

**A COMPARATIVE NOTE ON THE THAI AND
THE JAVANESE WORLDVIEW AS EXPRESSED
BY RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND BELIEF**

by

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Worldview, or *Weltanschauung*, is an abstraction from life experience; it is a style of thinking and feeling about values, social organization, behaviour, events, and other aspects of experience; it is a mental ordering and integration of these various aspects of experience, giving rise to a mentality and an attitude toward life.

In most traditional, rather undifferentiated societies, religious practice and belief still provide most of the vital coordinates of a worldview. The sociological and psychological importance of a worldview is that it shapes the attitude to life of individuals; a worldview can therefore be studied as revealing the approach to reality of individuals and groups, which means that it can be analysed as the logic behind a social system and its dynamics.

In this note I wish to make a few comparisons between the Thai and the Javanese worldviews, as expressed by religious practice and belief. Thai and Javanese society share many of the same sources of cultural inspiration, and formally they share many striking similarities. Yet the practice and the daily life interpretation of the common cultural heritage appears to be very different, especially nowadays. It appears that the Javanese religious belief system and its practice come closer to the enactment of a total worldview than Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. Yet the very character of Theravada Buddhism may allow for faster and easier social differentiation and de-traditionalization in face of the challenges of the 20th century. To expound this argument I first offer a short comparative

analysis of the two religious systems as I observed them¹. From each system I then abstract the attitude to life that it sustains. Each attitude is then viewed in terms of its consequences for social and economic modernization.

Javanese Religion, a Style of Life

It is hard to say what exactly is the religion of Java. Although most Javanese will say that they are Moslims, at least 80% of them are only nominal adherents of Islam. At best these nominal Moslims² have mixed a few Islamic lines of thinking and concepts into their view of nature and supernature. The basis of Javanese religion (Javanism) is the conviction of the essential unity of all Existence. That makes Javanism more encompassing than formalized religion: it views human existence within a cosmological context, making life itself a religious experience. In this conception it is not possible to separate the religious from the non-religious, the natural from the supernatural, the here and now from the beyond and timeless.

Existence is conceived as ordered in a ranked and regulated Universe. It is the moral task of all that exists to be in harmony with that universal order. To oppose that order is at the same time disruptive and sinful. Therefore men carefully regulate their society to harmonize with the universal order and to sustain its own inner harmony. The rules of the Javanese etiquette (*tatakrama*) regulate interpersonal behaviour; the rules of the tradition (*adat*) regulate the inner harmony of society; the formal religious and animistic rules and practices regulate the relationship to supernature; the moral rules, that emphasize acceptance, patience, self-knowledge, modesty and simplicity, regulate the human drives and emotions. The people who respect all these rules, live in harmony with Existence, with God, and

1) For my observations on Javanism, see "Aliran Kebatinan as an Expression of the Javanese Worldview", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. I, No. 2 (September 1970); for those on Buddhism in Thailand, *Monks, Merit and Motivation* (Special Report Series No. 1, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Ill., USA, May 1969).

2) This and subsequent remarks do not so strictly apply to the devout Muslims—the *santri*—as to the majority of the Javanese who are only nominal Muslims.

lead the right life. Human existence should be in quiet equilibrium with the Universe; men should neither strive to conquer nature, nor to compete and to be ambitious, nor to achieve by an excessive interest in material things. The approach to life and reality is essentially one of resignation and surrender to the all-encompassing divine presence, to That Which Is Almighty.

This belief is enacted in *kebatinan* or Javanese mysticism. Its general theory is simple, although its elaborations are many. Man should surrender to That Which Is Almighty by cleaning himself, by ridding himself of his impulses and bodily desires, by emptying himself so that he can be filled with the divine presence, so that God can reveal Himself within his heart (*batin*), so that Master and servant may become one.

The source of the knowledge of cosmological reality is the inner-feeling (*rasa*) that resides in the inner man (*batin*). That knowledge is revealed knowledge to which man has to open himself by surrender. Not every man, however, is able to achieve this intimate contact with the Universal Existence. Those people who are believed to have received revelations usually become the teachers (*guru*) of all those who want to achieve a closer identification with the really Real.

Because the revelations are an individual experience, the various *guru* tend to differ in their theories about mysticism and consequently they teach methods that relate to their own experience. Javanese mysticism clearly misses accumulated tradition in theory and method, since every *guru* starts anew. There are no theology, dogma, systematic tradition or commonly accepted written sources in Javanese religion. Mystical discipline tends to be weak, since it emphasizes surrender and inner tranquility as the ways to achieve mystical experience. Meditation is often seen as *yoga*, or the power of the will over the physical self, and forms as such a practice that stands in the way of surrender. The *kebatinan* tradition is a culture of the inner man, emphasizing the development of the *rasa*; it is passive, not conquering and disciplining the body and the will in order to acquire ultimate insight, but in order to surrender and receive.

Theravada Buddhism, a Religion

In Thailand religion is a system among other systems to deal with nature and supernature. Buddhism is not a style of life, although there may be a Buddhist style of life. In contrast to Javanism with its syncretic and cosmological style of thinking, Theravada Buddhism is very explicit in separating this-worldly reality from ultimate reality. This-worldly reality, although illusory, is a kind of reality, and the ordinary housekeeper has to live in it and to make the best of it. The monks may tread the path to ultimate reality, but they are a class that has been set apart for this purpose. To go the way of the monks is a way of discipline and study, of exercise and meditation. It is certainly not a way of passive mysticism and surrender. On the contrary, Buddhism stresses rational understanding and objective experience. It is by way of understanding that man can achieve enlightenment. That understanding and that experience are objectifiable, are a Truth that has been discovered by The Buddha and that has been elaborated and made clear in the Dhamma. It does not depend upon the individual insights and methods of *guru*, but it is the One Way leading to the Truth.

In its course through history Buddhism has accumulated a great tradition of systematic writings that have continuously been studied and elaborated. This continuity of the Dhamma is intimately connected to the continuity of the Sangha that forms the living embodiment of the Buddhist Teachings and tradition. When monks preach the Dhamma they will do it in a systematic, schematic and analytical way, while relating the Teachings to every day experience. Also meditation is taught and practiced along systematic lines, and it stresses discipline over the physical self and the senses to free the will to aspire to enlightenment.

While the Middle Eastern religions emphasize belief and acceptance, and while Javanism stresses intuitive feeling and surrender, Theravada Buddhism stresses rationality, experience and discipline. Man does not depend but he can know and find out for himself.

Truth can be aspired to, can be worked for, and is certainly not revealed because of the surrender of man. Buddhism is essentially a rational and active religion: it is the culture of the mind.

The Concept of Karma

In both Javanese and Thai societies the concept of Karma is important, but there exist cardinal differences in interpretation. To the Javanese Karma is vague. To him it is the product of the behaviour and wishes of his ancestors, and of his past and present behaviour. Moreover his karma is influenced by his Destiny, the will of God. His power over his karma is limited and unclear since he does not hold the sole responsibility for it.

This is in marked contrast to the Thai concept of Karma. To the Thai karma is in full responsibility of its individual bearer. Although an individual karma is beyond the volition of a person as far as previous existences are concerned, it is clearly the working capital for this and future existences, irrespective of other forces, cosmic or social.

Attitude to Life

The attitude to life may be heavily influenced by religious experience and religious concepts. The Javanese experience and view is totalistic, not separating the individual from his environment, from his group, or even from nature and supernature. Nor is it possible to separate the this-worldly from the other-worldly. Boundaries are unclear. Hence, causes are unclear, and the Javanese tend to mix ideas and objects. To him the two appear to be equally real. His reasoning is speculative and intuitive, and he has no indigenous tradition of systematic reasoning. Not clearly distinguishing between nature and supernature, he has not developed clear ideas in either. To pray for a thing may be as good as to achieve it. He does not master, he submits; he does not invest in the future and he accepts life as it comes to him; he does not separate his individuality from the primary group, and he accepts that the group, like the Universe, are superior forces to which he had better surrender. Individuality and initiative are potentially dangerous and even sinful.

The Thai appear to live with their religion rather than to practise a style of life that is religious. Unlike the Javanese syncretism, they do not mix the Hindu, the animistic, and the Buddhist elements in their ways of dealing with supernatural. Besides that, Buddhism stresses an analytical and experimental attitude and clearly distinguishes between the here and now and the beyond and timeless. It also stresses that man can find his way by experience and understanding.

Because the ultimate religious behaviour is within the Monkhoo, the ordinary housekeeper has the double responsibility to care for his own welfare and for the prosperity of the monks and religion. While a housekeeper he should work this world to the best of his ability; that is his basic task and it enables him to make merit by supporting the monks and to care for his dependents. Merit is expensive, and to make it a farmer or another person should be effective in this world. All this is an individual responsibility, and the strong emphasis on the collectivity, that is characteristic on Java, is clearly absent in Thailand. A Thai has pride in independence and is mentally able to separate himself from his group. He has individuality, and that is tolerated and somewhat encouraged by his society³. He is less interested in cosmological speculation than the Javanese, and does not confuse ideas with objects. To him, as long as he is not a religious man (*Bhikkhu*), objects are clearly far more important than ideas, although a little magic may help to achieve success in the world of things.

Consequences for Modernization

I would like to define modernization as a process of increasing mastery over the physical and social environment, a mastery that can be expressed in terms of objects and effective organization. A worldview with its consequent attitude toward life will reflect mental potential for modernization. That I am no advocate for a straightforward and simplistic relationship between the world of ideas and

3) For elaboration, see Hans-Dieter Evers (ed.), *Loosely Structured Social Systems: Thailand in Comparative Perspective* (Cultural Report Series No. 17, Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, 1969).

the world of things and behaviour has already been documented in a previous contribution to this Journal (JSS LV/1, 1967). Yet on Java this relation appears to be far more direct than I ever dreamt to be possible, to the extent even, that people on Java appear to mix ideas with things without making clear distinctions. Neither of the two seems to prevail, the this-worldly is not separated from the other-worldly.

The Thai have a clearer approach to the world of things. Things have an autonomy and are interesting, are *sanug*. In Thailand I often heard, that to do something, to engage in activity was worthwhile, *sanug*. When an individual is able to separate himself from his group or a situation, and when the world of objects has acquired an autonomy, modernization can proceed. On Java activity has no purpose, is not *sanug*: man has to be active to eat, but people are not fascinated by life or by things *per se*. The good life on Java appears to be acceptance and passivity, while the Thai appreciates activity in the world of objects and does not enjoy speculation for its own sake. The Thai is a practical man when compared to the mystically inclined Javanese.

In 1940 Java was a highly productive place, industrially as well as agriculturally. Colonial administration was reasonably efficient and effective and there was a fair amount of regularity and security. These Western traditions, this mastery of environment, have now all but disappeared. Population has grown, efficiency and productivity have declined, and there are no indicators that the Javanese will soon enjoy economic independence or a rising standard of living. The contrast to developments in Thailand is striking. The Thai response to the challenge of the 20th century, especially during the past few years, seems to be very positive indeed. There appears to be an intensive interest in this world and its possibilities. I think that it is not too speculative to associate Thailand's progress and rising standard of living with the worldview of its people as expressed by its religion, especially when I compare these to my observations on Java.

I wish to express my gratitude to Professor James L. Peacock for his helpful comments and for his straightening out of my odd usage of the English language.

