

## The Folk Belief and Cultural Heritage in the Syncretic Theravada Buddhism : The Cases of Human-Spirits Relationship in Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar

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*Abstract* : This sociological study of religion attempts to explain the relationship between humans and spirits in the syncretism of Theravada Buddhism tradition with case studies in Indonesia, Cambodia, and Myanmar. In these countries, before the influence of the Indian Dharmic Religion, people practiced Theravada Buddhism side by side with folk beliefs. This study uses the theory of correlational theology from Paul Tillich as the search for common ground in reflection of the syncretic folk belief of worshipping Danghyang among Javanese people in Indonesia, Neak Ta among Khmer people in Cambodia, and Nat among Burmese people in Myanmar. The method used literature research and field observations in three countries in 2020. The results of this study are in the exploration of doctrinal concepts from religious texts and the acculturation practices on cultural heritage between the folk belief with the view of wholeness theology in Theravada Buddhism cosmology. Humans live in harmony with other creatures in this world according to the law of attachment and reciprocity, or Pativasamuppada, consisting of 31 realms of existence. In the context of the three countries, these spirits articulate three relations: the relationship between guardian spirits and the people, the relationship between the deceased spirits and the living, and the relationship between spirits and the social environment, as in line with spiritual ecology (215 words)

*Keywords* : Theravada Buddhism; Folkbelief; Syncretic Buddhism

### 1. Background

This sociological study of religion attempts to explain the relationship between human and spirits in the syncretism of Theravada Buddhism tradition with case studies in Indonesia, Cambodia, and Myanmar. This study will apply the theory of correlational theology from Paul Tillich as the search for common ground in reflection of the syncretic folk belief of worshipping *Danghyang* among Javanese people in Indonesia, *Neak Ta* among Khmer people in Cambodia, and *Nat* among Burmese people in Myanmar. Using qualitative descriptive study, primary data sources of this study come from the Tipitaka, the Buddhist Sermon of Paritta Sutta and field observations, while secondary sources come from scientific articles and media data. The results of this study are in the exploration of doctrinal concept from religious texts and the acculturation practices between the folk belief with the view of wholeness theology in Theravada Buddhism cosmology , of which doctrinal values on the harmonious relationship between humans and non-physical beings such deity, spirits and ghost.

In Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar, before the influence of Indian Dharmic Religion, people from three countries used to practice Theravada Buddhism side by side with animistic practices by worshipping various spirits, namely ancestral spirits, guardian spirits, or god-like spirits. In Indochina, for the most part, Theravada Buddhists are used to performing rituals of delegating merit (*Pattidana*) to non-physical beings to the house of spirits they have at home or in the corners of the village. As in the photo below, spirit houses are very common in Theravada Buddhist countries in the Indochina region such as Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.



*Photo of Spirit House in Phnom Penh, Cambodia  
(Researcher's Documentation Source: Fuji Prastowo, 2020).*

While in Indonesia, the spirit house is manifested in the village *Pundhen* which is usually a spring with a large Banyan tree. The Javanese Theravada Buddhist people who inhabit the mountain slopes of Temanggung in Central Java Indonesia, for the example, also have a habit of offering incense to spirits outside their homes, as in the adaptation of *Padmasana* in Balinese Hinduism as an offering to the universe.



*Buddhist Padmasana to place an offering to universe,  
including spirits in Temanggung, Indonesia  
(Researcher's Documentation Source: Fuji Prastowo, 2021).*

In Indonesia, the Javanese, who are Theravada Buddhism, still preserve the tradition of respecting -worshipping- *Danghyang*, namely the guardian spirits of houses, trees, and other sacred places. In Javanese culture, *Danghyang* or also called *Danyang* are spirits that protect a sacred place called *Pundhen* (Endraswara, 2005: Geertz, 1983). *Danghyang* is believed to be the spirit of a deceased ancestor. Not only for Buddhists, Javanese people who adhere to Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism and other *Folk-beliefs* still carry out the *Slametan* tradition as a tribute to the *Danghyang* in order to protect the villagers. In the month of *Sura* and *Ruwah*, the Javanese people make offerings to *Danghyang* with the intention of hoping for a safety with *Merti Dusun* Ritual. Hundred Years after the collapse of the Hindhu-Buddhist civilization in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism returned to Indonesia in 20<sup>th</sup> century after the genocide tragedy towards communism in 1965. Those who are animistic adherents at that time were labelled to communist, making many Javanese converted to Buddhism with the majority of following Theravada tradition whose a high tolerant for animist belief. In line with *Danghyang* in Indonesia, the Khmer people in Cambodia revere *Neak Ta* as their guardian spirit. *Neak Ta* is also a folk belief that coexists with Theravada Buddhism.

According to Coggan (2015), the Khmer people in Cambodia believe in *Neak Ta* as an ancestral spirit who lives on as a supernatural world living side by side with humans. The spread of Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century underwent a process of acculturation with local animist beliefs known as *Chumneang Pteah* who inhabited sacred areas such as old trees, caves, and other places. The majority of *Neak Ta* which is also called *Lok Ta* also has an anthropomorphic form like *Danghyang* in Indonesia, while the monument is adjacent to a Buddhist temple in the form of Humanoid Statues called *Kru Boramey*

The third case study is in Myanmar which has also *Nat* as protective spirits. Unlike Indonesia and Cambodia, *Nat* are god-like spirits that are worshiped alongside Buddha Statue. In Myanmar, consisting 37 great Nats, there are two types of *Nat*, namely *Auk Nats* or lower *Nats* which are ancestral spirits as in Indonesian and Cambodian beliefs, and *Ahtet Nats* or upper *Nats* which occupy the sky realm (Bart, 1906). *Leppya* is a butterfly-spirit in Burmese word. In Theravada Buddhism, the non-physical supernatural beings who inhabit the earth realm are called *Yakkas* as equivalent to *Auk Nats*, while those, as equivalent to *Ahtet Nats*, who live in the sky realms are called *Gandharvas*.

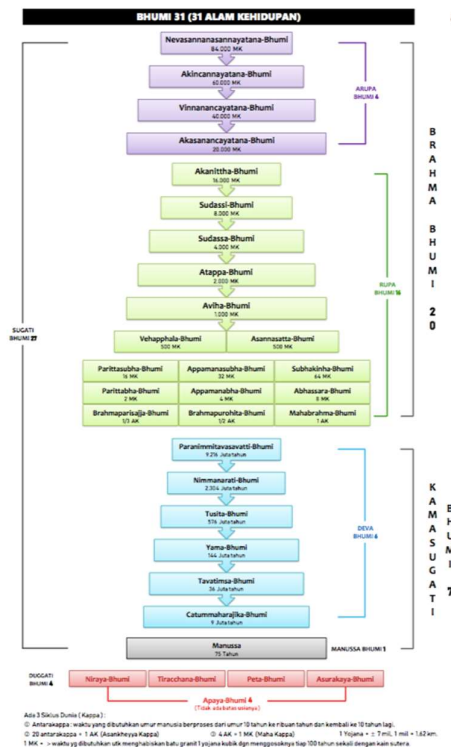


Diagram 31 The Realm of Life According to the Cosmology of Buddhism (Santamoko, 2019)

Reflecting to the Buddhism teachings, as in the diagram above, the cosmology of the universe according to Buddhism consists of 31 realms of existence. There are 26 happy realms that have no physical form above the human realm and there are 4 suffering realms below the human realm, namely the hell realm (*Niraya*), the animal realm (*Tiracchana*), the demon realm (*Petta*), and the demon realm (*Asurakaya*). Thus, Buddhism is not anthropocentric in that humans are not the centre of the life of the universe. Humans live side by side in harmony with other creatures in this world according to the law of attachment and reciprocity or *Paticcasamuppada*. In addition to the doctrine of reincarnation, Buddhists believe that before becoming human, they may be born in the realm of spirits or the realm of animals. Like Gautama Buddha, the historical figure of the founder of Buddhism, is described in the Jataka Sutta in the Tipitaka about his life as an animal, carved in many temples in Indochina and Indonesia (Setiadi, 2021).

Based on the empirical reflection above, this study aims to photograph the intersection of Buddhist teachings of Theravada school with syncretism practices that exist in Javanese society in Indonesia, Khmer people in Cambodia, and Burmese people in Myanmar. The flexibility of the Theravada Buddhism tradition in accommodating this folk belief is the basic reason for this study to be carried out within the framework of the sociology of religion. In short, It tries to reflect on the empirical tradition with religious texts, on how religious institutions can accommodate the intersection between religious doctrine and culture.

## **2. Method**

This research uses a qualitative descriptive study. This is based on the reflection on the study from Bauman (2016) on comparative methods in spatial approaches to religion, arguing that discussion of religion is a non-spatial study that crosses spatial boundaries. The intersection of culture with the local context is the common thing in religion studies. To facilitate this, this study will use a qualitative descriptive study which aims to describe a phenomenon in detail with the characteristics of holistic narration (Nassaji, 2015). The results of the study are comprehensive descriptive texts based on stories from observational experiences, summaries of religious texts, scientific articles, and media data. The data will be processed with Nvivo before being narrated descriptively, while sources of data in this study are as follows :

Primary Data Sources	Religious Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tipitaka</li> <li>• The Buddhist Sermon of Paritta Sutta of Sangha Theravada.</li> </ul>
	Field Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field Observations among Khmer Buddhist Society in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, Cambodia in December 2019.</li> <li>• Field Observations among Burmese Buddhist Society in Yangon, Myanmar in January 2020.</li> <li>• Field Observations among Javanese Buddhist Society in Temanggung and Kulonprogo, Indonesia in October 2021</li> </ul>
Secondary Data Sources	Scientific Articles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Books</li> <li>• Journal</li> </ul>
	Media Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Media : Youtube.</li> <li>• Online Articles.</li> </ul>

### 3. Analysis

**3.1 Buddhism :** The harmonious relationships between humans and any living creature in nature

The contribution of this study lies in two parts, namely the *first in the realm of theoretical development of the study of sociology of religion* which places Paul Tillich's view of correlational theology as a framework for reading syncretism in Theravada Buddhism. Tillich (1970) argues that 'religion is the substance of culture and culture is the expression or form of religion', meaning that there is a strong relationship between religion and culture. This study uses what Tillich said with correlational theology of religion and culture by employing method of correlation : the historico-cultural bridge, the religio-mystical bridge, and the ethico-practical bridge.

In this sense, Said (1993) says that all human cultures are influenced by each other and nothing is completely pure. Stewart (1999) explains that anthropologists' studies on syncretism are one of the classical studies, considering that every culture is a mixture of other cultures, so the words syncretism, hybridity and creolization really depend on the power of the narration. The term "cultural borrowing" is also strongly attached to the study of postcolonialism, which places the perspective of a culture with higher power in viewing a lower culture, just as the colonists view their indigenous people.

The dimensions of Pantheism in Buddhism, one of which is seen in the pattern of harmonious relationships between humans and any living creature in nature.

*“Ye keci pāna-bhūtatthi tasā vā thāvarā vā anavasesā, Dīghā vā ye mahantā vā majjhimā rassakā anuka-thūlā,*

*Ditthā vā ye ca aditthā ye ca dūre vasanti avidūre, Bhūtā vā sambhavesī vā sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā”*

Meaning: Any living being that exists; the wobbly and the sturdy without exception, the long or the great, the medium, the short, the small, the thin or the fat;

Seen or unseen, far or near, who have become or have not become, may they all live happily.

Karaniyametta Sutta (Sutta on Loving-Kindness) in the Holy Paritta (Bhikkhu Dhammadiro Mahathera, 2005, p. 37)

“Sabbe Sattā Bhavantu *Sukhitattā*” which means may all sentient beings be happy is a very popular piece of Sutta in Buddhism which is very popularly recited as a universal broom prayer for all beings without being conditioned by any kind of barrier. The Sutta Pitaka or in Sanskrit referred to as the Sutra Pitaka is a collection of discourses in the Pali canon which incidentally is the second part of the discourse of the three parts of the Buddhist scriptures, namely the Tripitaka. The Sutta Pitaka contains at least more than 10,000 suttas derived from the lectures, teachings, dialogues, questions and answers of Gautama Buddha with his students. Which are then grouped into 5 groups (nikaya) namely *Digha Nikaya*, *Majjhima Nikaya*, *Samyutta Nikaya*, *Anguttara Nikaya*, and *Khuddaka Nikaya*.

In practice the Karaniyametta Sutta is closely related to the practice of meditation to radiate love for all living beings or known as Metta-Bhavana which is then correlated with the Buddhist way of life (Buddharakkhita, 2013, p. 54). If summarized, the way of life of the Buddhist community both among ascetics and householders is based on the diagram below,





*Fangsheng on Vesak*

Source: *Instagram*  
 @sammaditthifoundation, 2021

*Fangsheng of Thai Princess :*

Source : *Instagram*  
 @thairoyalfamily, 2021



*Fangsheng of Vesak 2565 BE.*

Source : *Researcher, 2021*

The basis for doing Fangsheng is in line with the first precept in the Buddhist Pancasila, namely "Pānātipātā veramani sikkhapadam samādiyāmi" which means "I am determined to train myself to avoid killing living beings (Bhikkhu Dhammadiro Mahathera, 2005, p. 24). Fangsheng is one of the implementations of transmitting love in Buddhism which is one of the practices of Abhaya Dana (giving a sense of security) by releasing living beings to free them from suffering such as killing, and being able to return to enjoying their free life in their original nature until they die not as food. . In this perspective, by returning them back to nature, there is a balance in the ecosystem which will then have a direct impact on the environmental conditions in which humans live.



On the other hand, Fangsheng can also be criticized when Buddhists who do so release animals that are not native to the area or are invasive. Therefore, in creating this goodness of metta or love, everyone must also inculcate the value of Panna (wisdom), so as not to cause new suffering due to human Avidya (ignorance) about natural knowledge. In addition, when this good will is initiated by deliberately sending animals to animal traders to be released, it will also create new bad karma between humans and animals.

Reviewing Fangsheng from a Buddhist perspective can be started from the perspective of Punarbhawa (rebirth). Before being born as a human being, in the Buddhist belief, every human being must have been reborn in the realm of suffering as an animal. With this point of view, the released animals can experience a better life without having to live in fear until they eventually die and be reborn in a happier world. As the diagram below shows cosmology in Buddhism, there are 31 realms of existence with 4 realms of suffering under the human realm, namely the hell realm (niraya), the animal realm (Tiracchana), the demon realm (map), the demon realm (Asurakaya)

A life of mutual respect and love for all beings is the essence of Buddhism. The definition of being here then becomes more fluid, like the cosmological link of the realm of life above. In Indochina, for example, in addition to respecting animals, they are also used to performing rituals of devoting services (pattidana) to an unseen nation with daily offerings to Phi or Spirit House.



Gautama Buddha himself in the Jataka Sutta is told about his many times as an animal. This Jataka Sutta is carved for the most part to fill the walls of Borobudur Temple. Besides being born as an animal, in his past life, humans may have lived as plants which is implicitly explained in the Agganna Sutta and Dhammapada III 88-90 about the reciprocal relationship of human behavior with the evolution of rice which at that time the idea arose in the human mind to collect rice to eat (Setiadi, 2021).

In the Mahayana tradition, Fangsheng is interpreted as one of the Boddhichitta determinations, namely the determination of Buddhists to try to eliminate the suffering of other beings. From the 1st to the 15th centuries, the Buddhist tradition that developed in the

Diagram of the 31 Realms of Life According to Cosmological Buddhism (Santamoko, 2019)

archipelago was very closely related to Mahayana with its educational center being in the Sriwijaya Kingdom. From there, there was known an education that is still thriving in Tibet about Lojong which was introduced by teacher Dhamakirti at that time, namely the Buddhist effort to 'exchange' the suffering of other beings with themselves through changing the point of view that every creature encountered can be perceived as our 'mother'. in past lives as in the quote in the Karaniya Metta Sutta (Sutta on Loving-kindness),

"Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttāṃ āyusā eka-putta-manurakkhe, Evampi sabba-bhūtesu mānasam-bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ" (Meaning: Like a mother who risks her life Protecting her only child. Thus towards all living beings, the thought of boundless love radiates: Karaniya Metta 7th Verse Sutta)

This is related to the Buddhist view of living beings where every living being consists of Rupa (physical body) and Nama (mind) which in the mental elements are Vinnana (consciousness), Sanna (perception/memory), Vedana (feeling), and Sankhara (mind formations). Just like humans, animals also have feelings that must also be considered. Thinking about the feelings of an animal is indirectly correlated with thinking about the ecosystem in which the animal lives.

From one of the practices that are closely related to the environmental ethos above, this study then seeks to capture in depth the relationship between Buddhism and environmental ethos. Ecological studies specifically study the relationship between living things and their natural environment. This is in line with Buddhist teachings which place nature as part of the Dharmadatu, which is an absolute unity where when a phenomenon or event occurs in this world, it will affect directly or indirectly anyone who lives together in it. According to the three main laws in Buddhism, namely the three general patterns of the universe (Tilakkhana), nature always undergoes processes and changes following three main laws, namely (1) Sabbe Sankhara Anicca (Aniccata) which means that everything in this universe consists of a mixture of elements. which is impermanent, (2) Sabbe Sankhara Dukkha (Dukkhata) which means that what is impermanent is unsatisfactory so that suffering arises, (3) Sabbe Dhamma Anatta (Anatta) which means that everything without essence is eternal. In other words, all phenomena that occur in the universe are based on the existence of Paticcasamuppada (law of cause and effect). This law of interdependence makes the relationship between humans and nature inseparable from each other (Caliadi, 2021). In short, the law of paticcasamuppada can be formulated as follows:

*"Imasmiṃ sati idam hoti, Imasuppada idam uppajjati, Imasmiṃ asati idam na hoti, Imassa nirodha idam nirujjati"*. Meaning: With this, that is that, With

the arising of this, that arises, With the absence of this, then that is not, With the extinction of this, then that goes out (Prajoko & Sukiman, 2017, p. 245)

Reflecting on the practice of Buddhist teachings that are correlated with environmental preservation above, this study then tries to capture two very interesting areas to study in sociological life, namely, first, in the realm of Pariyatti (science) about how Buddhism is taught in environmental ethos. Second, in the realm of Patipatti (practice) and Pativeddha (meditation) about how Buddhist communities in Indonesia, especially Java, translate the teachings of the Buddha by harmonizing them with local Javanese culture with its Kejawen principles. The sages in the ancient Javanese era, this ascetic life was seen from the stages of life such as Grehasta, Wanaprashta, Sanyasin, and Bhiksuka to reach the path of perfection liberated in many shackles of suffering.

### 3.2 The Folkbelief and Cultural Heritages : Myanmar, Cambodia and Indonesia

This section will answer the second problem formulation, What are the cultural forms of syncretism practices that represent the harmonious relationship between humans and spirits with case studies of Danghyang in Indonesia, Neak Ta in Cambodia, and Nat in Myanmar?. If it is concluded from all the examples of human relations in the metaphysical dimension in three countries, it is based on the harmonious relationship of humans with other creatures according to the cosmological foundations in Buddhism which are mixed with animism. There are several assumptions of spirits from a human perspective, firstly respect to spirits because respect to demigods or groups of gods who live on earth to protect a place or humans. Second, respect for spirits as Pattidana's ethos, the services to ancestors born in the spirit dimension. Third, respect for spirits because of the balance between nature and humans.

The element of Animism that is still strong in the three Buddhist cultures in Myanmar, Indonesia and Cambodia is evidence that there is a strong syncretism between the local animist religions and Buddhism. Animism is the belief that everything in this world has a soul like humans. Therefore, humans need to take care of nature such as animals, plants, and every other natural object as part of a harmonious relationship.

In Cambodia, for the Khmer. Cambodian religion is a complex combination of Hinduism, Buddhism and Animism. Hinduism provides transcendental protection to the Khmer by the presence of gods, Buddhism provides the ethical foundation of life, and animism forms a complex teaching between humans and spirits. These three form the sole mandala for Cambodia's spiritual life. Some of the mandalas formed in Khmer from human relations with spirits are the belief in the existence of several important spirits in Cambodian culture such as:

Preah Phum	They are village guardian spirits who usually live around houses, lakes, farms, mango trees, irrigation canals, rice fields, and plantations. He does not have a single name from one village to another, but is always treated with respect by the villagers to get health and safety in life. Usually after a natural disaster, the Khmer people will hold a ceremony for him
Neak Ta	There are at least three types, namely those who live in the wilderness, those who live in villages, and those who live in the waters in general. In the order of Animism culture in Cambodia, he has the most important position, such as Neak Ta Dam Po which is believed to always give good luck to good people.
Arak	wild spirits that inhabit plantations and rice fields.
Boramey	Spirits who have a desire to always take care of humans. Some of its species can be classified as Neak Ta in some areas of Cambodia. He can be classified as Patron Saints who provide protection to those who make offerings to him.
Meba	Classified Spirits come from family ancestry who live as spirits after his death.
Arp	The evil spirits born due to the death of humans who behaved badly in their reincarnation life. He became the spirit that the Khmer people feared the most.

For Khmer culture, people who can be a mediator between human life and the life of the spirits are called Kru which comes from the Sankrit word "Guru" which means teacher. There are several types such as Khmer Crew like healers who understand medicine comes from herbs, leaves, and tree roots. In addition, there is the Arak Crew who has the ability to make contact with Arak, and the Boramey Crew who is able to make contact with Boramey.

In this case not all spirits have the nature of helping humans. Therefore, villages in Cambodia usually have a place of worship in their respective homes to avoid spirits that are considered destructive and disrupt the lives of villagers with disease and disaster. In everyday life, Khmer people can easily be found using Koan Krak, which is an amulet that is believed to have mystical powers from various types of natural objects or other mystical objects.

Of all the spirits, Neak Ta occupies the most important position as a supernatural being in Cambodia. His life around nature causes many worships to be born on important days in agriculture such as during rice planting or rice harvesting. In this case, Neak Ta is considered the owner of the land, while humans are trespassers. In some activities, humans need to ask permission from Neak Ta through rituals that are considered appropriate for Neak Ta. They are represented by statues of an adult male or female, or can take models from Hindu culture as found in some parts of Angkor.

Of all the spirits, Meba was not considered a demigod. Meba is an ancestral spirit that is believed to be reincarnated after death. The Khmer people pay homage to all the Meba because the Meba Mothers are believed to be the mothers in the past lives of humans who they cannot remember. In this Meba category there are Mrieng Kongveal who are child-spirits who live around the trees around the village. They are depicted wearing a red cloth on their heads. Chumneang Pteah are protective spirits in people's homes which are usually placed on altars in people's homes. The last one is the Tevoda protective spirits in the residents' houses which have an altar outside the residents' houses with an altar in the yard of the house in the form of a small house.

The relationship between humans and spirits in Cambodia is based on the Buddhist ethos which was adapted in the local languages, namely Kamm and Bonn. Kamm is Karma in the context of Buddhism which is interpreted from an intentional act, while Bonn is the fruit of that action. To get a good Bonn, it is necessary to respect all beings on earth like the Karuniya Metta Sutta in the previous discussion.

In Burmese, not much different from Cambodia, the situation of Buddhism, especially Theravada, is influenced by the animist culture in Myanmar. Taya or Dhamma in Pali is the basis for Burmese thinking to understand the doctrine of right and wrong thought actions and behavior according to Buddhist doctrine. The relationship between beings is based on Buddhist cosmology which regulates the relationship between the 31 realms of life across beings. The Burmese pays homage to spirits at the Hpaya Zin or altar placed in front of the house as the Khmer people make offerings every morning to protective spirits. The syncretism of Animism and Buddhism can be seen in the morning ritual which is always performed by Burmese as morning veneration on Paritta in Buddhism called Kadaw-Kan by launching the Three Gems of Buddha as daily Taking Refuges.

In Burmese cosmology the terms Lawki and Lawkouttara are known which are adaptations of the Theravada Moral Universe. Lakwi is the mundane world where humans live, or in Pali it is called Lokiya. While Lawkouttara is a universe that exceeds the life of humans and creatures with material objects on earth. The Moral Universe translated by Theravada in Myanmar is called Kan which is equivalent to Karma in Pali in the Tipitaka which explains the causal relationship in an action in the human realm or Lawki which is connected to the wider universe or Lawkouttara. Human relations with all beings in the universe are correlated with thirty-eight blessings or Mingala, ten virtues or Paramis, and reflection on morality or Thila.

The relationship between human-spirits is a relationship of interdependence as in the Buddhist doctrine. In Myanmar, they are known as Nat or god-like spirits, which number 37 Great Nats throughout Myanmar. Prior to the arrival of Buddhism as an ethic of life for the Burmese, the Burmese were familiar with the system of animism and dynamism as did the Khmer. The formalization of Nat in Myanmar's cultural environment began with King Anarahta in the 11th century. There are at least two types of Nat, namely Nat Sein which is a holy human spirit after death and then becomes a protector believed by the Burmese, the second is Nat which is a spirit from nature such as water and plants. All villages in Burmese have at least Nat Kun or Nat Sin which is an altar for village guards or what is called Ywa Saung Nat. The offerings in people's homes are usually in the form of coconuts hung with various flowers or called Ywa Saung Nat. In this context, worship of Nat has a very close relationship with environmental conservation, for example, Nat who guard the forest is called Taw Saung Nats or Nat who guards the mountain is called Taung Saung Nats. This Nat festival celebration is held every December with Natdaw.

In Indonesia, the ancient religion of Java, before the arrival of Hindus and Buddhists, was called Kapitayan, which is a monotheistic religion of Javanese ancestors with a combination of animism and dynamism. Kapitayan means something that is not visible to the five human senses. The worship of Danyang, as well as the worship of Neak Ta in Cambodia and Nat in Myanmar, is a symbol of the relationship between humans and nature. In Javanese culture, down to Mataram Islam, the animist belief in the existence of Danyang as a spirit who protects nature and lives in a place called Punden with the implementation of Slametan as an annual ritual. Usually Danyang is believed to be the spirit of the founding figures of the village. In the relay of animist values to the Buddhist community in Java, Danyang is known by several types such as Danyang Pulung and Kumara. One of the renewals in the tradition of respecting Danyang is through Pattidana or Abhaya Dana such as Fangseng, the release of sentient beings around Punden, the Javanese Buddhist community.



Apart from Fangsheng, many traditions based on nature conservation that have a Buddhist spirit have been fused with local culture. This nature conservation is part of the understanding of the Javanese Buddhists in the dynamics of Kejawen who see Danghyang as the Burmese and Khmer people. For example, Javanese people who have a strong foundation of Javanese or Kejawen teachings harmonize the two teachings through ritual practices that are full of symbolic meaning. One of the rituals that has been in the media spotlight for several years is the Tribhuana Manggala Bhakti (TMB) Ceremony which has been held by Kulon Progo Buddhists every Vesak celebration since 2015.



Tribhuana Manggala Bhakti Ceremony in Vesak Celebration in Kulon Progo.

Source : <https://buddhazine.com/upacara-tribuana-manggala-bhakti-upacara-menyambut-waisak/>, diakses 12 Juni 2021



Source : Vlog Ndeso Kulonprogo, 11 Nov 2020

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3suE9LiOTw&t=13s>

The TMB ceremony is an organic initiative of the Kulon Progo Buddhists in realizing harmony between humans and nature. This can be seen from the message of the TMB committee, namely Surahman who said "Memayu Hayuning Bhawana Lumantar Practice Compassion and Compassion and Kawicaksanan" which is essentially the essence of the Buddha's nature, namely almighty love (Maha Karuna) and all-wise (Maha Panna). Furthermore, according to the committee, this TMB ceremony is an activity that is 'regional cultural and extracted from a mixture of Buddhist teachings combined with local wisdom and local Javanese culture' (Kemenag, 2016). What's interesting about the TMB is about the symbolism of the relationship between humans and nature which is translated into three dimensions of natural ecosystems, namely (1) the earth dimension is symbolized by planting 1600 water-supporting trees such as Gayam, Bodhi, banyan trees and productive plants such as mangosteen, longan and duku in the park. Mudal River; (2) the air dimension symbolizes the release of endemic birds such as turtledoves, finches, trotokan; (3) the water dimension is symbolized by the release of 1000 endemic fish animals and the use of water as a means of worship (Sutarmi, 2018).

According to the history of the development of Buddhism in modern Indonesia, the mixing of Buddhism with the existing local beliefs of the Indonesian people is a very common thing, based on the fact that Buddhism has been in suspended animation since the fall of Hindu-Buddhist civilization in Indonesia around the 15th century. Preservation of Buddhism started from the colonial era recorded in history, for example the presence of the Theravada Bhikku from Sri Lanka, namely Bhikku Narada Maha Thera in 1934 with several agendas for Dharmaduta visits such as visiting Borobudur Temple, giving Buddhist lectures, establishing the Java Buddhist Association in Bogor and Jakarta, cooperation with Buddhism associated with people of Chinese descent in temples, inaugurating Upasaka-Upasika or Buddhist congregations such as in Yogyakarta to Maha Upasaka S. Mangunkawotjo, and so on. A few decades later, Buddhism was again in demand by the Indonesian people and the colonial government at that time with one of its peaks being the ordaining of the first Bhikkhu since 500 years of the fall of Hindu-Buddhist civilization in Indonesia, namely Bhikku Ashin Jinarakkhita. During the Dutch East Indies era, Buddhism was previously better known as the religion of the Chinese mixed with Confucian and Taoist doctrines

**JEJAK BHIKKHU/BHIKSU  
DI ERA HINDIA BELANDA**

**Tahun 1600-1700-an**  
 Tahun 1650, berdiri Klenteng Jin-de yuan yang bercorak Buddhis di Glodok, Jakarta. Pada abad ke-18, tak kurang dari 18 bhiksu Mahayana tinggal di dalamnya.

**Tahun 1814 M**  
Dalam Serat Centini, Jilid 4: 131-146, Sloka ke-7 dikisahkan, Mas Cebolang Berjumpa rombongan Brahmana Sidhi dari Hindustan (India). Mereka menerangkan beberapa hal tentang Agama Buddha kepada Mas Cebolang. 

**Tahun 1838**  
 Arsip Gong-guan dari Klenteng Jin-de yuan memuat adanya tugas untuk rahib Mahayana. Salah satunya rahib Kepala klenteng Ji-de yuan yang bernama Chong-qing.

**Tahun 1901**  
Mahastavira Aryamula atau Sanghanata Pen Ching (1878-1962) datang dari China ke Hindia Belanda. Ia tinggal dan membina pemeluk Buddha di Wihara Tay Kak Sie Semarang. 

**Tahun 1934**  
 Bhikkhu Narada dari Srilanka hadir ke Jawa atas undangan Ong Soe An, pegiat Theosofi dari Bandung.

----- Diolah dari berbagai sumber oleh Tim Badra Santi Institute -----

The development of Buddhism in the era of the Dutch East Indies,

Source: Badrasanti.or.id, accessed June 14, 2021 <https://badrasanti.or.id/para-bhiksu-awal-sebelum-hadirnya-bhikkhu-narada/>

Bhikku Ashin Jinarakkhita or Bhante Ashin can be said to be the first Indonesian to be ordained as a Bhikkhu in 1953 after undergoing education at Sasana Yeiktha in Yangon, Myanmar under the tutelage of Mahasi Sayadaw. After returning from Myanmar, he then returned to Java and began to rebuild the monastery and Buddhist education center on the island of Java. As a re-founder of Buddhist teachings in Indonesia, Bhante Ashin has a flexible and assimilated nature to local beliefs that have developed previously, the most famous inclusive quote from Bhante Ashin is "Dig the old, adapt to the times and the environment" (Setiawan, 2020 ). From what Bhante Ashin said about the flexible nature of Buddhism, the process of assimilation has become commonplace among Buddhists, for example by reconnecting the Tribhuana Manggala Bhakti Ceremony that Kulon Progo Buddhists do during Vesak.

Basically, the process of syncretism of Buddhism with other teachings has become an old habit since the era of the Hindu Buddhist kingdom, for example in the Majapahit era, namely during the reign of King Hayam Wuruk, there was the motto "Ciwa Buddha Bhinneka Tunggal Ika Tanhang Dharma Mandrawa" by Mpu Tantular as a melting pot of Buddhist teachings. with Shiva in the Javanese society at that time. Even in the era of Indonesia after

independence, precisely when after the tragedy of September 30, 1965, Buddhism in Indonesia experienced political pressure which caused its teachings to be adaptive to Indonesian conditions which demanded monotheistic teachings based on Pancasila. In an effort to defend Buddhism at that time, Buddhism then initiated the concept of a 'typical' divinity for the Indonesian Buddhist community, namely the title "Sang Hyang Adi Buddha" which was taken from one of the ancient prose parts of Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan in the Buddhist Tantri tradition which was massively spread during the period of time. Mpu Sindok years 929-947. Gradually after the 1965 tragedy, the number of Buddhists in Indonesia experienced a sharp increase which at its peak in 1987 there were at least seven Buddhist traditions or schools affiliated with the Indonesian Buddhist Representatives (Walubi) namely Theravada, Buddhayana, Mahayana, Tridharma, Kasogatan, Maitreya, and Nichiren. Of course, during this political process, elements of Javanese beliefs such as Kejawen became a vital element in influencing the nature of Buddhism in Indonesia

In more depth, many of the intersections of Buddhist teachings with Javanese teachings or this study then refer to it as Kejawen in the context of appreciating the existence and sustainability of the universe. In Buddhism, the behavior of loving the universe is implied in the text of the Dhammapada verse 49 namely

"Just as a bee that does not damage a flower, neither color nor smell, leaves after getting honey, so should a wise person live his life."

The verse in the Dhammapada implies a teaching about the reciprocal relationship between humans and the universe as also expounded by Gautama Buddha in the Agganna Sutta as a real awareness of need and greed, in the context of utilizing nature. In the ecosystem, bees are symbolized metaphorically not only to benefit from flowers, but also to help pollinate (Setiadi, 2021). This discourse of the Buddha also reappears in the Cakkavati Sihanada Sutta in the context of emphasizing the dangers of overexploitation of nature in which the development of a large population will still be fulfilled if there is a balance between material and spiritual needs. The command on nature conservation is also explicitly stated in the section of the Tipitaka text, namely the Vanaropa Sutta text which emphasizes that both park conservation (Aramaropa) and forest (Vanaropa) are both synergistically supportive of human life (Ngasiran, 2018).

From the empirical data of the three countries, according to Le and Nguyen (2021) what is shown by the conditions of assimilation of Buddhism in Myanmar, Indonesia and Cambodia is part of the Buddhist spiritual ecology. Spiritual ecology is also called Eco-cosmology or Animist Ecology which believes that soul ownership is not only in the human world, but also

all creatures and objects on earth. In the context of Buddhism, this relationship exists between the Sangha which emphasizes harmonious ecological relationships between self and community, human relations with nature, human relations with the supernatural, and human relations with oneself or self-knowledge. Karlstrom (2013) also added that in the material dimension of religion, all things that are sacred will form a 'sacralization of social heritage' which then encourages human behavior to tend to maintain these material cultures with a number of mythical knowledge, as well as rituals, which include among them is the relationship in the worship of the unseen world. Paulos (2020) even discusses this debate more ontologically about what spirits are, whether spirit is part of the self, then what is the self. The understanding of the self that is part of the transcendental community causes the human understanding of the forces of the natural surroundings to become commonplace. This then forms what is called Holt (2009) as the mandala of human belief in the universe. Not only in these three countries, Capper (2016) in his study on Animism among Western Buddhists also shows that knowledge of the position of man in the midst of the universe has contributed to the birth of a new pantheistic religious movement in this world.

#### **4. Conclusion**

There are two main arguments why syncretism occurs in Theravada Buddhism. First, there is no worship of Supreme Beings such as God or Mahadeva, causing flexibility in religion practices. Second, the parallel relationship between humans and nature in Buddhist cosmology makes the relationship between humans and spirits a natural thing. In the context of the three countries, these spirits articulate three relations such as the relationship between guardian spirits and the people, the relationship between the deceased spirits and the living, the relationship between spirits and the society environment. In Buddhism the two main arguments are referred to as the Wholeness perspective which sees the universe as a unified system. This is in line with Paul Tillich's theory that will be used in this study, namely Correlational Theology which states that religion and culture influence each other.

A life of mutual respect and love for all beings is the essence of Buddhism. The definition of being here then becomes more fluid, like the cosmological link of the realm of life above. In Indochina, for example, in addition to respecting animals, they are also used to performing rituals of devoting services (pattidana) to an unseen nation with daily offerings to Phi or Spirit House. This is related to the Buddhist view of living beings where every living being consists of Rupa (physical body) and Nama (mind) which in the mental elements are Vinnana (consciousness), Sanna (perception/memory), Vedana (feeling), and Sankhara (mind formations). Just like humans, animals also have feelings that must also be considered.



Thinking about the feelings of an animal is indirectly correlated with thinking about the ecosystem in which the animal lives. From the three empirical examples in three countries, it proves that the Paticcasamuppada Buddhist doctrine provides the foundation for harmonization of human relations with nature, including supernatural beings through a reciprocal relationship that is equivalent to spiritual ecology.

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