surround the provincial capital. The latter ritual has been performed annually since.

Phrakhru Manas considered the long-life ceremony to be a success, particularly in terms of strengthening a sense of communal responsibility among participants. He could not document specific evidence tying it to relieving the drought, although he argued that it contributed to people working together to learn about the effects of their actions and livelihoods on the local ecology.

In the 1970s the government granted ten logging concessions in his district. The company completed eight of them by 1988, resulting in severe deforestation. Phrakhru Manas approached the Ministry of Agriculture and the Royal Forestry Department to cancel the remaining two concessions and allow the villagers to protect the remaining forest and its water. Two years earlier, he had organized villagers into a conservationist group, 'Klum Hak Pa Mae Chai' (the Mae Chai Forest Lovers Group) to challenge the logging concessions and save the forest. On 14 October 1988, he performed the first tree ordination to pull villagers together in a more formal group and publicly highlight the problems of deforestation.

Phrakhru Manas did not originally call the ceremony a tree ordination. He based it on an adaptation of the ritual to sanctify a Buddha image (*buat phraphuttha rup*), a traditional northern Thai ceremony.⁷ During the ritual, villagers placed tree saplings at the base of the Buddha statue. These saplings were sanctified along with the image. Villagers planted and cared for them because they considered them sacred. They called the saplings 'ordained trees' (*ton mai ti buat laew*), providing the name for the adapted rite.

At the time, Phrakhru Manas was criticized by many people, including his own preceptor and the media, for ordaining trees. He countered the criticism, arguing that even though the ceremony he conducted was not found in the scriptures anywhere, it served a valuable purpose. Not only did it bring attention to the causes of deforestation, especially those based on greed and ignorance, but the ritual brought people together to help each other. It fostered the development of the 'mind and spirit' (*chit chai*), essential to Buddhist practice.

Environmental monks incorporate tree ordinations into larger conservation projects. They work with villagers to prepare them, teaching both the ecological significance of the forest and water, and Buddhist morality. Phrakhru Pitak, for example, presents a slide show leading up to tree ordination ceremonies. It begins with cartoon versions of popular Jataka tales, retold with local people as key characters. Phrakhru Pitak weaves morality tales into the show, gradually incorporating human responsibility for nature based on Buddhist concepts such as *paticca-samuppada*, or co-dependent arising, to show the interdependence people have with the rest of the world. He ends with shocking photographs of dead, bloated human bodies, people who died in the tragic floods in southern Thailand in 1988. These floods led to the passing of a national logging ban in 1989, as the government recognized the floods were caused by deforestation and over logging (Pinkaew and Rajesh 1991).

Through tree ordinations, environmental monks help villagers challenge people with greater power, such as businessmen or government officials, who want the land and promote deforestation for financial gain. Forests that have been consecrated through tree ordinations face destruction not only from logging concessions but also from the expansion of agricultural plantations such as eucalyptus in the north and northeast, or tangerines in the north, or the promotion of cash crops across the nation. The monks argue such use of land is based on negative desire (Pali, *tanha*), and greed, two main causes of suffering. They use the rituals to teach villagers to avoid desire through consumerism and commercial agriculture, promoting sustainable agriculture and self-sufficiency instead. Central to their work is the idea that people should produce only enough to survive, and avoid accumulating a large surplus. For most villagers in the north, engaging in cash cropping has led to large debts, which Phrakhru Pitak argues is the major problem facing his province today.⁸

Adapted rituals provide an opportunity to introduce ideas as well as concrete approaches within a familiar framework. Rituals legitimize the process and gain people's commitment. As Rappaport (1979) argues, participation in rituals signifies acceptance of the basic underlying concepts involved. In this case, the underlying concepts include not only Buddhist teachings, but environmental ones as well. They are not necessarily a fool-safe method to protect the forests, as there are many other factors to be considered in each individual case. The rituals are powerful, however, and have the potential to sway people's positions on hotly debated issues such as forest conservation. The evidence lies in the appropriation

of tree ordinations from a radical action by a small number of activist monks to a common ritual used to back a wide range of activities.

Radical rituals

Ordaining trees for forest conservation was initially a radical idea. When Phrakhru Manas performed the first one in 1988, he subjected himself to strong criticism from his ecclesiastical superiors and the media. The villagers, however, joined in readily, largely because of the respect they held for the monk. He lived where they lived, and he understood the problems they faced. He also convinced his superiors that his motivations lay within the purview of Buddhism, as he acted out of concern for relieving people's suffering and maintaining the relevance of the religion in a rapidly changing world.

Even as it was accepted as appropriate for Buddhist monks by some members of the Sangha administration (the more local the Sangha administrator, the more likely the acceptance), the ritual was radical in several ways. Its creativity challenged people to think about the reasons for their participation in ritual, rather than just acting out of habit. As performing regular rituals became an increasingly common way to gain followers and funds among many monks who felt their position in society was weakening, conducting a ritual that encouraged people to think stood out. As more monks performed tree ordinations, the publicity they received increased as well.

The projects of environmental monks challenged the state's economic development policies. The monks criticized government policies, predominantly begun in the 1960s, that emphasized export production, industrialization, and mono-cropping and cash-cropping (Darlington 2003a, Forthcoming). These policies, they argued, were symptoms of greed, ignorance, and hatred, three root evils in Buddhism. They promoted consumerism without consideration of long-term effects on either people's livelihoods or the environment. In some cases, the criticism was blatant. In 1991, Phra Prajak Khuttajitto of Buriram Province overtly challenged the government's program in the northeast to relocate villagers from 'degraded' areas in order to plant monoculture plantations, especially eucalyptus (Taylor 1993; Reynolds 1994). The displaced villagers received land in areas that were often worse than what they left, or were occupied by other people. Adding insult to the process, eucalyptus has been documented to be environmentally destructive when grown outside its native habitat (Lohmann 1990, 1991). Environmental monks and environmentalists alike criticized the government for claiming eucalyptus plantations as forested land.

Other monks, such as Phrakhru Manas and Phrakhru Pitak, targeted government policies in less explicit ways. They made it clear in sermons and speeches (such as Phrakhru Pitak's slide show) that they saw export-oriented and cash-cropping policies as major contributors to the environmental crisis Thailand faced. They did not ignore small-scale destructive behaviors such as clear-cutting

for agricultural fields or individual logging, but placed these actions under the larger influence of the shift from a self-sufficient to capitalist economy.⁹

That people with power felt threatened by the work of environmental monks rapidly became apparent. Beyond criticisms from the Sangha administration, Phrakhru Manas received calls in the local newspaper for him to disrobe because performing a tree ordination was not proper Buddhism. (He suspected a representative of the logging company contacted the newspaper.) Phrakhru Pitak faced opposition, including death threats, to his work even before he conducted his first tree ordination. Other monks encountered more public opposition. Phra Prajak was arrested twice in 1991 for challenging government projects in northeast Thailand (Taylor 1993; Reynolds 1994). Shortly thereafter, sex scandals erupted surrounding two well-known environmental monks: Achan Phongsak Techathamamoo in Chiang Mai, and Phra Yantra in Kanchanaburi Province.¹⁰

The impact of the scandals, the arrests, and other incidents concerning environmental monks brought controversy and raised questions about their activities. The cases, regardless of the reality of the accusations, indicated that their actions threatened people who stood to benefit from environmental destruction in their areas. Despite the threats, most of them continued their conservation efforts. Some, such as Phrakhru Pitak, made conscious efforts to counter opposition through involving a range of people, such as government, military and Sangha officials, in their work.

Tree ordinations and their related environmental projects serve to link environmental monks and the villagers with Thai civil society. In a nation in which much of the political opposition lies with NGOs and people's organizations, being connected with civil society strengthens the impact of a project. Lacking solid ecological knowledge, most environmental monks work with NGOs to plan and implement the larger projects that tree ordinations initiate. For example, Phrakhru Pitak established a coalition of indigenous provincial NGOs, called *Hak Mueang Nan* (HMN) or the Love Nan Province Group, to provide support, logistics and funding for his projects. He invited local and provincial government officials and civilian leaders and several monks to serve as advisors (see Delcore 2000, 193–4). HMN provided a support structure for Phrakhru's projects, connecting him with several loci of power within the province. Not only did HMN provide logistical support, but, with the participation of representatives of both the government and civil society, fewer people criticized his work as time passed.

Conservative rituals

By the mid-1990s, even while scandals continued to plague the Sangha as a whole, accusations about and attacks on environmental monks decreased.¹¹ Within less than a decade after the first performance of a tree ordination, people across the nation took up the rituals as symbolic markers of claims to land, community membership, and even allegiance to the King. As early as 1991,

Phrakhru Manas commented that 'the whole nation is going crazy for ordaining trees.'¹² The previous day, the governor of Chiang Mai Province had sponsored the ordination of the large rubber trees that lined the road from Chiang Mai City to Lamphun Province that were slated to be cut down to expand the road. Phrakhru Manas complained that the ritual was performed without consideration of long-term care of the trees, but rather to make an immediate and superficial political statement.

In 1996–1997, tree ordinations reached a new height. The Northern Farmers' Network organized a program to ordain 50 million trees in community forests in honor of King Rama IX's fiftieth year of reign (Delcore 2004; Isager and Ivarsson 2002; Tannenbaum 2000). Nicola Tannenbaum (2000, 109) notes how, in the process, tree ordinations 'have changed from protests led by environmentalist monks to acts that the King supports.' She describes how a remote upland Shan village used a tree ordination as part of the King's program to protest against development in their area. At the same time, use of the ritual indicated that the villagers had become connected to larger political, religious and economic structures on a national level that supported development. More broadly, I argue that as tree ordinations became increasingly popular and used across Thailand for a range of political as well as religious and environmental purposes, they pulled the environmental monks into positions of implicitly supporting the same economic and political structures they initially critiqued.

Lotte Isager and Soren Ivarsson (2002, 402) point out how since Buddhism entered environmental debates in Thailand, people have used the religion and its symbolic tools (i.e., tree ordinations) 'to legitimate highly different positions.' Their examples illustrate differences of approaches among environmental monks themselves, comparing Achan Phongsak's accusation of highland Hmong people as directly contributing to deforestation with Phra Prajak's criticisms of the government's relocation and reforestation program in the northeast. More to the point, however, are the ways in which the objects of both of these criticisms appropriated the rituals themselves.

Isager and Ivarsson (2002), Tannenbaum (2000), and Hayami (1997) all document minority people's use of tree ordinations to lay claim to community forests surrounding their villages, some as early as 1993. In the process, they tap into the discourse of being members of the national community. As Tannenbaum comments:

... the tree ordination allied the villagers with the King and the national government as well as local and international nongovernmental organizations interested in environmental protection. Tree ordinations, environmentalism, and sustainable development are now part of the rhetoric and practice of Thai intelligentsia, development workers, and politicians. In the past, tree ordinations organized by monks were part of a larger protest against modernization, capitalism, and development that were seen as destroying traditional values and ways of life. (2000, 116–17)

Henry Delcore (2004) emphasizes the ways in which tree ordinations contributed to a process of cultural objectification of rural people by middle-class NGO activists through the generification of the ritual as an aspect of an idealized 'local wisdom.' Also drawing from tree ordinations done as part of the celebration for the King, he shows that while villagers and environmental monks participated in the planning and performance of the rituals, they were largely controlled by NGO activists. These tree ordinations 'had the effect of symbolically bolstering the hierarchical structure of the Thai state and Thai society as a whole—a structure in which local leaders and middle class NGO activists exercise power as arbiters of "good" and "bad" culture among rural people' (Delcore 2004, 1). Unlike in the cases of minority peoples using the tree ordinations to incorporate themselves more fully within the state structure as a means of protecting their cultural identities and building their political power, Delcore describes a process in which local people lose some of their cultural and political capital. In both cases, however, the political meaning of the ritual shifted away from the original concerns of the environmental monks about deforestation and the suffering it causes.

None of these authors argue that tree ordinations were no longer effective as means of establishing and protecting community forests. Rather, they changed from serving a focused purpose to becoming entangled in complex ways in ever-changing environmental debates and political struggles.

Similarly, environmental monks more generally have found themselves embroiled in these debates, and in cases used by different players to bolster their positions. Phrakhru Manas, Phrakhru Pitak and other monks won national environmental and model citizen awards for their work. Phrakhru Manas won the 'Green World' Award, sponsored by the Petroleum Association of Thailand (PTT), in 2000. Phra Somkit, a disciple of Phrakhru Pitak, received it a few years later. The PTT initiated this award shortly after environmental and Buddhist activists, including the social critic Sulak Sivaraksa, publicly protested its involvement in building a natural gas pipeline from the Burmese border through a national park in Thailand. Both monks who won the award became the subjects of national television programs highlighting their environmental and cultural conservation programs. Receiving the award boosted support for the monks and validated the value of their work. At the same time, the PTT used famous environmental monks—and, implicitly, Buddhism itself—to offset criticisms laid against it for its environmental record.

Phrakhru Manas told me that in 2003 the Ministry of Education published a book of people who supported and spread traditional Thai wisdom. The list included both him and Phra Somkit. In the process, the government, much as the middle-class NGO activists discussed by Delcore, defined and reified 'Thai wisdom.' 'The government wants to claim our work,' Phrakhru Manas complained.¹³

Whose rituals?

The work of environmental monks, in particular the use of tree ordinations, has become manifestations of a new kind of tension facing socially engaged

Buddhists. On the one hand, monks such as Phrakhru Manas and Phrakhru Pitak struggled for years to gain wider acceptance in Thai society. Their critiques of state-led development and its links with capitalist exploitation of the natural environment needed to be heard in order to be effective. The challenge they now face is that their symbolic rhetoric has been appropriated by numerous actors all laying claim to a Buddhist base for their positions on environmentalist and other political debates.

Duncan McCargo (2004) argues that Thai Buddhism has long served to legitimate state power and foster a nationalist ideology. Several movements challenged this reactionary position, especially over the past century, but have, in McCargo's eyes, failed to fulfill the revolutionary potential of the religion to promote social and political equality and progressive ideas. The case of environmental monks is another example of a Buddhist movement challenging the effects of state policies rather than ignoring or even endorsing them. Yet as tree ordinations rapidly gained popularity to support numerous positions, their effectiveness declined as they too became tools of the state and broader social powers.

As governmental organizations and NGOs accepted and backed tree ordinations and the work of environmental monks, the issues addressed became less about local community needs and challenging state policies, and more about integrating the critique into a broader rhetoric. Many NGOs, themselves critics of state-led development, shifted the ritual's meaning away from relieving the suffering of local peoples through a critique of state-led development to solidifying a generic definition of 'local wisdom' (Delcore 2004). They linked the symbolism of Buddhist ritual to national goals and agents of power in a way that complicated and undermined the monks' support of local people's agency.

When government agents began to participate, the issues became even more complex. On one hand, monks such as Phrakhru Pitak invited the participation of government and military officials, as well as Sangha officials and businessmen. Having witnessed the challenges faced by Phra Prajak and Achan Phongsak, he aimed to avoid overt conflict with people in power. Pulling them into the projects got them to demonstrate public acceptance of both the projects and the implicit criticisms of consumerism and capitalist development as underlying causes of environmental destruction. At the same time, their involvement contributed to changing the ways in which the rituals are read publicly. Especially after the 50 Million Tree Ordination project in honor of the King, the ritual became a symbol of the state and the monarchy's efforts to care for the people. The state and its critics appropriated the ritual for a variety of purposes, undercutting its effectiveness in the struggle against deforestation and the suffering environmental degradation brings to rural people.

Environmental monks as a group survived criticism, scandal, arrest, and attack, and continued to work. Together with lay environmentalists, they convinced the Sangha administration, the media, the government, the King, and the public of the urgency of protecting the forests, and the value of incorporating

Buddhist principles and symbols into the process. In many places, they successfully protected forest land and other environmental sites—at least so far.

In the process, the concept of using Buddhism for social change has evolved. While the majority of Thai monks do not undertake explicit social projects such as rural development or environmental conservation, Thai society no longer views environmental monks as oddities. Stories abound about the interconnection of humans and the forest, and the Buddhist responsibility to care for the natural environment. Few debates occur about the authenticity of Buddhist environmentalism. It seems that environmental monks have successfully mediated the tension between Buddhist ideals and social action. The problem, however, is that that same tension provided power and impact to the monks' projects.

Environmental monks no longer shock society into thinking about social issues of environmental degradation and poverty through performing tree ordinations. Instead, as several monks told me in 2006, the public expects monks to engage in environmental work and perform these rites, especially if they live near a forested area. The danger is that people will approach tree ordinations with a perfunctory attitude rather than thinking deeply about the underlying message environmental monks hope to convey. People may spend less time in preparation and education about environmental issues and actions they can take to protect their forests. Without being incorporated into a larger, well-planned project with detailed follow-up, tree ordinations are unlikely to promote the attitude and behavioral changes necessary for genuine conservation.

Phrakhru Pitak and Phrakhru Manas, among others, continue to perform new tree ordinations. They also return to the sites of previous rituals to perform renewal ceremonies, in some places annually, to keep people invested in the projects. In Phrakhru Pitak's home village, the consecrated community forest was still standing in 2006, even though villagers no longer regularly conducted renewal ceremonies. They still honored the Buddha image and the spirit shrine on their way to collect sustainable forest products. And they still told stories of the power of the spirit's protection.

The challenge now is how environmental monks can continue to stimulate Thai society to address the environmental crisis and the concomitant suffering seriously. The potential lies, I believe, in their creativity. While tree ordinations have become mainstream practice rather than radical statements for social reform, the monks still have influence locally. Working closely with people in specific locales, people with whose problems they are intimately familiar and whose beliefs they understand, environmental monks can still implement effective, small-scale programs. The 'good Buddha' may have an evolving relationship with Thailand's forests and their defenders, but the 'fierce spirits' could hold the clue to continued efforts to deal with environmental issues at the grassroots. Unlike tree ordinations, spirit beliefs and local or regional rituals such as the long-life ceremony for waterways still hold sufficient power and meaning for villagers to serve as focal points for environmental projects.

Environmental monks, like the interpretations of Buddhism that inspire them, are not static in their ideas. They continue to seek creative—and skillful—means to teach villagers and relieve suffering. Despite Phra Payutto's fear that belief in sacred objects is no longer effective because of modernity (Payutto 1987, 83), the tension between modernity and Buddhism is driving a renewal in both the belief in sacred objects and, more importantly, the power of the concepts underlying them to deal with social problems. I, for one, am excited to see what these monks will do next.

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NOTES

1. Environmental monks make up perhaps one to two percent of the total Sangha, a figure difficult to determine because of the shifting number of monks nationwide due to temporary ordinations and the fact that environmental monks are not systematically defined or counted, but self-declared. Members of various NGOs that work with these monks, including the Thai Interreligious Commission for Development, gave the estimated percentage.
2. This section is based on field research conducted in Phrakhru Pitak's village, as well as interviews with him and other activist monks and NGO workers in Nan Province, carried out in 1992–1993, with follow-up visits in 1994, 1995, 1999, and 2006.
3. On Buddhadasa, see Jackson (2003), Swearer (1997), Santikaro Bhikkhu (1996).
4. On the power of ritual as a public expression of acceptance of ideas, see Rappaport (1979).
5. For more detail on the spirit beliefs connected with this ritual, see Darlington (2003c).
6. Personal communication, 30 September 2006.
7. On the Buddha image consecration ceremony, see Swearer (2004).
8. Personal communication, 10 September 2006.
9. I am oversimplifying their analyses here for the sake of space, as most monks and activists recognize the complexities and interactions of behaviors on all levels.
10. Evidence indicated that the scandal surrounding Achan Phongsak was probably fabricated, and it died down quickly. Phra Yantra's case was brought to court, and the monk fled to the United States to avoid prosecution. The Sangha administration officially defrocked him, although he continues to wear orange robes and act as a monk in the United States.

11. The threats do continue, however. One environmental monk, Phra Supoj, was murdered in Chiang Mai Province in June 2005, apparently due to conflict over land he worked to protect. The case remains unsolved.
12. Comment made at the seminar Mountain Peoples' Ecological Conservation Attitudes and Adaptations, Chiang Mai, 4 August 1991.
13. Personal communication, 30 September 2006.

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