

Jane Bunnag, Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman: A Study of Urban Monastic Organization in Central Thailand, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 6, Cambridge University Press 1973, pp. xii, 219, £5.

The study of Theravada Buddhism as a living religion has made considerable and accelerating progress in the last decade. Though authors have varied in theoretical approach, there is now much common ground about what Theravada Buddhism looks like in practice. Writers need no longer begin with potted accounts of Buddhist doctrine and history; a plateau of knowledge and understanding has been reached which allows scope for monographs to examine particular aspects of the subject.

Dr. Bunnag has made excellent use of this situation. Most previous researchers have worked on the religious life of villages in S.E. Asia and Ceylon; she has studied a Thai provincial town of some thirty thousand inhabitants, Ayutthaya. (The town's status as a former capital of Thailand has little relevance to her theme, except that it largely explains the town's religious and cultural prestige.) Moreover, she has written exclusively on religious role performance and its correlation with social and economic status. In her succinct concluding chapter she shows that what previous anthropologists have called the 'looseness' of Thai society, which she sees rather as the ability to move easily between the simple roles available (e.g. monk and layman), can in general terms be explained by the material abundance with which Thailand has been blessed; competition for scarce resources has rarely been necessary, and she gives us hints that its advent will bring sad changes to an over-populated countryside and to monasteries in the secularizing city of Bangkok. Though the abundance of fertile land cannot of course explain, even indirectly, all the local features of Thai Buddhism - and the author's footnote on p. 186 make one suspect that she may be dismissing the causal potency of ideology rather too summarily - it does do much to explain, for instance, why monks

can freely change their monastic residence; this interests the general student of Theravada Buddhism because this mobility is in turn a factor differentiating Thai from e.g. Sinhalese monasticism which may be crucial in its consequences. The other most distinctive aspect of modern Thai Buddhism, its involvement with the state, the author amply documents in earlier chapters but does not discuss in her conclusion. Its ramifications and consequences will provide material for further interesting comparisons with other Buddhist countries.

In the body of the book Dr. Bunnag restricts herself to describing social interaction; she mentions Buddhist ideology and ritual only in so far as they are directly relevant to her theme, and for details refers the reader to other works, notably to Wells' Thai Buddhism: its Rites and Activities. But the student of religion would be completely wrong to conclude from this that her contribution is irrelevant or uninteresting. Though unassuming in tone, the book soon strikes the reader as authoritative, not least because Dr. Bunnag^(who is English) is clearly at home in Thai language materials. (The orientalist is favourably impressed by the consistency of spelling and paucity of misprints in foreign words, qualities all too rare in works of this genre.) The author has little space for current fashions in anthropological theory, and devotes her energies to ethnography which will be of lasting value. She demonstrates how to be systematic without being schematic, and how to present much detailed information without lapsing into pedantry or tedium. It is hard to single out one section for particular praise, but the following may serve as an example: 'Several informants remarked that to build a new wat at the present time was both a foolish and an ostentatious gesture, as there were already so many monasteries in the country which were falling into disrepair. Consequently it would be both more meritorious and more sensible for a rich man (setthi) to use his money for the benefit of the community by building a school or a hospital. Indeed when they were asked to grade the

religious activities of the Buddhist householder with respect to the amount of merit to be derived in each case, both monks and laymen declared this to be impossible, because the results of these actions depended not only upon the purity of the actors' intentions but also upon the usefulness of the act itself' (p. 245). The author therefore declines to follow the example of previous anthropologists who have constructed league tables of merit-making acts, since this 'is to some extent to falsify the issue' (p. 144, note 5). From this one may conclude: that the Thai are sensible, humane, and sensitive to Buddhist tradition; and that these qualities are shared by the author. Her book deserves to be widely read, and we await another with impatience.

Richard Gombrich.