

ABSTRACT

Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Nuns Challenge Gendered Orders in Thailand. By Monica Lindberg Falk.

Doctoral dissertation at the Department of Social Anthropology, Göteborg University, Sweden. ISBN 91-628-5490-9

This anthropological study addresses the interaction and interconnectedness between religion and gender relations in Thailand, analysing this through the lens of the Buddhist nuns' (*mae chiis*) lives, actions and role in Thai society. The *mae chiis* have a long history in Thailand. However, leaving lay life to become a nun in Thailand implies going against prescribed female gender norms. The recent decades' growth of nunneries governed by the nuns themselves and the reports of Thai women's increasing interest in Buddhist monastic life are notable changes in women's behaviour in the spiritual field. This connotes a modification of the restricted male religious domain, which is related to the modernisation of the social and religious landscape.

This work is concerned with Thai Buddhist nuns' agency in the processes of change in their religious vocation. The aims of the study are to examine what it means to be a female ascetic in contemporary Thailand, to explore how the *mae chiis* alter their religious position, and to analyse how the female ordained state fits into the wider Thai sex/gender system. These inquiries address major themes of gender and religion in anthropology and are here examined and explored mainly in a local Buddhist nunnery in Central Thailand. The goal is to illustrate how contemporary *mae chiis* at a nunnery are forming their religious legitimacy in relation to the monks' *sangha* and to the laity.

The arguments developed in this study are based on seventeen months of fieldwork, mostly spent at nunneries. Data were collected using mainly participant observation, ritual studies, informal conversations and interviews. As demonstrated in this study, the *mae chiis* are agents and creators of meanings and new orders in Thai society. They lead processes of autonomous realisation of their religious vocation. The women portrayed in this thesis are thus not passively accepting their marginalised position. They utilise their autonomy and find ways to create space outside the male hierarchy.

At nunneries, the role of the *mae chiis* has been broadened and become more analogous to that of the monks. Moral conduct, Buddhist practice, and Buddhist knowledge are important for the nuns' religious status. Through their daily practice of giving alms, the laity demonstrates its recognition of them as religious persons. This study shows that the *mae chiis* have the potential to cross the gendered boundary between the lay and religious realms and be transformed into fields of merit for lay people. Impeccable conduct, religious performances and Buddhist knowledge have proved to be requirements for achieving religious legitimacy.

Key words: Anthropology, Thailand, Sex, Gender, Buddhism, Nuns, Rituals, Gifts, Education.