

Preliminaries to the Study of *Sadəkhrə* Rituals: How Rituals Make People Better Buddhists

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Predbežné poznámky k štúdiu sadəkhrə rituálov: ako rituály robia ľudí lepšími buddhistami

Resumé Príspevok sa venuje otázke rituálnej manipulácie kammy v thajskom buddhizme. Autor argumentuje, že doktrínálna formulácia konceptu kammy je konceptuálne málo špecifická a neumožňuje praktické inferencie. Doktrínálna karma je síce iresponzívna voči dobovým rituálom, ale postuluje neštandardné kauzálne spojenia. Nekanonické rituály sú systematickým spôsobom ako zachovať koncept relevantným v širšom kultúrnom kontexte.

Abstract Addressing the issue of ritual manipulation of kamma in Thai Buddhism, the author argues that the doctrinal formulation of kamma—underdetermined in terms of action-representation, irresponsive to contemporary rituals while reinforcing the intuitions of non-obvious causal connections—is unlikely to survive the process of cultural transmission unchanged. Ritual helps internalize the concept and makes it relevant on a larger cultural scale.

Keywords Thailand, Buddhism · Kamma, Theravāda Ritual, Cognition, Culture

*Introduction*¹

The variety of Thai Buddhist beliefs and practices is staggering. People make offerings to local spirits, placate wandering malevolent ghosts, worship statues of kings, gods and Buddhas, tie threads around their wrists to consolidate their vital

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Jiří Holba (Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences) for reading the earlier draft of this article. His valuable comments helped me to avoid some factual imprecisions and improve the clarity of points I am making in this essay.

power, wear magical tattoos and amulets, and drink the urine of famous monks for protection. They have their stars and palms read to ward off bad luck and magical attacks. Not only do many of these practices have an ambiguous canonical standing but some clearly violate the norms. Yet they take place in Thai Buddhist *wats* (shrine-monastery) with Buddhist monks as the main ritual officiants.

For some time now I have been intrigued by one of the manifold *sadokbrø* rituals warding off (*sadø* สะเดาะ) bad luck (*kbø*เคราะห์). This particular ritual goes by various names: *nēnlōng* (นอนโลง), *bangsugun* (บังสุกุล), *sadokbrø*, and *gēgam* (แก้กรรม). The first two names derive from the ritual's form, in which the client lies (*nēn*) in a coffin (*lōng*) to die to his/her past and be reborn again. At some *wats* the client is only covered with a shroud. In either case, *bangsuguntāi* (บังสุกุลตาย) and *bangsugunpen* (บังสุกุลเป็น), two chants used at actual funerals are chanted, thus lending the ritual its name.

The terms '*sadokbrø*' and '*gēgam*', on the other hand, point to the object of ritual manipulation. '*Gēgam*' translates as 'improving one's *kamma*' while *kbø* is a vague term generally understood as 'bad luck'. Some informants expressed the opinion that one can have also good *kbø*. The distinction between *kamma* and *kbø* is fuzzy and one often comes across the term *kbøgam*, (เคราะห์กรรม) unifying both concepts². A popular book on *kbø* explains that »*kbø* understood in the broader

2 »While among common people one can still often hear karma as the explanation of their inferior position, I have the feeling that it is rather felt to relate to 'fate' (chookkchataa, โชคชะตา), inescapability, or the planets and the stars than to any deep moral justification. [...] The question of justice is rather amorphous and only just emerging on the Thai social scene.« Niels Mulder, *Everyday Life in Thailand: An Interpretation* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol 1979), 6. Engel & Engel have observed that »injury victims in Northern Thailand tended to merge the two concepts in a single expression, khrokham, and they spoke of their khro as the product of bad karma they have accumulated through misdeed in their current or previous lifetimes.« David M. Engel & Jaruan D. Engel, *Tort, Custom, and Karma: Globalization and Legal Consciousness in Thailand* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 74. And Pattana Kitiarsa simply notes that »when it is translated into practice, karma is usually perceived as 'karmically determined fate' (khro kam), which guides people to either fortunate or unfortunate ways.« Pattana Kitiarsa, »Buddha Phanit: Thailand's Prosperity Religion and its Commodifying Effect«, in *Religious Commodifications in Asia. Marketing*

sense of *kamma*« includes »suffering from a series of unpleasant events, bad health, unexpected spending, losing job and difficulties to find a new one, broken family, misbehaving child, being abandoned by spouse, becoming addicted to substances and gambling, becoming a victim of bad temptations, all the things that make your life to sink down«. ³ Even standing alone, the term *kamma* (*gam*, กงม), like '*kbṛø*', is in Thailand understood as 'bad kamma' while 'good kamma' is referred to as '*vāsanā*' (วาสนา).

This transformation of the 'moral law' of *kamma*, its merger with the amoral *kbṛø* and inclusion in non-canonical rituals pose an intricate problem. As Charles Keyes explains:

The concept of fate is less easily rationalized in terms of Buddhist cosmology than are other concepts held by peoples in Theravāda Buddhist societies. Fate implies a causation that operates irrespective of the moral actions of people, whereas the Buddhist concept of karma relates all causation ultimately to moral action. Yet, despite the apparent contradiction, most people in the Theravāda Buddhist world, since about the fifteenth century at least, have conceived of fate as a proximate, not an ultimate form of causation. ⁴

The involvement of *kamma* in *sadokbṛø* practices entails a double—doctrinal and disciplinary—violation of the Theravāda canonical norms. On the doctrinal side, the ritual violates the (in Pāli language, hereafter P.) *kammasakatā* and (P.) *kammakāraṇa* principles of immunity of kamma against ritual manipulation: the former principle states that *kamma* is one's own and the *kammic* effect accrues to the doer only. ⁵ According to the latter, »*Kamma* itself will hold the agent responsible for action by 'doing back [the agent] with the act' (*kammakāraṇa*) (PTS

Gods, ed. by Pattana Kitiarsa (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), 133.

3 Gewthara, *Sadokbro: Duei ton eng ben pbon than ta* [*Sadokbro: See the Results with Your Own Eyes*] (Nonthaburi: Yonroy Publishing House, 2013), 11.

4 Charles F. Keyes, »Introduction: Popular Ideas of Karma«, in *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry*, ed. by Charles F. Keyes and Valentine E. Daniel (Berkeley: University of California Press 1983), 116–117.

5 »I am the owner of my kamma, the heir of my kamma; I have kamma as my origin, kamma as my relative, kamma as my resort; I will be the heir of whatever kamma, good or bad, that I do.« *Anguttara Nikāya*, iii, 72. Hereafter AN.

190),⁶ and being rooted in intention (*cetanā*), such ‘doing back’ ought only to apply to the agent.⁷ The doctrinal *kamma* works automatically and unremittingly and not even the Buddha can interfere.⁸

In addition to this doctrinal dictum, an explicit monastic rule prohibiting acts of divination also classifies »performing ceremonies to counteract the influence of the stars« as the second most severe violation of proper monastic conduct, one which entails initial and subsequent meetings of the Community (P. *sanghādisesa*).⁹

6 PTS refers to *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, ed. by T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede (Chipstead: Pali Text Society, 1921–1925), 190. Available at <<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/>> (last retrieval April 10, 2017).

7 Jessica Main, »The Karma of Others: Stories from Milindapañha and the Petavatthuattakathā« <<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2011/01/main01.pdf>>, 2, (last retrieval March 25, 2017).

8 Jayara Attwood in his »Escaping the Inescapable: Changes in Buddhist Karma«, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 21, (2014), 497, <<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2014/06/Jayarava-Karma-final2.pdf>> (last retrieval March 20, 2017), points out »In the early Buddhist texts the results of actions are inescapable; there is nothing that stands between us and the consequences of our actions.« Or, he also argues that »Like Zoroastrians, the early Buddhists were concerned with how actions of body, speech, and mind determined one's afterlife destination, and saw this as an impersonal, impartial, and inevitable process. This idea is embodied in a number of early Buddhist texts, but the frame story of the Pāli *Samaññaphala Sutta* emphasizes that not even a Buddha may intervene in this process. The best an early Buddhist could hope for was to mitigate the impact of karma on themselves through religious practices that improved their resilience in the face of suffering.« Attwood, »Escaping the Inescapable«, 518. And, »Likewise, in early Buddhism the outcome of karma is fixed only by the action itself. Nothing can be done to avoid the outcome. Over time, as we will see below, this limitation is gradually removed by Buddhists, but initially Zoroastrians and Buddhists agree that the judging is inevitable, impartial (even impersonal), and inescapable«, Attwood, »Escaping the Inescapable«, 504.

9 Specifically, it is *sanghādisesa* 13. For the full description of the ‘depraved conduct’ see for example *Cullavāga*, i.13–16; see also Thānissaro, *The Buddhist Monastic Code: The Pātimokkha Training Rules Translated and Explained* (Bangkok: The Mahāmakuta Buddhist University 1993), 197. »Saṅghādisesas are classified as heavy offenses (*garukāpatti*), both because of the seriousness of

Monks typically justify their non-compliance to the monastic rule as a concession to popular beliefs that allows them to attract followers and teach them the *Dhamma*. For example, Luang Pi Uthēn (หลวงปู่ฤๅษีเทน), abbot of Wat Thā Mai (วัดท่าไม้), explained that the triple knocking at the coffin symbolizes the three characteristics of all existence: impermanence, no-I, and suffering (P. *tilakkhana: anicca, anattā, dukkha*). But it should come as no surprise that the clients don't represent this nor any other ritual sequence symbolically. Most of my informants didn't ponder about the explicit meaning of the knocking. Some, upon my prompt, speculated that it is simply a polite sign we make when entering a place that is not our own. The officiating monk doesn't make any symbolic references during the ritual either, though he later, again upon my prompt, did explain that the knocking announces the client to the spirit in the coffin. At another wat (Wat Phrāmanī, วัดพรหมณี), I was told that the knocking is a polite signal to the spirit of the place (*jaothī*, เจ้าที่) who at this wat is also asked for assistance in the ritual. Also, the relatively high level of belief in the efficacy of the ritual speaks against its symbolic interpretation. 41% of Thai undergraduate students I asked (N=66) indicated that they somewhat believe (*khōnkhāngchua*, ค่อนข้างเชื่อ) in the efficacy of the ritual while 15% gave a straightforward 'yes' (*chai* ใช่) to the question.¹⁰

The elitists' theme of the gullibility of uneducated masses exploited by monks is not a good explanation for the practices' popularity, since as Suntaree Komin's nation-wide study shows:

As check of some superstitious beliefs and practices, the results of the Thai value studies revealed that for certain superstitious behaviors like *duu moduu* (fortune telling) and *phuuk duang* (having one's personal star read by fortune-teller), and *bon baansarn klaw* (making vows to spirits), the urban Bangkokians are engaged in such behaviors

the offenses themselves and because the procedures of penance, probation, and rehabilitation are burdensome by design, not only for the offender«. Thānissaro, *The Buddhist Monastic Code*, 202.

¹⁰ The question »Do you believe in the efficacy of the ritual?« (คุณเชื่อในพิธีกรรมไหม) was a part of a questionnaire on the *nōnlōng* ritual and the respondents indicated their attitude on the five-level scale: »yes« (ใช่; 15.7%); »rather believe« (ค่อนข้างเชื่อ; 41.2%); »don't know« (ไม่รู้; 15.7%); »rather don't believe« (ค่อนข้างไม่เชื่อ; 15.7%); »no« (ไม่; 11.8%). The results show not only the prevalence of more favorable attitudes (with »yes«→»rather yes« totaling to 56.9% as against »no-rather« with 27.5%) towards the ritual's efficacy but 15.7% of respondents gave »don't know« answer by which they missed the opportunity to refuse straightforwardly the practice based on an unorthodox notion of *kamma*.

more often than the rural people; the educated Thai more than uneducated; the Government officials of various levels as well as hawkers do more than the farmers, laborers, etc. [...] It is true that most Thai according to the sample did not engage in these behaviors, but the interesting point here is that among those who practiced, no difference was found in terms of educational level, that is highly educated sought [sic] out fortune telling as often as the uneducated.¹¹

This essay is an attempt to at least partially explain the situation. I will argue that the scholarly view of these phenomena as symptoms of cultural conditions—the post-modern commercialization of Buddhism (*phuttha phānit* พุทธพาณิชย์),¹² its decentralization, and the state's loosening of control over Buddhist practices¹³ streamlining the influx of heterodox practices¹⁴—is insufficient as it is not formulated against the backdrop of more systematic causes: the conceptual and action-representation underdetermination of the doctrinal formulation of *kamma* (explained below), which, given the practical¹⁵ rather than theoretical character of

11 Suntaree Komin, *Psychology of Thai People. Values and Behavioral Patterns* (Bagkok: NIDA, 1990), 223–224.

12 See Pattana Kitiarsa, »Beyond Syncretism. Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand«, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36,3 (2005), 461–487; Kitiarsa, *Buddha Phanit*; or Pattana Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets. Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012).

13 See e.g., James Taylor, »Cyber-Buddhism and Changing Urban Space in Thailand«, *Space and Culture* 6,3 (2003), 292–308, <<http://sac.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/6/3/292>> (last retrieval May 26, 2016); James Taylor, »(Post-) Modernity, Remaking Tradition, and the Hybridisation of Thai Buddhism,« *Anthropological Forum* 9,2 (1999), 163–187; Peter Jackson, »Withering Centre Flourishing Margins. Buddhism's Changing Political Role«, in *Political Change in Thailand. Democracy and Participation*, ed. by Kevin Hewison (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 75–93.

14 Barend J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic. An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*, Third Revised Edition (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994). (First published 1975).

15 »Western people—especially educated people, especially students of religion—tend to consider religious concepts primarily as the expression of some beliefs about how the world works. Nothing wrong about that in principle, except that it may lead to a *contemplative* view of religion, in which people are said to consider their world or existence in the abstract and to realize or

religion, will on a cultural scale result either in inconsequentiality or significant modification of the concept. Historically contingent circumstances then are »shapers«, not independent causes of these processes.

The practical character of religion determines situations in which supernatural (also called ‘counterintuitive’) concepts will be invoked, and puts constraints on their cultural (statistically most distributed) representations. Let’s take, for example, the negative context in which *kamma* is typically invoked despite the Thai’s explicit knowledge of its both good and bad forms. This seems to comply with a general fact that »More superstitions seem to be associated with bad than good. It may be an evolutionary consequence of the need for caution: you are more likely to survive if you can spot potential threats«. ¹⁶

Humans are cognitively susceptible to invoking supernatural agents whenever emotionally eruptive events arise, which have superficial characteristics of telic event structures with no apparent CONTROLLING FORCE. These include chaotic or chance events (earthquakes, thunderstorms, floods, drought), uncertain events (disease, war, famine, loneliness), and future events that are normally beyond a person’s control but that people cannot avoid trying to manage, such as critical periods in the human cycle (birth, puberty, old age, death). ¹⁷

The negative valence of *kamma* is thus not a specifically Thai cultural phenomenon, but a feature of religious concepts to function as short-hand labels for a possibility

imagine that it would make more sense with the addition of some concepts of gods, ghosts or ancestors. In this view, what counts most about the ancestors is that they are the souls of dead people; what matters about God is that he created the world, and so on. But this may not be the most important aspect in people’s actual thoughts about these agents. For religion is a rather *practical* thing. First, religious concepts are represented by people mostly when there is a *need* for them. That is, some salient event has happened that can be explained in terms of the gods’ actions; or someone has just done something that the ancestors probably will not like; or some baby is born or someone just died and these events are thought to involve supernatural agents.« Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained. The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 137–138.

16 David Hand, *The Improbability Principle: Why Coincidences, Miracles, and Rare Events Happen Every Day* (New York: Scientific American/Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014), 248.

17 Scot Atran, *In Gods We Trust. The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 66.

of causally non-obvious i.e., ritual action in existentially conspicuous, prevalingly negative, situations.

In terms of constraints on the cultural representations of religious concepts, to be practically engaged, they must include action-representation structures permitting either their instrumental manipulation, as when handling inanimate objects, or interaction, as when dealing with animate objects (*agents*). A religious concept that doesn't permit an action is useless. As Melford Spiro also reports, »the dominant motive among the Burmese for believing in karma is not so much to discover the 'meaning' of suffering as to do something about their own suffering«. ¹⁸ He observes that while for most Buddhists *kamma* is identified or closely associated with merit, »When the laymen were asked to name the acts which conferred the most merit, not one male and only one female mentioned any of the five precepts. [The fundamental lay-Buddhist moral code.] [...] In short, however the Burmese view the social and pragmatic importance of the precepts, compliance with their injunctions is not in their minds an important way of obtaining merit«. ¹⁹ Spiro bases his claim on a relatively small sample (N=42) but given the centrality of the five precepts, I find the outcome significant. I also believe that Spiro is right in explaining this phenomenon through the fact that keeping the precepts doesn't feel like actively performing a merit-making act. Precepts are negative—one is not prompted to do something but to abstain from doing something. Normally, there are more opportunities in Theravāda countries to perform a *positive* act of releasing animals that would otherwise be sold for slaughter than to abstain from killing²⁰, and since Buddhism (like every other religion) includes acts of penance, virtually any violation of prohibition can be 'undone' by performing a compensatory meritorious act.

Importantly, ritual practices not only enact belief-systems but also internalize them. Rituals »form an artificial reality of sorts, set apart from ordinary life, in

18 Melford Spiro, *Buddhism and Society. A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*, Second expanded edition (Oakland: University of California, 1982), 128. (First published 1970).

19 Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 102.

20 See *Ibid.*, 104.

which counter-intuitive representations acquire an aura of factuality»²¹. Capable of creating motivational belief_B²² in religious concepts, rituals are »prime candidate for spreading religious belief«. ²³ As Boyer puts it:

People have the thought that the ritual created some [...] effect and have some intuition that the actions themselves are not the whole explanation, so something else is involved. This empty slot in our representation of ritual in many cases remains empty. [...] Now an empty slot like that can also be filled by whatever representation you have that could be connected in some relevant way to the unexplained effect. This is why concepts of gods, spirits and ancestors are often activated in such contexts. People then think that the people were changed by the wedding because the gods were witnesses to their pledge. The apprentice turned into a shaman because the ancestors effected some mysterious change in his body.²⁴

Referring specifically to the concept of *kamma* Keyes observes that, »the authority for karmic dogmas that immediately suggests itself is that of the sacred texts of Hinduism and Buddhism. While such texts often do provide the form wherein karmic ideas are expressed, as the essays herein attest, these ideas are accepted as ultimate truths only when the ‘word’ has been linked with powerful emotional experiences«. ²⁵

The doctrinal Buddhist *kamma*, designed to resist both instrumental and interactional engagement, is significantly limited in its capacity to become an object of belief_B on a large cultural scale. Some scholars therefore see its cultural

21 Ilka Pyysiäinen, *How religion works: Towards a New Cognitive Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 140.

22 I will follow Pyysiäinen’s distinction between belief_A, a belief with religious content but without motivational power or even endorsement of the content (e.g., »God exists« or »‘God exists’ is not true«) and belief_B—religious belief »as an attitude in which one emotionally feels religious concepts to be relevant«. Ilka Pyysiäinen, »Believing is Doing: How Ritual Action Enhances Religious Beliefs«, in *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture: Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative*, ed. by Armin W. Geertz and Jeppe S. Jensen (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), 147.

23 Jesper Sørensen, »Religion, Evolution, and the Immunology of Cultural Systems«, *Evolution and Cognition* 10,1 (2004), 72.

24 Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 257–258.

25 Keyes, *Karma*, 4.

purport in ‘ethicization’ of the world.²⁶ But as *kamma* is also underdetermined experientially, it permits no specific event to be explained through specific *kammic* causes; its function of ethical exhortation should also seem unconvincing.

In this situation, it is only the unorthodox rituals that can provide an opportunity for the abstract and evasive concept of *kamma* to become believed_B and make thus people to be ‘good Buddhists’.

1 Who Would Believe in *Kamma*?

To see the importance of these rituals, let me first describe the Theravāda doctrinal position on *kamma*.

Virtually unanimous scholarly view holds that the doctrinal *kamma* is an abstract law of moral retribution resistant to ritual manipulation with the moral valence of acts determined by the agent’s intention (*cetanā*).²⁷ Putting it like this I am bypassing some discussions concerning the possibility to reconstruct *doctrinal* *kamma* or even the existence of such a concept. Yet I feel justified in doing so, since though it may be true that »Recent scholarship on *kamma* in the early Indian and Theravāda contexts tends in precisely the opposite direction to [...] all those arguments attempt to define a pure karma against a set of useless aberrations«,²⁸ the works accentuating the coexistence of different forms of *kamma* don’t actually challenge the notion of doctrinal *kamma*. Obeyesekere, cited by

26 See for example Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006) (First published 1988.); Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006) (First published 1996); Attwood, »Escaping the Inescapable«.

27 See Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*; Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*; Attwood, »Escaping the Inescapable«; James P. McDermott, *Development in the Early Buddhist Concept of Kama/Karma* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2003). Even when *kamma* is, less abstractly, called »intention« (see AN. iii, 415) the statements doesn’t express identification of *kamma* with the mental factor but the fact that only intentional acts bear *kammic* consequences.

28 Main, *Karma of Others*, 4.

Main as one of the two scholars presenting these ‘challenging theses’, explicitly refers to »doctrinal texts« and »doctrinal tradition« and construes this doctrinal *kamma* as an unalterable law: »Although the *doctrinal texts* affirm that one’s present status is karma dependent, popular rituals everywhere give gods the capacity to bring weal or woe to individuals and the group. [...] Although this theory has no justification in any of the texts of the *doctrinal tradition*, it appeared as soon as Buddhism became the religion of specific nations in South and Southeast Asia.«²⁹ Even if »the pure doctrine has been ‘contaminated’ from the very start in many ways« and »one must not imagine that the aporetic questions arose ‘later’ and were incorporated into later texts or exclusively into the popular religion«,³⁰ we still see Obeyesekere acknowledging the concept of »pure doctrine« though this has been contaminated »from the very start«. Obeyesekere’s point, rather, is that the doctrinal formulation of *kamma* produces contradictions, »aporias of existence« as he calls them, which account for *kamma*’s variegated interpretations.

Ample textual evidence supports the above view of *kamma*: in the Nikāyas *kamma* is called ‘*tathatā*’ (suchness) and ‘*niyama*’ (law-pattern). Together with the *kammasakatā* and *kammakāraṇa* principles, they make explicit pointers to *kamma*’s abstract, unmediated, law-like character and the point is being emphasized in various ways throughout the canon: »I am the owner of my *kamma*, the heir of my *kamma*; I have *kamma* as my origin, *kamma* is my relative, *kamma* is my resort; I will be the heir of whatever *kamma*, good or bad, that I do.«³¹

Not in the sky, nor the middle of the ocean,

Nor in a mountain cave;

Though terrified, there is nowhere on earth

Where one might escape from an evil action.³²

»*Sutta Nipāta* 666 declares that a man’s *kamma* is never lost (*na nassati*); it comes back to haunt him. [...] In similar vein, AN., V. 292 strongly denies that intentional

29 Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (Oakland: University of California, 2002), 134; italics added.

30 Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma*, 136.

31 AN. iii 72.

32 *Dhammapada*, 127. Hereafter Dph..

(*sañcetanika*) deeds can be wiped out once accumulated, unless their result is first experienced, either in this state of existence or another.³³

Now, why exactly this formulation should be called ‘doctrinal’? I see at least two reasons. The term, as long as it has a theoretical purport, is best applied to the formulations of *kamma* which are in line with the defining concerns of the Buddha’s *Dhamma*. These are quite uncontroversial: 1. the new soteriological technique (the *vipassanā* meditation) predicated on 2. the new ontological doctrine of non-substantiality, of the world (*anattā*).

Secondly, the stance also conforms to a broader methodological assumption that the most abstract, cognitively costly religious concepts, unlikely to survive the process of cultural transmission without extracranial institutional support (writing, rehearsal), typically belong, due to these requirements, to the religious elites overseeing the doctrinal orthodoxy.³⁴ This being said, both law-like and non-ritualistic ascriptions to *kamma* require closer consideration.

2 The Invisible ‘Law’ of Kamma

The canonical appellation ‘*niyama*’ does position *kamma* among the invariable seasonal circle (*utu-niyama*), biological processes (*bīja-niyama*), functioning of mind (*citta-niyama*) and the occurrences in here rather poly-semantic context of Dhamma (*dhamma-niyama*).³⁵ Though the intention to associate *kamma* with

33 McDermott, *Development*, 17.

34 See Justin L. Barrett, »Theological Correctness: Cognitive Constrains and the Study of Religion«, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 11,4 (1999), 325–339; Jason D. Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn’t* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); but Ilka Pyysiäinen, *Supernatural Agents: Why People Believe in Souls, Gods, and Buddhas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

35 *Dhamma-niyama* is a rather obscure category. In Nikāyas it refers to the three characteristics of all existence—*anicca*, *anattā*, *dukkha* (AN. i, 86). Nyanatiloka in his *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1988), 211, glosses the term as »typical events occurring in the lives of the Buddhas«. Neither the former nor the latter reading

abstract, unmediated and unalterable regularities is obvious, *kamma-niyama* (together with *dhamma-niyama*) clearly fails to harmonize with the three other concepts. The supposed *kammic* pattern is unobservable. While generally described as »good acts yield good results, bad acts the bad ones«³⁶ the Buddha cautions that in practice good actions can be followed, though not as their results, by bad rebirths and bad actions by good ones.³⁷

Most emphatically is the point stated by proclaiming the results of *kamma* as 'inconceivable'. As the Buddha said, »the result of *kamma* is an inconceivable matter that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive it would reap either madness or frustration«.³⁸

The law-like status of *kamma* is thus asserted together with the explicit denial of its indicators. No pattern can be observed and no attempt should be made to relate everyday events with specific *kammic* causes.³⁹ A possibility of 'experiential evidence' religious discourses provide for their concepts through what Slone calls 'conceptual tacking'⁴⁰ is precluded. Conceptual tacking represents a loop where

implies an empirically observable pattern: the *sutta* makes it clear that the three characteristics are directly observable only by *Tathāgata* (Buddha) who »directly awoken to that, breaks through to that« and if the term refers to »typical events occurring in the lives of the Buddhas« these are not empirical but miraculous occurrences.

36 »Bhikkhus, there are these four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after I realized them for myself with direct knowledge. What four? There is dark kamma with dark result; there is bright kamma with bright result; there is dark-and-bright kamma with dark-and-bright result; and there is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, kamma that leads to the destruction of kamma. These are four kinds of kamma proclaimed by me after I realized them for myself with direct knowledge«. AN. ii, 231. These general canonical contours of *kamma* are captured in Thai ubiquitous phrase »*tham dī dai dī tham chua dai chua* ทำดีได้ดี ทำชั่วได้ชั่ว«.

37 »Thus, Ananda, there is action that is incapable [of good result] and appears incapable; there is action that is incapable [of good result] and appears capable; there is action that is capable [of good result] and appears capable; and there is action that is capable [of good result] and appears incapable«. *Majjhima Nikāya*, iii, 215. Hereafter MN.

38 AN. ii, 80. Only Buddhas and advanced mediators can see their own and others' past and future rebirths.

39 See also Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma*, 132–134.

40 Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 98.

the workings of supernatural forces are indicated by »(1) diagnostic reasoning, in which general causes are inferred 'backward' from particular events, and (2) causal reasoning, in which future events are inferred probabilistically from the represented characteristics of the postulated causative agent (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky 1982)⁴¹«. ⁴² It is frequently applied in popular *kammic* discourses but impossible for doctrinal *kamma* without violating its 'inconceivable' character.

Let us make a few comparative points illustrating the full scale of this *kammic* indeterminacy: distinct from Calvinist theology which also »precludes *any* and *all* human action«⁴³ doctrinal *kamma* defies the possibility of reading the present states as indications of one's future conditions. Being an impersonal *agency*,⁴⁴ *kamma* precludes acts of pleading, praying, bribing, appeasing, promising, dedicating, and other approaches based on interactive causal assumptions people

41 Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic and Amos Tversky, *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

42 Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 99.

43 Jason D. Slone, »Why Religions Develop Free-Will Problems«, in *Mind and Religion: Psychological and Cognitive Foundations of Religiosity*, ed. by Harvey Whitehouse and Robert McCauley (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2005), 191. See Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*, 94.

44 »Having approached the brahmins & contemplatives who hold that [...] whatever a person experiences [...] is all caused by a supreme being's act of creation, I said to them: "Is it true that you hold that [...] whatever a person experiences [...] is all caused by a supreme being's act of creation? Thus asked by me, they admitted, "Yes." Then I said to them, "Then in that case, a person is a killer of living beings [...] a holder of wrong views because of a supreme being's act of creation. When one falls back on a supreme being's act of creation as being essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort [at the thought]. This should be done. This shouldn't be done. When one can't pin down as a truth or reality what should & shouldn't be done, one dwells bewildered & unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to oneself as a contemplative«. AN. 3, 61. The doctrinal *kamma* does react to one's mental states as agents do but is not to be represented as a conscious *agent*. Whole Buddhist ontological and soteriological edifice emphatically suppresses—through the doctrine of *anattā*—representations of an agent. Agents are just illusions of merely conventional, provisional (*sammutī*) nature while what *really* (*paramattha*) exists are impersonal mental and material units (*dharmas*) with momentary existence.

typically assume toward supernatural agents. As an abstract entity, *kamma* defies attempts at instrumental ritual manipulation associated with reified supernatural *agencies* such as pollution or luck. In addition, unlike luck, which only rarely has been personalized or believed to be dispensed by an intentional agent,⁴⁵ *kamma* cannot be reified and stored in or associated with objects like a horseshoe or a rabbit's foot, nor can it be ritually washed or chased away. So rather than a »law«, doctrinal *kamma* is a pattern-less, instrumentally and interactively inert otherworldly mystery.

I have mentioned earlier that it was probably this irresponsiveness to interactive and instrumental manipulation that made scholars see *kamma* as an anti-ritualistic concept explaining suffering, inequality and inequity in the world and exhorting ethical behavior. Some of these scholars would even claim that the Buddha wasn't 'particularly religious' but, as the other figures of the so-called axial age »lived in religious societies, surrounded by people who believed in supernatural entities. In this environment, the religious version of this new way of life had a cultural advantage«. ⁴⁶

Let's now consider both these claims—the ethicizing and anti-ritualistic aspects of *kamma*—in turn.

2.1 *Anti-ritualism of doctrinal kamma*

Richard Gombrich, a prominent voice in this anti-ritualistic interpretation of *kamma*, uses the word 'ethicization' to describe the transformation of the brahminic concept of a rite securing blessed afterlife into the Buddhist concept of intentional act yielding soteriological consequences. Gombrich claims: »However, the most important step that the Buddha took was to turn the doctrine of *karman* on its head. He ethicized it completely, made morality intrinsic, and so

45 »The belief in luck differs from religious belief only by degree because both involve the presumption of agency at work in the world. The essential difference is that the agents of religious traditions are less ambiguously represented than the 'agents' of luck (although in some cases luck gets personified; e.g., 'lukshmi' in Hinduism, 'fortuna' in the ancient Near East, 'lady luck' in Las Vegas, etc.)«. Slone *Theological Incorrectness*, 105.

46 Nicolas Baumard, Alexandre Hyafil, Pascal Boyer, »What Changed During the Axial Age: Cognitive Styles or Reward Systems?«, *Communicative & Integrative Biology*, 8, 5 (2015).
<<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4802742/>> (last retrieval February 4, 2017).

denied all soteriological value to ritual and all ultimate value to social distinctions. In place of a highly particularistic view of duty he propounded a simple and universal ethical dualism of right and wrong.⁴⁷ He also says:

I have written at length elsewhere (Gombrich, 1988b:66–69)⁴⁸ about how the Buddha's re-definition of 'action' as 'intention', an audacious use of language, turned the brahmin ideology upside down and ethicised the universe. I do not see how one could exaggerate the importance of the Buddha's ethicization of the world, which I regard as a turning point in the history of civilisation.⁴⁹

And this refutation of ritualism is unconditional: »The Jains and the Buddhists particularly criticized animal sacrifice, which they considered to be murderous cruelty; but their objections to sacrifice had deeper doctrinal roots, and extended to all brahminical ritual. (Perhaps one should simply say that it extended to all ritual whatsoever, but the ritual available for criticism was brahminical)«.⁵⁰

Attwood, in the same vein, contrasts the Buddhist doctrinal *kamma* with the Upanishads where »the word karma had ritual rather than ethical significance«.⁵¹ And Steven Collins notes that: »The Buddhist scriptures bear witness to a very thorough ethicization of the idea of *karma*; [...] In pre-Buddhist times, the concept had been generalised from the sacrificial sphere to action in general. For Buddhism, this movement is continued, with a new emphasis on the intention (*cetanā*) with which actions are carried out«.⁵²

Gombrich's de-ritualization of the doctrinal *kamma* is to a large extent a result of his selective understanding of ritual. Saying that »The commonest name for the patterned action which religion prescribes is ritual, but it shades over into

47 Gombrich, Richard, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988).

48 *Ibid.*, 69.

49 Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, 51.

50 Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 68.

51 Attwood, »Escaping the Inescapable«, 498.

52 Steven Collins, *Selfless persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 82. (First published 1982).

etiquette and hygiene»,⁵³ he disregards the distinction between scripted non-ritual actions and ritual performance. It is not pattern itself, but its inviolable character and the absence of an obvious causal link between components of the patterned action that make an action ritualistic:

Non-ritual behaviors are scripted and goal-oriented in the sense that for example the action complex of 'going for beer' consists of various sub-actions whose interconnections are determined by the goal of drinking beer in a pub, possibly with good friends [...]. It is easy to decide whether or not the action has been successful. [...] This is not so with ritual. [...] A ritual is successful only on condition that it is properly performed; we cannot judge its success by consequences. We cannot for example examine the infant to see whether it really has been properly baptized. [...] In not being governed by any intentional goals, ritual action can only be defined by its own form. It is self-referential as religious semantics.⁵⁴

In other words, the key difference between ordinary and ritualistic stereotyped actions is that stereotypization of an ordinary action is a function of its efficacy while the ritual »behavior becomes stereotypical when cues to its effectiveness are unavailable or unreliable«.⁵⁵

Situating all ordinary intentional acts in a *kammic* framework creates expectations which transcend the acts' typical ends, just like ritual killing of a buffalo is believed to produce effects beyond the animal's death or giving the dead body to the funeral pyre to send the soul to the desired realms. Instead of breaking through the ritualistic framework, the Buddha turned the intentional act into a magical act determining in a non-obvious causal way the agent's rebirths. Rather than refusal of ritualism, the doctrine of *kamma* thus represents an extension of the ritual field from the Vedic funeral pyre to mundane activities.

I am obviously not suggesting that scholars fail to recognize the supernatural character of *kamma* (see Collins quoted above). My point is that they tend to underplay this primarily supernatural, ritualistic aspect in favour of the concept's ethical dimension and thus widen the gap between the doctrinal formulation of *kamma* and its cultural representations. Damien Keown's translating *kamma*-

53 Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 26.

54 Pyysiäinen, *How Religion Works: Towards a New Cognitive Study of Religion*, 89.

55 Konrad Talmond-Kaminski, *Religion as Magical Ideology: How the Supernatural Reflects Rationality* (Riscmansworth: Acumen, 2013), 45.

niyama as »a law in a realm of morality« contrasted with *dhamma-niyama* as »certain religious phenomena«⁵⁶ is a vivid example.

2.2 Ethical kamma

As suggested above, the force of *kamma's* ethical appeal is ebbed by its experiential underdetermination. Also, no conclusive empirical evidence has been provided in support of the ethicizing claim so far.

Historically, for the period of the 'axial age', which covers both the period of the Buddha's teaching and development of Buddhism under King Ashoka, »what we really need is proper statistics on violent death in ancient India [...], and once again, none exist«.⁵⁷ There is no evidence of decrease in quotidian or large-scale violence in the areas with established Buddhism meriting *kamma*, in any practical sense, the label 'a turning point in the history of civilisation'. As is well known, the Third Century BCE witnessed Ashoka's conquest of Kalinga, a bloodshed showing no concern for *kammic* consequences. It was after the victory that »the Beloved of the Gods felt remorse« and »announced that he would follow *dhamma*«. ⁵⁸ Whether this »*dhamma*« was solely the Buddha's *Dhamma* is still an open question but none of Ashoka's inscriptions mentions explicitly the concept of *kamma*. The king's advocating of »good behaviour, [...] obedience, [...] generosity, [...] and abstention from killing living things«⁵⁹ might thus have been a spontaneous human reaction to the horrors of war or a wise act of statesmanship. But even if we presume that the social and cultural life in India of the axial age followed the developments in its Chinese, Greek or Jewish counterparts and »Pax

56 He glosses five law-like processes referred to in Pāli canon and systematized in commentarial literature: »Pāli commentaries recognize five areas that are subject to law-like principles: (1) natural science and ecology (*utu-niyama*); (2) botany (*bija-niyama*); (3) morality (*karma-niyama*); (4) psychology (*citta-niyama*); (5) certain religious phenomena (*dhamma-niyama*).« Damien Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 199.

57 Ian Morris, *War. What is It Good for? The Role of Conflict in Civilisation, from Primates to Robots* (London: Profile Books, 2015), 71–72.

58 Morris, *War. What is It Good for?*, 71.

59 *Ibid.*, 71.

Indica« had been established, not at all an implausible scenario, this dynamic is with a better sense for empirical evidence explained as an adaptive response to affluence⁶⁰ than an impact of the teaching of *kamma*. The affluence theory proposes that the material prosperity allows for devaluating of high status and wealth and appreciation of arts, aesthetics, well-being, friendship and »spiritual« needs.⁶¹ Morris demonstrates an increase in »energy capture« across the »lucky latitudes«, about 20 to 35 degrees north of the equator in the Old World,⁶² the area comprising the areas of Magadha and Kosala kingdoms until eventually »at the end of the first millennium BCE these regions reached a production level (25 000 kcal per capita per day) that largely surpassed that of previous societies, which ranged from 4000 kcal for hunter-gatherer societies to 15 000 kcal for states such as Egypt and Uruk«. ⁶³ In this model the development of moral religions »is viewed as just the tip of the iceberg—a reflection of a deeper, more intuitive and automatic psychological change«. ⁶⁴ Consequently, »Religious commandments and beliefs (afterlife punishment and rewards) are not advantageous by themselves. They rather become attractive because they allow justifying and legitimizing a range of new behaviors that were already emerging in the Eurasian upper classes«. ⁶⁵

In contemporary Thailand »The concept of karma as a religious preaching to build a better life cycle is not in reality a guiding force in regulating Thai social

60 See for example Nicolas Baumard and Pascal Boyer, »Explaining Moral Religions« (2013), <https://sites.sas.upenn.edu/behavethics/files/baumard_boyer_2013_tics_explaining_moral_religions.pdf> (last retrieval March 3, 2017); Ian Morris, *The Measure of Civilization: How Social Development Decides the Fate of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

61 Interestingly, Spiro in his seminal work fifty years ago (*Buddhism and Society*, 72) related the development of the world-rejecting, doctrinal Buddhism to psychological effects of material saturation. He proposed that that the attractiveness of the concept of nibbāna rests in satiation of worldly material desires.

62 Ian Morris, »*Social Development*«, <<http://www.ianmorris.org/docs/social-development.pdf>> (last retrieval March 19, 2017); Morris, *The Measure of Civilization*; Morris, *War. What is It Good for?*

63 Baumard and Boyer, »Explaining Moral Religions«.

64 Baumard et al., »What Changed During the Axial Age«. The authors also refer to Nicolas Baumard and Pascal Boyer, »Religious Beliefs as Reflective Elaborations on Intuitions: A Modified Dual-Processing Model«, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22,4 (2013), 295–300.

65 Baumard et al., »What Changed During the Axial Age«.

behavior« either but »it serves psychologically as a defence mechanism for a whole range of negative experiences«. ⁶⁶

It thus seems safe to conclude that though the concept of ‘ethicization’ does capture an important change in the *kammic* doctrine, its purport is in accommodating ethics into a ritualistic context rather than in replacing the empty ritualism with world-changing ethical exhortation. Saying that this was a world-changing event either fails to note the difference or ascribes the soteriological concerns an unrealistic cultural weight and distribution.

3 *Kamma and Ritual*

If this seems sound, then the abstract, experientially untraceable and instrumentally and interactively inert doctrinal *kamma* will be only unlikely incorporated into peoples’ practical thought and behavior. Acknowledging *kamma* through observing negatively formulated moral precepts doesn’t provide the necessary feeling of actively doing something about one’s *kamma* and doesn’t contribute to its internalization. However, meditation might have helped, historically, to internalize the doctrinal concept of *kamma* among a very small circle of religious virtuosi.

Though the doctrinal formulation of *kamma* contravenes Brahmanical rituals it ascribes non-obvious causal structures to everyday intentional acts, and turns any form of intentional navigating through these structures into a ritual. Since it is intention that determines the soteriological consequences of a ritual action, the power of any ritual will be in this context determined by its capacity to produce wholesome intentional states. Gombrich is thus right in taking the identification of *cetanā* with *kamma* as the ‘dogmatic’ formulation of *kamma*. Even though the Buddha’s »identification« of *kamma* with *cetanā* was honorific rather than logical, this formulation which pinpoints the importance of intention, connects *kamma* most directly with the Buddhist soteriological technology—*vipassanā*: »It is this ‘purifying action’ (*puñña kamma*) which brings the good Buddhist rewards in this and future lives. But since acting is really mental, doing a good act is actually

⁶⁶ Komin, *Psychology of Thai People*, 128.

purifying one's state of mind. In meditation, such purification is undertaken directly, without any accompanying action«. ⁶⁷ »Dogmatically, a monk's kind thought is good, purifying karma; but it does not come naturally to call it 'action'«. ⁶⁸ This soteriological function of *vipassanā* might produce belief_B in *kamma* since meditation provides emotional experience («feel real»; see below p. 87) to be associated with the doctrinal *kamma*.

Salient meditative states, accompanied with visions, give it the needed emotional tag and encode it in episodic memory. Furthermore, long-lasting cognitive and behavioural changes resulting from systematic meditative and ascetic practices can help to represent this doctrinal (or dogmatic) *kamma* as 'working'. The results of the meditative effort, however, are not fully in the mediator's hands, since, despite the effort, it is ultimately one's past *kamma* that sets limits to one's spiritual progress in the present lifetime. This also brings the concept of *kamma* into very specific, emotionally laden context of the mediator's earnest struggle.

It is obvious that the number of meditators, let alone those who have achieved a transforming experience, was in any historical period too small to produce belief_B in *kamma* on a large cultural scale. Both historical and contemporary data indicate that, more often than not, meditation manuals have been used as magical formulas rather than meditational guides. ⁶⁹ Here an array of non-canonical rituals emerges as a systematic necessity for anchoring *kamma* in cultural context. One might object to this emphasis on ritual, that—as Schwartz has demonstrated—⁷⁰mere repetition can increase the likeliness of a statement to be regarded as true. Also, the substitution hypothesis that »any statement that includes pre-experimentally earned concepts (e.g., *Ernest Hemingway, World War I*) will evoke some experience of familiarity, even if the statement as a whole (*Ernest Hemingway*

67 Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, 68–69.

68 *Ibid.*, 52.

69 See for example Robert Sharf, »Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience«, *Numen*, 42 (1995), 228–283; Robert Sharf, »Rhetoric of experience and the Study of Religion«, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7,11–12 (2000), 267–287; Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*.

70 Martin, Schwartz, »Repetition and Truth Value«, *The American Journal of Psychology*, 95, (3) (1982), 393–407. See also Ilka Pyysiäinen, »Believing and Doing: How Ritual Action Enhances Religious Beliefs«, in *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture: Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative*, ed. by Armin W. Geertz and Jeppe, S. Jensen (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011).

was an ambulance driver in World War I) is new to the subject«⁷¹ has been experimentally substantiated.

These effects, however, are not stable and, given the evasiveness of doctrinal *kamma*, insufficient to function as sole stabilizing mechanisms.

3.1 *Ritual make-belief*

Let me briefly, drawing chiefly on Pyysiäinen,⁷² outline how rituals make religious concepts believable_B.

Referring to Wegner,⁷³ Pyysiäinen lists »three things that contribute to something being judged real; it must seem real (perceptual detail), feel real (emotional impact), and act real (uncontrollability)«. ⁷⁴ Rituals provide emotionally charged visual pageantry (feel and seem real) as well as a structure invoking agency ascribed to something beyond the participants in the ritual.

The sensory material (seeming real) and emotional stimuli (feeling real) to associate with the notion of *kamma* come from the ritual props. More intricate is the issue of producing the intuition of transcendent agency present (uncontrollability) together with the participants' belief that what they are doing leads to the desired effect. This, in principle, is possible through the human capacity of understanding other peoples' minds.

As Pyysiäinen explains, the basal requirements for a conscious action are a neuronal configuration for *possible* motor actions activated by sensory inputs and a control mechanism selecting from these possibilities one to be executed. Since this 'planning' mechanism involves not only responses to inanimate objects but also to *other* organisms, it must involve a capacity to represent other organisms' (agents) mental states as these determine agent's behaviour. This basic cognitive structure allows for sharing of internal states and opens for full-fledged conscious awareness which is »an experience of volitional control over meta-

71 Schwartz, *Repetition and Truth Value*, 395.

72 Pyysiäinen, *Believing is Doing*.

73 Daniel M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

74 Pyysiäinen, *Believing and Doing*, 152.

representations«. ⁷⁵ »Meta-representation« here means the representation of representation i.e., a context in which a representation is embedded: ‘there is a cake on the table’ is representation, ‘John *wants* the cake’ is meta-representation. ‘Laura *knows* that John *wants* that cake’ involves yet another embeddedness i.e., ‘Laura knows that...’ and the structure thus forms an even higher level of meta-representation.

The presence of these two simulations—that of one’s possibilities of actions and of other people’s mental states—implies an important element of our perception of the world, namely goal-orientation. The world we perceive consists not of mere things ‘out-there’ but of ready-to-hand objects to be either engaged or avoided. This relational structure comes in different levels of specificity too, from aiming at homeostasis—the most basic goal-representation—up to conscious representation of the world we live in and our position in it. The »me-in-the-world« is constantly being ‘scooped’ out of many represented possibilities through motoric action:

The moment bodily behaviour ensues is the moment when the already active motor simulation is integrated into the currently active bodily self-model. At that moment one identifies with a particular action, turning potential action into actual action. [...] A possible (form of) self is realized by enacting it. Proprioceptive and kinesthetic feedback allows one to feel the degree to which one had identified with the sequence of bodily movements.⁷⁶

Through multi-modal »mirror neuron system« (neurons activated both when one *performs* an action and *watches* someone doing it) is this I-perception extended to others, who are then seen as intentional agents of equal ontological status. The higher level of conscious experience of inter-subjectivity is formed on this basis. Ready-to-hand world’s objects are thus represented not only through what *we* do with them but also through what *others* do (and can do). By observing and understanding other people’s actions directed to ritual objects, these objects receive qualities beyond what their physical characteristics suggest. Their function is understood through what others do with them. But it is also obvious to all present that the intention producing the ritual actions is not fully with the actors: participants in the ritual only recycle stipulated conduct and are unable to adjust

⁷⁵ Pyysiäinen, *Believing and Doing*, 150.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

the ritual sequence, say, for the sake of higher efficacy or even assess the ritual's efficacy. No inspection of a monk tells you whether he was ordained properly; it is, again, only the correct performance of the *upasampadā* ceremony that establishes his proper religious status. In this situation, mind will spontaneously seek for the target of agency-attribution external to the participants.

As Atran⁷⁷ drawing on Csibra et al.,⁷⁸ argues, the agency-attribution is triggered not only on the basis of the object's cues (such as motoric behaviour i.e., self-propelledness, change of direction or velocity without collision etc.), but also on the basis of event-structure (predator-prey, friend-foe). A telic (from Greek »telos«—goal, end) structure has two characteristics: an end point (which gives the action its meaning) and that the achievement of this end point is not guaranteed. These two conditions issue the intuition of agency being involved even without necessarily identifying ostensibly a specific object as an agent: »The critical feature of a telic situation is not the initiation of an action, but contingent control of its outcome, such that the outcome could have been different if control had been lost.«⁷⁹

Pyysiäinen also argues that unpredictability of the ritual outcome, the fact that ritual might fail

doesn't destroy belief but rather affirms it. This is because if the ritual were effective every time, this would create in the participants a feeling that it is their own will causing the outcome: they pray to or otherwise manipulate counterintuitive agents, and what they want from them subsequently happens. [...] If, however, [...] the rains sometimes come and sometimes do not, participants will be prone to feel that what happens is controlled by someone other than by themselves.⁸⁰

Ritual structure is a telic structure which includes standard causal representations as well as non-obvious causal expectations: people walk to change the place, speak to convey a message, move objects to adjust their position. But words can be uttered without an intention to communicate, water drunk not to quench one's

77 Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 64. See also Pyysiäinen, *Believing and Doing*, 154.

78 Gergely Csibra et al., »Goal Attribution without Agency Cues: The Perception of 'Pure Reason' in Infancy«, *Cognition* 72,3 (1999), 237–267.

79 Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, 65.

80 Pyysiäinen, *Believing and Doing*, 157.

thirst, and the object's placement might have nothing to do with logistic optimization, etc. By creating a framework combining representations of intentional acts based on both standard and non-obvious causal expectations, ritual connects supernatural (counterintuitive) concepts with everyday reality. One's own acting upon religious beliefs and observing others to act on the same presumption reinforces these intuitions. Through associating supernatural concepts with sensual pageantry, emotional load, and context invoking the presence of a non-obvious agency ritual helps to accommodate supernatural concepts in one's cognitive structure.

This, obviously, is not to say that each participant believes_B in the ritual's efficacy or its related supernatural concepts. Different participants can perceive the same ritual either as a social convention, symbolic religious act or magical technology. The proposal, however, attempts to outline why ritual has this capacity to contribute to internalization of religious concepts whether one uses it explicitly for this purpose or not.

4 Conclusion

Since religious concepts are not part of logically consistent systems, their meaning is not constituted by logical relationships to other concepts (though religious doctrines have a level of intuitive coherency and attempts at their consistency can be made.) *Kamma*, gods, ancestors, luck and fate are shorthand references for practical systems of behaviour in salient circumstances, and therefore their understanding will be informed by action-representation. Since it is impossible to engage an abstract law in any non-theoretical way as it is difficult (if not impossible) to represent it without relating it to some pattern, *kamma* will on a larger cultural scale be transformed into more intuitive forms or merged with other supernatural concepts and their associated practices. Ritual bears primacy over conceptual consistency in producing motivational belief_B in religious concepts and determines the interpretation of concepts.

Thai non-canonical practices performed by religious authorities are thus systemic requirements for successful internalization of the doctrinal concept of *kamma*. Contingent historical circumstances shape both the practices and the forms the concept assumes but they don't initiate the dynamics.

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