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**Gazing into the Abyss: Representations of The Apāya
in Thai Cosmological Parks**

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Abstract

Cosmological parks, *utayan sawan narok*, are a curious phenomenon that is widely visible in the Thai Buddhist landscape. These parks create a space in which different cosmic realms, literary scenes, historical figures and events, and anecdotes from the Buddha's life story come to life via three-dimensional imagery. The imagery and its spatial arrangement create a pathway, guiding the visitors upon a didactic yet entertaining journey through the myriad depictions. Affiliated to Buddhist temples, and devised by the temples' *sangha*, cosmological parks present opportunities for the visitors to engage in devotional activities that are associated with generation of positive *kamma*, and which appear to be suitably restorative after being reminded of the dantesque hellish penalties that befall wrong doers in the lower realms' sections of the parks. In this way, the visit to the parks brings about a meaningful experience that extends beyond an educational and entertaining escapade, and which ultimately supports the reciprocal relationship between *sangha* and laity.

This dissertation considers the momentous representation of the lower realms of woe – the *apāya*, in seven parks. In addition to their popularity amongst the visitors, the depictions of the *apāya* underline ideas of *kammic* retribution, mindfulness of death, and the benefits of meritorious activities. The initial stance that is employed in this research is that cosmological parks function as an extension of well-established cosmological teachings that are distributed via a wide variety of media in Thailand. Therefore, the underline assumption is that in order to gain a thorough understanding of the parks, it is essential to study the context in which they were created, and the way in which the narratives they introduce have been rooted, dispersed and evolved on a cultural and societal level. Thus, this research applies a multi-disciplinary approach, juxtapositioning a study of the *apāya* imagery, its spatial positioning, as well as its variants amidst the different parks, with a survey of a variety of sources which extend beyond traditional liturgy, and include a wide array of mediums: textual, visual, and impalpable (i.e., altered states of consciousness). By way of this amalgamation of data, this study reflects the complexity of cosmological parks and their disposition within the contemporary Thai Buddhist worldview.

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1. Introduction

Cosmological parks, *utayan sawan narok*¹, are a curious phenomenon that can be witnessed in the Thai Buddhist landscape. These parks are spaces in which different cosmic realms, local scenes, historical figures and events, and anecdotes from the Buddha's life story come to life via three-dimensional imagery. The parks are housed within Buddhist temples' precincts so that a visit to them is assimilated into the temple experience. The depictions and their spatial arrangement create a pathway, guiding the visitor upon a didactic yet entertaining journey through different realms and divergent times. In this way, the parks are spaces in which the artistic reimagination of the cosmos and the Buddhist teachings is being utilized as an amusement facility, which also carries an educational and religious value.

On the temple grounds one can then make a merit or listen to a *dhamma* (the Buddhist doctrine) talk, activities that are associated with generation of positive *kamma* (action, the sum of one's actions). This appears to be suitably restorative after being reminded of the dantesque hellish punishments that befall wrong doers and are presented in the parks. Devised by the temples' high rank *sangha* and funded by donations, these parks serve laity: families on a day out, students on organised school trips as well as locals for whom the parks are an integral part of the temple which is the area's focal point. The parks function as an extension of well-established cosmological teachings that are distributed via a wide variety of media in Thailand. Therefore, the parks operate on prior knowledge of Buddhist narratives, relating to rebirth, *kamma* and merit, thus promoting the dissemination of Buddhist concepts and cosmological teachings amongst the visitors. By creating an engaging multi-sensory experience, the parks constitute an added value to the temple visit, hence optimising the lay attendance and participation in the temple activities.

These parks' entertaining aspect is an exemplary case of a current trend in Thai Buddhism, in which temples incorporate visually stimulating and attractive spectacles created for didactic purposes. In this way they promote the preservation and dissemination of Buddhism in an everchanging modern world and encourage the reciprocal relationship between laity and *sangha* that ultimately supports the temple system, and is essential for the continuation of Buddhism in Thailand.

¹ Note on Thai transliteration: for Thai transliteration I apply the RTGS system.

In the cosmic scheme, the most horrid realms of birth are the *apāya*, the lower states of existence – the realms of loss and woe.² Amongst these, the hells (Pāli: *niraya*, Thai: *narok*), and the ghostly realm (Pāli: *peta bhumi*, Thai: *lok pret*) have substantial representation in the parks. By juxtapositioning data collected on the parks, this dissertation will provide a multi-disciplinary account of the *apāya* imagery in the parks, its textual and iconographic referencing, spatial positioning, and its variants amidst the different parks. The research question that has guided my analysis is: In what way do the representations of the *apāya* and their spatial arrangements in Thai cosmological parks assert and propagate Buddhist teachings, and contribute to the maintenance of *sangha*-laity relationship within the Thai - Theravādin framework?

The reason I chose to scrutinise particularly the depictions of the *apāya* is their popularity amongst the parks' visitors, which is an extension to their frequent appearance in the social sphere in way of religious teachings as well as popular content created by secular agents (i.e., films, books etc.). In addition, the *apāya* reinforce ideas of *kammic* retribution, mindfulness of death, and the benefits of meritorious activities. Thus, a close examination of these representations, which considers visual elements, influences and spatial arrangements, will enable us to gain insight into the way the parks operate and their position within the contemporary Thai Buddhist worldview.

In this introductory chapter, I first review the state of the field and discuss my research approach. Secondly, I introduce the parks that are studied in this thesis. Thirdly, I situate the *apāya* within the Buddhist cosmological universe, which serves as a foundation for understanding their representations in the parks. Finally, I detail relevant sources that perpetuate cosmological narratives and that will be incorporated throughout this study respectively.

1.1 State of the Field

This section will survey the scholastic approaches to Thai Buddhism, while focusing on the construction of its study; from earlier scholarship that applied a divisive approach to the religious landscape separating its elements, to more recent scholarship, that maintains the need for a more holistic approach, and takes into account the multi-faceted nature of Thai Buddhism and the practitioners' experience.

² Payutto, *apāya* 149- 150, 198.

Before I begin, I will first introduce earlier treatments of the theme of this thesis – the cosmological parks. While research on the majority of these parks has not been thoroughly conducted, neither in English nor Thai, two scholars have addressed their presence within the Thai Buddhist landscape.

First, is Anderson's travelogue in which he discusses Wat Pai Rong Wua '*The Fate of Rural Hell: Asceticism and Desire in Buddhist Thailand*'. In this account, Anderson describes Wat Pai Rong Wua's hellish section, by making an inventory of the captions adjoined to the imagery and organising them into categories assigned by types of sins. In addition, with information gathered from academic theses, local brochures and interviews with monks he provides a biography of Luang Pho Khom, the creator of the park (2012). Anderson, a distinguished scholar who produced influential works amongst which 'imagined communities' (1983), was a political scientist. The account of Wat Pai Rong Wua which he refers to in his memoir as "some amateurish anthropology" (2016:115) is an entertaining read and includes valuable information about Luang Pho Khom, the creator of the park. However, the portrayal of the hellish imagery is descriptive in essence, and does not take into account the sources from which the depictions stem and the context within which they operate, but instead associates them to the abbot's imaginaire alone.

Another coverage of the parks, was made by McDaniel. He first mentions them in his 2011 elaborate research on the ghost of Mae Nak, '*The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*'. In it, he discusses hellish scenes and brings up Wat Saen Suk as an example, which in his words is "one of the most public and graphic depictions of hell" (2011:122). In a later publication 'Architects of Buddhist Leisure: socially disengaged Buddhism in Asia's museums, monuments, and amusement parks' (2016), McDaniel discusses the growing Buddhist leisure culture in Asia, which he refers to as socially disengaged Buddhism. In this study of different Buddhist sites which includes museums and parks, McDaniel points out a blurred line between the secular and religious where spectacles take the place of sermons. In this work, McDaniel challenges the appropriation of religiousness to architecture, by noting that these places develop lives of their own. In this work he relates to one of the parks introduced in this thesis, Wat Muang, which he refers to as 'cosmological garden', describing the way in which "this sculpture garden works as an outdoor classroom for the panoply of Thai religion, history, and culture" (2016:112). McDaniel emphasis is on the ecumenical properties of Wat Muang, an idea which he demonstrates by listing the depictions of Chinese Daosist immortals, local female deities and Hindu hermits, the latter 'commonly depicted in monasteries and Buddhist narratives'

(ibid:111, 112). To this end when describing the hellish depictions, he notes the way in which they are found in Thai folklore, on monastic murals, and in illuminated manuscripts, as well as in modern religious guidebooks and even comic books (ibid: 109) A theme that McDaniel brings up when discussing Wat Muang, which I also detected in my field work and will be discussed here, is that these parks are not strange to a Thai Buddhist. “For Thais” he says “constantly imbibing scenes of and listening to sermons about hell are part of daily religiosity” (ibid:113). In his study, McDaniel points out the relationship between the imagery and the myriad sources through which they are communicated beyond the parks, a relationship that I explore in this research. McDaniel emphasis on the park’s ecumenicity is an example of the way in which all elements are considered as part of a whole and not framed by divisive categories. This understanding is a part of a scholastic shift, which aspires to explore Thai Buddhism as it is, in a somewhat existential manner (that is - not asking why, but rather asking what). Furthermore, as his study of spectacles exclaims, the line between the religious and the secular is blurred as religiousness is part of the day to day, and amusement is utilised for transference of religious ideas. This is expressed in Wat Muang, as it does in all the parks explored in this thesis.

These short but important works by Anderson and McDaniel have pointed out the parks’ visibility within the Thai Buddhist arena, thus acting as an outset for a wider investigation, which this thesis embarks upon.

Since the subject of this thesis is nested in the wider field of Thai Buddhism, the research on the parks is thus situated in this context. The topic of this thesis falls in the middle between a study of Buddhist cosmology as learned through texts and commentaries, and the way it is put into practices through imagery, popular culture, and the parks’ functionality. Along these lines, this section surveys notable scholarship and the main themes that have been addressed in Thai Buddhist studies, and exploring the way in which these have been approached in prominent scholarship.

I will begin with the scholastic approaches to the study of Thai Buddhism, which have been shifting throughout time, followed by a survey of scholastic treatments of concepts of Thainess and their relation with Buddhism. Seeing my thesis deals with a variety of expressions of Thai Buddhism, the below analysis is done with the aim of highlighting its dynamic characteristics.

I will begin with the bedrock of Thai Buddhist studies, and look at early scholarship on Thai Buddhism (Phya Anuman Rajadon 1968; Kirsch 1967, 1977; Tambiah 1970, 1976, 1984;

Terwiel, 1976) that is characterised by highlighting the syncretic nature of Thai Buddhism and applied a deconstructive analysis to its study.

“Essays in Thai Folklore”, a work characterized by the distinction between ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ Buddhism, was published in 1968. Written by a respected Thai Scholar, Phya Anuman Rajadon, it presented a detailed account of Thai folklore, describing the cultural traditions of Thailand, or what was defined by him as ‘Thailogy’. The approach to the study of Thai Buddhism, suggested by Phya Anuman Rajadaon, states a clear dichotomy between popular religious practices which he attached to Animistic and Brahmanical beliefs, and textual based Buddhism. This approach laid the ground for works to follow that will be detailed below and which continued studying Thai Buddhism through the lens of this divisive perspective.

Phya Anuman Rajadon’s approach was further implemented in Terwiel’s work, who shares a similar frame of reference. In his anthropological exploration of rural Thailand, he refers to Thai Buddhism as Magico-animistic. In a somewhat derogatory manner, Trwiel states that “unsophisticated Buddhism appears to be fundamentally different from the Buddhist religion of the highly educated classes” (1975). Kirsch further implements this classification in his account of the complexity of the Thai religious system, dividing it into three components: Buddhism, Animism and Brahmanism, pointing out the supremacy of Buddhism (1976).

One prominent scholar who we should not fail to mention when discussing the study of Thai Buddhism is Tambiah. Tambiah’s mark on the field is undeniable, with a long list of meticulously detailed anthropological works on Thai Buddhism (1970, 1976, 1984). While he too pointed out separate theological world views, he allocated these different elements under what he calls a “single total field” (1975). Thus, his work looks at the relation between religious belief, ritual action and the corpus of Buddhist literature. Tambiah’s approach views Thai Buddhism as a synchronic, ordered scheme of collective representations which also incorporate Animistic and Brahmanical elements. It can be said then that his outlook was a beginning of a shift in the common perception that characterised the study of Thai Buddhism during those years and whilst still emphasising the division of its elements, it nonetheless put them under the same umbrella.

While there is no doubt that these early works on Thai Buddhism have been influential in the field of Thai studies, and resonate to present day, their approach seems rather biased or one-sided. This problem is illustrated well by Schopen in his study of the history of Indian Buddhism. The scholarly tendency to elevate textual sources to a position of main authority, which defines what is so called 'real' religion, is based on a theological approach and leaves

other sources, such as those provided by archaeology and epigraphy, to be the ‘handmaiden of history’ (1997). Early scholarly works on Thai Buddhism appointed textual authority as ‘true’ Buddhism, while so called ‘popular’ Buddhism, that is, local elements and beliefs, become merely a hybrid commodity. Not only this type of approach presents the risk of selective use of data in order to maintain the supremacy of the so called ‘true Buddhism’, it also ignores the importance of the practitioners’ own experience. What makes a religion real is whether the practitioners perceive it as real or not, that is the experience of lived Buddhism. I strongly believe that it is the task of the Thai Buddhist scholar to look at the way in which Thai Buddhism operates in the field, without presupposed ideas as to what it ought to be, but as a given state that is to be learned for what it is, providing an account that is true to the reality in the best possible way. Recent scholarship, presented below, have paved the way in this sense, by identifying this issue and called for a shift in the study of Thai Buddhism by employing an integrated approach to the subject under analysis. These recent works include McDaniel (2011, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2017) and Pattana (2005, 2007, 2012), who advocate a holistic approach that focuses on the practitioners’ own definition of Buddhism (McDaniel) and Buddhism’s negotiation with global modernity (Pattana). In many respects, these scholars have laid the groundwork for the methodological consideration I apply in this thesis and thus deserve more attention here.

McDaniel's perceives Thai Buddhists as dynamic arbiters and sponsors of ideology and innovation (2011:7). According to him, it is more useful to look at what complex methods people actually employ to solve problems, such as practical technologies, astrology, healing, protection, prognostication and precepts. This perspective has been notably influential on the approach applied in this research, which takes into consideration Thai Buddhist practitioners’ points of view and the way that Buddhist narratives about the cosmos have evolved amongst them. McDaniel suggests that learning the practitioners' understanding is possible by paying attention to the way stories are told (Ibid: 19). Narratives, he says, emphasize the importance of emotions in understanding the full range of reasons underlying the maintaining of beliefs and engaging in rituals (Ibid: 14). This is also reflected in the above-mentioned study of Buddhist spectacles as he looks their incorporation into day-to-day life (2016).

To this end, the call for reflection on the effect of narratives on moral life within Theravāda Buddhism (expanding beyond the specifically Thai arena) have been arisen by Hallisey and Hansen, who traced three different ways in which moral life is enabled by narrative: prefiguration (the effect of narratives in enlarging an agent’s moral horizon), configuration (the power of narratives to expose the opaqueness of moral intention) and refiguration (the healing

and transformative potential of narratives) (1996, 308). Pointing out these ways in which narratives operate, Hallisey and Hansen add another dimension to the role of narratives, by shifting from the beliefs and rituals that McDaniel's pointed out and diving into the moral aspect, which is especially relevant to the topic of this thesis, looking at the way in which narratives as they are revealed may influence moral stances.

Returning to McDaniel, his approach is well expressed in a 2014 article, where he looks at images of birds in Buddhist art, that although very common, have not been studied by Buddhist studies scholars. McDaniel highlighted the relation between text and art, noting 'some problems with the use of Buddhist texts to study Buddhist ornamental art in Thailand'. According to him, birds, are often omitted because they are ornamental in essence. This brings about some concerns, one of which is that birds are seen as ornamental art and are not meant to be sourced textually. Yet, artists, *sangha* and laity do not necessarily have prior knowledge of Buddhist texts. The sources of the artefact are often performances witnessed in sermons, dances, dramatizations and murals, rather than texts. Thereupon, McDaniel calls attention to ornamental art as a reminder that monasteries are not just repositories of tradition, but dynamic arenas of cultural, economic and social life (2014). This point is an extension to his earlier endeavour to incorporate the practitioners' experiences in the analysis of a religious event, in order to create a cohesive account on Thai Buddhism.

Another scholar who calls for a shift in the study of Buddhism is Pattana, who challenges the paradigm of 'inclusive syncretism', that is the traditional paradigm which argues for an integral complex religious system posed of Theravada Buddhism, folk Brahmanism and animism or supernaturalism (2005:462) as expressed in the scholarship outlined above. Pattana argues that it is essential for scholarship on Thai religion to incorporate the concept of hybridization, looking at the way religious commodification and capitalist consumerism have been increasingly prominent (2012:461). He suggests that the syncretic model is no longer capable of explaining the rapidly changing landscape of Thai religion, as it tends to misrepresent or ignore the larger or more dynamic picture (Ibid:464) by narrowing the research to preconstructed moulds. He also notes that religiosity has expanded beyond its confined conventional spaces (temples) into the mass media and the marketplace, becoming 'prosperity religion' or 'commercialized religiosity' with symbolic and direct aims to bless the worldly desires guided by capitalist logic (ibid:484).

This necessity of acknowledging the commercialism of Buddhism while conducting scholarly research has also been pointed out by Jackson (1999, and forthcoming) who calls out for a post Buddhist frame, noting that Thai popular religiosity is a highly plastic phenomenon

that exists in finely tuned dynamic relations with the society of which it is part (1999: 251-252). In his latest work he further examines Thailand's prosperity religions, where the shift from protection to prosperity has been apparent, and new modalities of enchantment and expressions of popular devotion outside of official Buddhism have moved from the sociological margins to the mainstream of Thai religious life. Jackson provides a much-needed set of concepts to fathom the Thai religious system that expands beyond doctrinal orthodoxy and expand notions of diversity (forthcoming).

In his call for diversity in the study of Thai religion Jackson proposes four analytical modules: 1. Polyontologism as an amalgamated non-blended mixing of religious forms.³ 2. *Kala-thesa* "time and space", i.e., contextualised separation of culturally diverse ritual forms and a general tolerance of ambiguity, incommensurability and contradiction; 3. Hierarchical dominance of Buddhism in structural and symbolic terms; 4. An emphasis on ritual practice over doctrinal harmonisation (forthcoming).

I find that Jackson's approach, by pointing out the heterogeneity of Thai Buddhism, manages to tackle simplified attitudes, that were in use in earlier scholarship, and which reduce Thai Buddhism to a set of outdated definitions. His work, along with that of McDaniel and Pattana have been paving the way for scholarship that seeks to study Thai Buddhism as a whole rather than dissecting it. This mirroring of the way Buddhism operates in the field, which provides a cohesive portrayal of its multi-faceted characteristics, has been influential in the formulation of the methodology I chose to utilise in this research, as will be detailed in the following section.

In light of this, I will now explore the relationship between the components of the expression 'Thai Buddhism': 'Thai' and 'Buddhism', that is what makes Buddhism Thai and what makes Thai Buddhist, looking at the way in which scholars have pointed out the role which Buddhism plays in the shaping of a Thai world view with the aim of gaining a better understanding of this relationship, and its representation in scholastic works as a premise to the approach this thesis operates, according to which, interrelating components act as a key to understanding the arena within which the parks are situated. It also considers current scholastic discourse that takes into account the current institutional instability in Thailand, and questions the way in which positions of power applied Buddhist concepts to maintain this position.

³ Here Jackson draws on McIntosh who contends an overemphasis on a presumed coherence in religious belief and practice and calls for a new model for the study of religions which she coined as "polyontologism", an emic viewpoint that accepts that ontological reality of different sets of religious-cosmological forces (McIntosh cited in Jackson, forthcoming).

Kirsch demonstrates the way in which the values and beliefs of Buddhism influence most Thais and set the religious context that has shaped the institutional fabric of Thai society. Buddhist values, conceptions and attitudes colour virtually all aspects of Thai life, pervading the Thai attitude towards the world in which they live (1977: 245). In this way, a triole of nation- religion-king (*chat-sasana-kasat*) has been identified as an operating mechanism which characterises Thai society (Murashima, 1988, Swearer, 1999). It operates a pervasive milieu of self-censorship and occupies an untouchable position (Harrison, 2011), thus stressing the importance of Buddhism within the construction of Thai identity.⁴

While the interrelation between Buddhism and a Thai world view is undeniable, this construction of a Thai worldview anchored in the king-nation-religion triole, or as often referred to as ‘Thainess’, has been questioned in recent scholarship, which echoes a wider social movement in Thailand that challenges the dominating ruling institutions. It has been criticised as a political construct which does not include all social spaces (Stattayanurak, 2005), and as a cause for the centralisation of language and the loss of language diversity (Premsrirat, 2014). Further is the re-examination of Thai Buddhism and its capture by the state, which according to McCargo have led to the forsaking its core values. In addition, texts like the *Traiphum*, which have a strong hold in the conceptualisation of Buddhist cosmology enhance the idea of the divine king (Payuto, 2013), ultimately promote royalism and act as an ideological frame to the triole of king-nation-religion.

The above issues are a specifically burning topic of debate, fuelled by the current protest movement which challenges the power of the military-controlled government and calls for reformation of the monarchy. It is a debate relevant to the understanding the Buddhist relation with the state and the construction of ‘Thainess’ in general. However, this thesis is deep-seated within the field of Buddhist studies, and while there is no doubt that there is a need for a study which will employ a political approach to Thai cosmological parks, the concern of this thesis is the religious aspect of the parks and the dissemination of the *apāya* narratives.

While the literature review introduced above looked at the treatment of Thai Buddhism in scholarship throughout the years, as well as the discussion concerning the role of Buddhism in the construction of ‘Thainess’,

⁴ To this end, it is interesting to mention that the most recent constitution (20th edition) which was agreed in a referendum in 2016 and went into effect in 2017, specifically notes (section 67) that “the state should promote and support the education and propagation of Theravāda Buddhism⁴”. This recently introduced identification with a Theravāda specific tradition further enhances the evident interrelation of Buddhism and a Thai world view, and a Theravādin one at that (see appendix no.1 for section 67 extract and translation).

In addition to the above scholarship, the need to address the use of modern-day modes of communication of the Buddhist teachings, and the ever growing spread of Buddhism via popular means, this area in the field of study of Buddhism is constantly developing and includes some notable works. Phillips in his research emphasises the way in which Thai Buddhism has evolved to acclimate modernity, while noting that it is the adaptability to the contemporary world that continues to make Buddhism relevant, legitimate and timeless for most Thais (1992). Stolorow further asserts this notion as he notes that the adaptability of Buddhism in Thailand is well embedded in the arena of religious studies. According to him in the context of our contemporary geography of digital information, virtual telepresence, panoptical visualization, concentrated media ownership, and fragmented audiences, it seems no longer possible to contain religion within the confines of traditional social perception. Instead, the field of religious symbols, practices, and modes of belonging has been radically extended through the colonization of a dizzying range of genres, technologies and forums: from popular history and pop-psychology books to websites, cartoons, trading cards, posters, music, bumper stickers, television dramas, package tours and sundry forms of public spectacle (2005). This 'contemporary geography of information' in Thai studies can be placed under a wider scholarly treatment of popular culture. Aldridge maintained a general and yet accurate definition, simply noting that popular culture is widely favoured by many people (2007), this is due to it being entraining and accessible. Possamai affirms this further, saying that life is created and viewed through popular culture, which is part of a consumer culture. In this way, we can know people by what they consume. In the modern world we live in, media is used as an effective platform for the transference of religious ideas. Religion and popular culture coexist intimately while content of popular culture is used to back up religion and vice versa (2005). This consumer nature of popular culture takes us back to the above discussion of the ecumenical nature of Thai Buddhism as asserted by Jackson and Pattana, parallels which demonstrate the interchange of modernity and religion, and the way in which consumerism has become an integral part of daily life, inasmuch as what Pattana refers to 'commercialised religiosity'.

Furthermore, as technological advances enable humanity to communicate via screens and keyboards, religion too becomes an integral part of this digital field, a development that further embedded during the time of the Covid pandemic. Scholarship as a whole began a shift towards 'Digital humanities and the virtual field is now established as more relevant than ever. To this end scholars like Taylor, who explores what he refers to as 'cyber-Buddhism', a term that arisen from the Thai experience of modernity, give way to new spatial possibilities that are produced in large by hyper technologies, especially the Internet. Thus, digitalized electronics

potentially and markedly transform religious space (2003). As this online space of Thai Buddhism increasingly becomes influential, I take this into consideration in this research and explore the activity of the parks, and the conversation of Buddhist cosmology, also in the virtual arena. This configuration of virtuality into scholarship is well maintained by Phrakhru Kosit *Sanghapitak* as his research revealed the way in which the Thai *saṅgha* too has shifted to this space, by creating a network of online Buddhist society by broadcasting live *dhamma* talks and distributing materials through online platforms (2017).

To sum up, the scholarship I surveyed above demonstrated the scholarly treatment of the dynamic characteristics of Thai Buddhism which denoted a shift from a divisive approach to a more wholesome outlook that strives to study Thai Buddhism while using an integrated approach which takes into consideration Buddhism as perceived by its practitioners. I further looked at the ecumenical expressions of Buddhism as it unfolds in the modern-day arena, while also taking to consideration means of transmission of the teachings, from popular culture to virtual spaces. This scholastic expedition played an important part in the methodological consideration I have applied in this thesis, which I will now move on to outline.

1.1.2 Methodological considerations

Thai cosmological parks are a momentous expression of Thai Buddhism, being spaces that encompass its varied facets.⁵ Considering this and situating this research within a holistic scholastic approach to the study of Thai Buddhism, I strongly believe that in order to gain a thorough understanding of the parks, it is essential to study the context within which they were created, and the way in which the narratives they introduce have been rooted, dispersed and evolved on a cultural and societal level.

The parks were not created for ornamental purposes. While the imagery in them includes artistic elements and incorporates an entertaining effect, its aim is certainly didactic. This was well illustrated by Phra Pawana Vimom, the abbot of Wat Po Chai Sri and the creator of its park, who maintained that at present the average age of lay people who participate in Buddhist practices soared, while young people are less inclined to listen to Buddhist teachings or practice Buddhism. Thus, a visually stimulating space can help to draw their attention, and allow them to learn about the results of positive or negative *kamma*.⁶ The weight assumed by Phra Pawana

⁵ While the parks studied in this thesis are idiosyncratic Thai, as they are embedded in a local framework, that is not to say that cosmological parks as a phenomenon are unique to Thailand. The concept of these parks may be likened, for example, to that of the ghost city of Fengdu in China, or Singapore's Haw Par Villa.

⁶ Phra Pawana Vimom in conversation with the author, August 2016.

Vimon to the effect of visual stimulation is further asserted by Phra Kru Pisaanjaryakun, the abbot of Wat Mae Keat Noi, who instructed the creators of its imagery to be blunt, thus producing strong imagery that has a shocking effect. According to him inspiring fear through explicit imagery is the most effective way to teach both children and adults about the kinds of deeds they should avoid in order to lead moral life and gain positive *kamma*.⁷ To this end, in an interview I have conducted with a 14-year-old student from Lampang named Puet, in the aim of understating whether the parks imagery does produce the desired effect amongst the parks' young visitors, he told me that he indeed got the chills when he first went into the hell section at the park local to him, Wat Santi Nikhom. This effect also resonated with his experience in the classroom, when the teacher played a very threatening video as they were learning about the hells in Buddhism class. However, Puet asserted he is now grown up and is doubtful about the existence of the hells, so the fear he felt as a little boy has now ceased.⁸ Puet's account emphasises the interrelation between the parks and other sources of dissemination of cosmological teachings, which increases the effectiveness sought after by the parks' creators. Consequently, it points towards the necessity of incorporating these sources into the examination of the parks, as I will now argue.

While the intention of the imagery in the parks is didactic in nature, and not ornamental, I still find that the point raised by McDaniel that I presented above, calling to pay attention for ornamental art as a dynamic arena of cultural, economic and social life, is relevant to the study of the parks. He reminds us that the dissemination of Buddhist teachings is not always established through texts, thus calling for researches to rethink the accepted tendency to resource art textually. The framework suggested by McDaniel informs my methodological approach to a large extent. I argue that a study of the parks should consider a variety of sources which extend beyond traditional liturgy, and include varied contemporary sources, as well as intangible sources such as altered states of consciousness.

There is no doubt that liturgical works are the roots of cosmological narratives, and when studying Buddhist art, it is essential to consider these texts. Furthermore, I find these traditional sources to be an expression of the 'primordial form' of cosmological ideas that are conveyed in the parks. Hence, this work will look at these sources closely and will refer to them along the way. That being said, as the parks are situated within the context of contemporary Thai Buddhism, the depictions that are presented in the parks are based on pre-established ideas that

⁷ Phra Kru Pisaanjaryakun, in conversation with the author, June 2013.

⁸ Puet, in conversation with the author, March 2022.

the visitors are familiar with. Subsequently to McDaniel's assertion, it is clear these ideas weren't necessarily communicated via textual means but through a wide array of mediums that are easily consumable and are widely accessible, namely contemporary adaptations of these ideas through platforms such as TV, radio, the internet etc. Arenas that align with Phillips, Stolow and Possamai as discussed above.

Another consideration that came about when examining contemporary sources, is social media, as in present day, it is an undeniably dynamic source of information. Buddhist teachings are increasingly disseminated in Thailand via online platforms. While most temples in Thailand have Facebook pages, there is also bustling Buddhist activity on platforms such as Instagram and Line, as well as online blogs, forums and YouTube channels.⁹ While gathering data from interviewees and from my own research online, it became clear that not only the usage of this medium is frequent, its users come from all walks and stages of life. To this end, an internet survey conducted in February 2022 by DataReportal revealed that 77.8% of the population uses the internet, while 81.2% engage in social media.¹⁰ These high percentages further affirm to the popularity of these mediums and the need to incorporate them in the research methodology.

Taking into account the abundance of material on Buddhism in the virtual arena, this research also incorporates data from online sources that are relevant to the discussion.

An additional dimension of the cosmological discussion arises from its fluid nature, crossing time and space, and that is the domain of altered states of consciousness. These states include traveling the realms through meditation, dream state visions and near-death experiences (NDEs). These kinds of materials, based on otherworldly states will also be considered in this thesis. These types of accounts deepen the understanding of the parks on several levels. First, when experienced by the creators of the parks, in form of meditation or dreams, they act as legitimation to the erection of these spaces. Secondly, some states such as near-death experiences (NDEs) and dream state visions are communicated in different forums, such as TV shows, public talks etc., reinforce cosmological narratives by providing first-hand accounts that not only bring about the cosmological realms as a topic of discussion, but also affirm their presence within the cultural sphere. The NDEs that are presented in this thesis were gathered from news' reports, TV appearances, internet blogs, as well as a comprehensive collection of NDE's assembled by Murphy (2001).

⁹ Line is a mobile messenger app which is widely used in Thailand. It includes timeline and gallery pages similar to the Facebook configuration.

¹⁰ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/2265383/thailands-digital-dependence-revealed-in-new-internet-study>

In addition to the above resources and with the aim of assembling a comprehensive account, notes from ethnographic field work I have conducted intermittently over a period of eight years will be added to the sources discussed above.¹¹ These findings from the field introduce an added dimension that reinforces the importance of acknowledging the practitioner experience and sheds light on the parks and the ideas they disseminate as they are perceived by both their creators and the visitors.

Within the multidisciplinary framework of this thesis, the parks day-to-day operation and the experience of the practitioners are invaluable for a deeper understanding of the way in which the parks function and how they are perceived amongst their users. During my field work in the different parks, I visited over and over again for days at a time. For this purpose, I usually rented accommodation nearby, and in two temples, namely - Wat Po Chai Sri and Wat Santi Nikhom, I stayed in the nuns' quarters, an experience which undoubtedly added a dimension to my field work as I also witnessed the activity in the temples after the parks' visitors have left. For my research, I have applied participant observation, joining daily activities as well as special occasions such as festivals and ceremonies. As for the imagery, I spent hours studying it, taking notes, photographs and drawing maps and diagrams. In addition, having lived in the UK at the most part, when I was not in the field I kept regular updates via the temples' social media pages, chats with informants and tracing relevant publications.¹² This work was complemented by information I have gathered from the informants I met along the way, and who contributed greatly to this research. These include *sangha* members who operate the parks, and/or contribute to the transmission of cosmological teachings, one of the artists who created the imagery in the parks, the park users—visitors and practitioners, as well as Thai lay Buddhists whose experiences and points of view enables a glimpse into the effect of the dissemination of the teachings and prevalent ideas that stem from the parks. I interviewed the informants in different settings: in the parks and at temple vicinities, at coffee shops, during festivals and events as well as meditation retreats, and even on a golf cart driven by the abbot around the hellish imagery at Wat Po Chai Sri. While I had some leading questions I usually just conversed with the interviewees, using recordings which I transcribed later on. While I met most of my informants during field work in the parks, there are some extracts from interviews with lay Buddhists whom I have met in different social circumstances; having found their points of view on the topic insightful, I invited them to be interviewed in a more formal setting. All the

¹¹ I have begun conducting fieldwork in the parks in the year 2013. This was a preliminary exploration of the topic stemming from it being the subject of my MA thesis, which opened the door for further investigation.

¹² See field work summary table appendix 2.

informants, excluding the *sangha* and park creators, are introduced here under pseudo names. At times, I also note their age and their occupation, in order to give an idea of their socio-economic background if relevant. The information gathered through interviews is incorporated throughout the thesis with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the parks.

To this end I would like to share a note on my relationship with my informants. A recently published paper by Tannenbaum raised the issue of the relationship between the anthropologist and the people in the communities they are engaged in. As Tannenbaum maintained ‘while anthropologists work to make our research community understandable in our academic terms, the people in our communities are engaged in the parallel activity of making us make sense in their terms’ (2022:59). This made me question my own relationship with my informants. Whilst they all knew I am a researcher and many of our conversations were recorded, our relationship developed beyond this so called ‘ethnographic’ mode. This happened specifically in the temples where I was staying (namely Wat Santi Nikhom and Wat Po Chai Sri). Since it was agreed that in order to be housed in these temples, I was to take part in their meditation retreat, I found myself in a position where the lines between the researcher and the practitioner were blurred. This came to expression with my informants, who with time became my comrades as we embarked on a spiritual journey together. Thus, I interviewed some of the women staying in the retreat in a setting which the recording immediately turned into a formal ethnographer-informant scenario, but then a few hours later we cried together, off record, having gone through intense physical and emotional tremors as a result of the rigorous practice. To this end, I identified greatly with Tannenbaum’s experience as she shared the way in which merit in her community mindset was perceived as a unifying force that strengthens and helps to maintain their relationship with her. ‘The local assumption’ she says ‘is that people who make merit together are reborn together’ (ibid:70). This idea also came about in my own conversations with my informants, some of which perceived our shared participation in meritorious activities such as: merit making ceremonies, meditation retreats and temple work, a bond which will be maintained over life spans. In addition, some of the topics discussed by my informants that appear in the thesis, were very personal and deep, and these bonds that I have created are to be accounted for in this sense. Indeed, as per Tannenbaum’s observation, the process of making sense went both ways, me as a researcher and as a human making sense of the blurred line between both, and my informants who became my friends, making sense of my presence in their world.

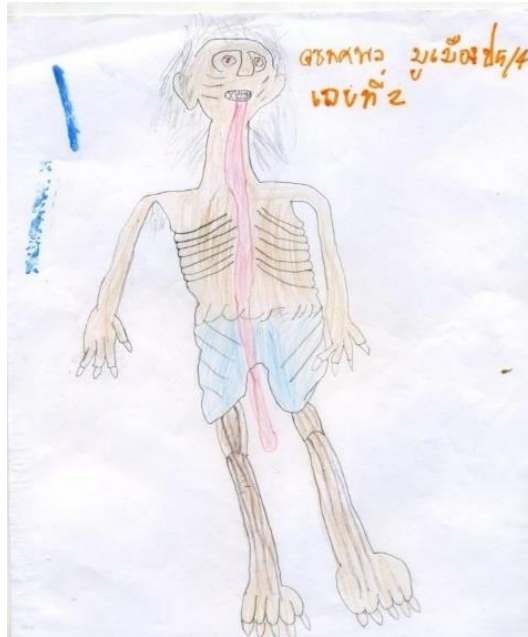


Figure 1: Drawing of a *Pret* by Thosapon, Wat Saen Suk, 2016.¹³

The incorporation of the variety of materials into my research provided a lens through which the evolution of cosmic narratives can be explored, in so much as the parks operate within a larger scheme that is composed of myriad facets.

I will now present the parks that are studied in this research, provide a summary of the *apāya* realms configuration and continue to look at the way these realms are dealt with via different mediums, all of which will be incorporated in this study.

1.2 The parks

Cosmological parks seem to be an ever-growing phenomenon in the Thai Buddhist landscape. To my knowledge currently there are at least a dozen cosmological parks in Thailand. Under this umbrella of cosmological imagery, additional spaces might also be considered, ones that include representations of the cosmic realms or related scenes on a smaller scale¹⁴. In fact, the more I explored the topic the more I stumbled upon spaces that depict

¹³ I met Thosapon at Wat Saen Suk, while conducting field work there. He and his brother are local to the temple, as they live across the road from it. As Thosapon told me, they spend their free time at the park which essentially functions as their playground. Thosapon took me on a tour of the park one day, and demonstrated his impressive knowledge of the imagery, by detailing the reasons for the punishments depicted and warning me to behave well so I will not end up in one of these hells too. Thosapon, in conversation with the author, June 2016.

¹⁴ For example: Si Kho Kham temple in the northern town of Phayao has a small hell area, that was built in the 70s, composed of some hell scenes and *pret* images. In Wat Phumin temple in Nan a recently built hell-dome which contains a display of *Phra Malai*'s visit to hell was added just outside of the main *vihara*.

different cosmic episodes or characters via three-dimensional imagery, pointing to the spread of this phenomenon.

As mentioned above, there are two studies on the parks. In these former treatments of the topic, these spaces were referred to as ‘cosmological gardens’ or ‘sculpture gardens’ (McDaniel, 2016) or simply as ‘*wat*’ – temple, or as ‘rural hell’ (Anderson, 2012). In this thesis I refer to the discussed spaces as cosmological parks. There are several reasons for my use of the term ‘park’. First, it is a direct translation from the Thai term *utayan* that is commonly used by the affiliated temples, the visitors and media that surveyed the parks. In addition, it is aimed to convey the function of these spaces. As maintained in the dictionary definition of the term park, this is “an area of land that is used for particular purpose.”¹⁵ The term theme park is defined as “an amusement park in which the structure and settings are based on a central theme.”¹⁶ Both these definitions sit well with the premise of the Thai cosmological parks, which are spaces that are designed and utilised for didactic purposes, built around a central theme, and aim to tell stories through an entertaining leisurely experience.

Returning to McDaniel and Anderson, it is significant to note that both referred to the parks as ecumenical; Anderson in reference to conversations he had with his local friends who defined Wat Pai Rong Wua as such, noting it was Theravāda centred but also offered space for Mahāyāna Buddhist and Brahminic Hindu Shrines (2012: 4), and McDaniel who situated Wat Muang amongst other Buddhist leisure sites, and conveyed its ecumenical nature by listing the imagery of myriad deities and ascetics (2017:112). McDaniel discuss the way in which ‘non-Buddhist’ themes have been assimilated into Thai Buddhism in such a way that they are an inseparable part of its milieu (2017). I share this perspective. I see the parks are yet another form of expression of the amalgam which is positioned under the Thai Theravāda Buddhism umbrella, that which makes a Thai – Buddhist framework.

The seven parks that are studied in this thesis, have been erected between 1971- to present day, Thus, I they will be surveyed chronologically.¹⁷

All the parks’ share similar configuration with slight variances. They are composed of cosmological realms representations, these include the heavens and the hells, as well as elements from the *himmaphan* forest, the human realm (human representations may come in the form of an integral part of the cosmic structure, that is as a realm, or rather as independent displays which convey historical scenes, enactment of well know Thai proverbs or daily village

¹⁵ Cambridge dictionary, Park <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/park>

¹⁶ Merriam-Webster dictionary, theme park <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theme%20park>

¹⁷ See appendix 3.

scenes). In addition, the parks include sections that are dedicated to segments from the Buddha's life story or the *jātakas*. In some of the parks one can also find sculpture enactments of famous Thai literary works. Seeing the connection between cosmology and astrology, most of the parks also include depictions of the Thai zodiac signs, the *Pi Naksat*,¹⁸ as well as Buddha images associated with specific days of the week that are available for worship by the visitors.¹⁹ To this end, it is worth noting that some of the abbots in the affiliated temples to the parks that are presented in this research, namely Luang Pho Sa'ad of Wat Santi Nikhom and Phra Pawana Vimon of Wat Po Chai Sri, practice divination and use astrological calculations while attending to their followers.²⁰

Since the parks act as leisure centres with an educational value, the venues thus also consist of seating areas, as well as shops and vendors. In terms of size, the parks are quite large and vary in size. For example, the largest park to this day is Wat Pai Rong Wua which spreads over 244 Rai.²¹

As the sequential account demonstrates, most parks discussed here were built during the 90's, a period of visible acceleration of this phenomenon. This time frame, correlates to a large extent with the time line determined by Jackson in his study of Thailand's boom-time religions of prosperity (1999). Jackson notes the way in which during these years commercially oriented religiosity appeared, and large numbers of monasteries around Thailand embarked on massive temple construction programmes and merit making-cum-fund raising schemes (ibid:247). This commercial aspect was expressed by Anderson, a decade earlier, as he pointed out the effects of the advance of capitalism in the construction of Wat Pai Rong Wua. This was specified by Luang Pho Khom himself, who intended for the temple to become a major business centre for Thailand, spreading Buddhism worldwide (2012:48-51).

As this thesis maintains, beyond their didactic objective, the parks also support a reciprocal relationship between visitors and *sangha* which ultimately supports the temples affiliated to the parks. Seeing that the parks are extensions to temples, and for which the operation funds rely

¹⁸ Represented by different animals in a similar fashion to Chinese astrology.

¹⁹ To this end it is also interesting to note a tradition according to which Particular pagodas/temples that house an important Buddhist relic, are assigned as unique and potent for certain birth years, so that those who were born in this year are advised to visit their birth year prospective pagoda at least once in their life time. Examples for these birth year temples include: Wat Prathat Chae Haeng in Nan which is assigned to the birth year of the rabbit and Wat Phra Borommathat in Tak, assigned to the year of the pig. A visual representation of the assigned pagodas and their respective locations on Thailand map, along with a detailed explanation as to each' properties can be found in Chiang Mai Lanna Folklife Centre. For more see <https://www.mcot.net/view/XB6B4T21>

²⁰ For a detailed discussion on astrology see appendix 4

²¹ A rai equals to 1,600 square metres; thus, the park size is approx. 390,400 sqm.

to a large extent on donations, that at times comes in the form of religious ‘merchandise’,²² they too can be viewed through the lens suggested by Jackson as commercially oriented to some extent. Looking at the phenomenon of religious populism, Jackson identifies three elements that intersect and form its emergence, which are: (1) Thai religiosity’s complex heritage (2) Its devotional focus on powerful personalities (3) The impact of the mass media (1999:253). These three elements can be distinctly identified in the parks: (1) The paraphernalia displayed in the parks, ranging from depictions of historical anecdotes to religious narratives which include an array of traditions, mirrors the complexity of Thai religiosity. (2) Powerful personalities are presented in the parks both via images of arahants such as Phra Malai and Thai saints.²³ In addition, the abbots of some of the parks who are well known for their divination abilities, attract visitors to the parks as they come to receive blessings and advice. (3) As this thesis will demonstrate the impact of mass media and its correspondence with the imagery in the parks has an essential part in the construction of the cosmological narratives that are disseminated in them. Insofar, the parks can be situated as part of this religious populist movement outlined by Jackson.

The parks are designed to attract visitors, and devised by their creators who in all cases studied here are the temple abbots. This agency of the abbots can be likened to the operation in Wat Doi Kham, which houses a miraculous, wish granting Buddha image - *Luang pho Tun-jai*. As discussed by Rotheray, a lot of work was initially undertaken recording and interpreting the site’s history and its internally generated mythology, much of this mediated through the agency of the temple abbot and the head of his lay committee (2016:168). Clearly, much religious space and material culture in Thailand are to some degree given shape or otherwise affected by the domestic tourist industry, as are modern Thai attitudes toward monastery attendance and activities undertaken therein. Moreover, abbots enjoy individual freedom to accept donations from wealthy patrons, and develop their monasteries according to their own tastes (ibid:176-177).

Beyond Rotheray’s observation as to the important role of the abbot in increasing the popularity of the temple, Wat Doi Kham brings about another aspect of Thai-religious populism, and that is the assimilation of popular elements (both Thai and global) into the Buddhist imagery milieu.²⁴ A mural on the temple’s exterior wall includes a portrayal of Artiwara Kongmalai, or as he is known in Thailand Phi Toon, the famous lead singer of the

²² See Wat Pai Rong Wua amulets sales, page 28.

²³ See chapter four.

²⁴ Rotheray’s work focused solely on the miraculous Buddha image of *Luang pho Tun-jai* (2016).

rock band Bodyslam and an activist. In the mural he is depicted as a *devata* – a celestial being. This is in addition to other superheroes such as Iron man and Aqua man who are also incorporated into the mural (see fig.1). In an interview with the muralist, Chitkorn Khankaew, he revealed that he wanted to add a contemporary story line to the mural and the decision to portray the singer as a *devata* was based on his contribution to the Thai society, which demonstrated self-sacrifice and kindness (Toon’s charity runs raised millions of Bahts for Thai hospitals).²⁵



Figure 2: Toon Bodyslam as a *devata* at Wat Doi Kham, Jpeg, Ronit Wang, 2022.

Examples for other temples that assimilate contemporary characters into their imagery are: Wat Sampa Siw in Suphanburi that includes the cartoon character Doreamon in its murals (even one that is burning in the hellish cauldron), as well as statues of the character on its ground, and Wat Pariwat in Bangkok that includes characters of superheroes and other western animation elements embedded on its walls.

This phenomenon was defined by Johnson as global neo traditionalism:

“Thinking of issues of cultural translation and the visuality of public art. Cate (2003) recalled how English visitors to Wimbledon’s Wat Buddhapadipa would point out the likes of Margaret Thatcher, Saddam Hussein, George Bush and Mother Theresa on walls that detail episodes from the Buddha’s life. These ‘international’ figures – symbols of a new global neotraditionalism in Thai art - were carefully integrated into the murals by Thai painters. They existed as part of a larger Buddhist landscape, albeit

²⁵ <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/local/north/1941245>

occupying traditional minor positions on the painted wall without detracting from the story-at-hand. In the language of Central Thai muralists, these figures were the quintessential ‘dregs’ (*phaap kaak*) of the painting. They inhabited the margins of the work, not contributing to the narrative per se but enlivening it and making it socially relevant to viewers” (2017:90).

Indeed, the above examples demonstrate the way in which popular elements are incorporated into the temple surroundings in order to create an interest amongst the visitors by keeping up with the times, and as Johnson noted, staying socially relevant. This goes hand in hand with Phra Pawana Vimon’s assertion that there is a need to create interesting content to engage people who would otherwise be uninterested in the Buddhist teachings, a premise which is incorporated in all the parks which include contemporary representations and localisation of cosmological themes. This type of ‘religious populism’ explains the amalgam of mass media and Buddhist practice which is present in the parks.

As noted above, the parks visitors are mainly locals for whom the temple is the focal point and families who come for a day out, but can also include practitioners who are staying at the temple or followers of the temple abbot who come to take part in temple activities. Other visitors might arrive in group tours, schools, university students or organised domestic tourists’ groups.

Before listing the parks, I would like to provide some background as to my own experience which led me to embark on this journey of studying them. The first park I visited was Wat Pai Rong Wua. I was introduced to it by Thai friends, with whom I went there on a day trip from Bangkok in 2008. Hearing it is a park depicting the hells, I did not really know what to expect. Once I got there, welcomed by the two towering images of *pret* that can already be seen from the road leading to the park, I was mesmerised. As I walked around, I was transfixed by the gory imagery and its blunt detailing. As a horror fan, it was a fascinating experience and it stuck with me since, ultimately leading me to embark on this research. Once I started to investigate this phenomenon further, I came across more and more parks. I learned about the parks via word of mouth, TV news segments, and internet blogs. Due to the large number of cosmological parks and monuments around Thailand, it became clear that I had to narrow down the number of parks for this study, in order to produce a comprehensive analysis of the representations of the *apāya*. With this in mind, the parks that I chose to include here are all easily accessible, popular and well visited. They are also located in different geographical locations, thus generating a representative survey of the phenomenon for this study. I will now introduce these parks, which as mentioned will be done chronologically.

1.2.1 Wat Pai Rong Wua, Suphan Buri

The first major cosmological park to be built, is located on the grounds of Wat Pai Rong Wua, also known as Wat Potaram, in Song Phi Nong district of Suphan Buri province. The impressive complex is the creation of the late temple abbot, Luang Pho Khom. Known for its two iconic male and female *pret* that tower above its grounds, this well-known park attracts visitors from across Thailand. According to the Thai Cultural Encyclopaedia this park is “an important centre of Buddhism, mimicking by use of imagery and large statues *pret*, the hells etc., and which Luang Pho Khom instructed to assemble in order to create awareness amongst the people who attend the temple”.²⁶ Anderson remarks that in an interview he conducted with the residing monks at the temple they all insisted that every single statue in the park was personally ordered by Luang Pho Khom (2012:34).

The impressive complex includes a giant Buddha image which is called Phra Gusantho, as well as several other Buddha images, monuments dedicated to the Buddha’s life story, an image of *Metteyya* – the future Buddha, a replica of the Bodh Gaya Mahabodhi temple, a pagoda representing the heavenly abodes, a model of Buddha’s footprint, a small lake, several prayer halls including a *vihara* with a hundred domes, a gift shop, and an extensive *apāya* section.

The construction of the main temple was initiated by locals from Pai Rong Wua village, who intrusted it with the revered abbot Luang Pho Khom. Then the extension of the park, devised by Luang Pho Khom, took place between the years 1957 and 1986, while the section of the *apāya* was erected in 1971. The subsidies for the construction were, to a large extent, funded by sales of amulets that were created by the abbot and are considered to have great potency (Anderson, 2012:43).

According to the temple brochure the abbot had a vision of building the park as an educational tool for future generations.²⁷ Indeed, the temple is a popular destination for domestic visitors, and continued to be so also after the passing of Luang Pho Khom in 1990, hitherto under the leadership of the current abbot Phra Kru Suwanchinawat.

The temple is located in central Thailand, thus easily accessible. Adjacent to the park is a local market that offers goods such as souvenirs, food and cooking utensils. The compound is a popular destination for a one-day trip, attracting visitors from nearby provinces, while at the same time also acts as the main religious space for the village of Pai Rong Wua.

²⁶ *Saranukrom Watanatam Thai pak glang*, Book 8, 2542 (1999), Wat Pai rong Wua, 3799.

²⁷ Wat Pai Rong Wua. n.d



Figure 3: Land of Hell Signage, Wat Pai Rong Wua, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2016.

1.2.2 Wat Wang Sean Suk, Chonburi

Built in the 1986, Wat Saen Suk Wisuthiwararam park is situated on the grounds of the local temple to Saen Suk village in Chonburi. This Park is quite popular with domestic tourists as it is located about 1km from Bang Sean beach, a seaside destination popular due to its close proximity to Bangkok. The park was founded by Luang Pho Nennoi Pothisato. Having been known for his virtue (*bun barami*²⁸), the inspiration for the construction of the park came to the abbot while he was meditating in Sean Suk area. In this meditative journey, He first visited the hells, then he encountered the *devatas* in the heavens, encounters that inspired the imagery that is represented in the park.²⁹ Sadly, the abbot passed before the park's completion. The current abbot of the temple is Phrakhru Samuwinay Chatawiro, who led the construction of a new large *vihara* that was erected in 2018.

Luang Pho Nennoi Pothisato Foundation Facebook page listed the objectives of the creation of the park and life work of the abbot which were continued by the foundation³⁰, as follows: “For educational benefits, to finance scholarships for underprivileged children in Chonburi, for the benefit of the society, to create jobs for people in need so they can support themselves, for the welfare of the society and for cultivation of mindfulness”.³¹

²⁸ For a discussion on *barami* and the Thai concept of power see Jory, 2002.

²⁹ Jeab, a laywoman that operates one of the park's stalls in conversation with the author, July 2016.

³⁰ In 2012 Wat Saen Suk took legal action against the foundation over land ownership dispute. <https://mgronline.com/local/detail/9550000045175>

³¹ Facebook: มูลนิธิหลวงพ่อเนนน้อยโพธิ์สัตโต

The vast area on which the park sprawls includes a *vihara*, an area that is dedicated to depictions of episodes from the Buddha's life, representations of deities, including *Mae Thoranee* (the goddess of the earth), images of Chinese and Hindu gods, an installation dedicated to a famous poem by a renowned Thai poet Sunthorn Phu titled *Phra Aphai Mani*, an astrological wheel, portrayals of Thai proverbs, and a large *apāya* section. At the edge of the park there is a large lake, in the midst of which a small island with a *nāga* sculpture in its centre. Near the lake there is a sitting area for the visitors to enjoy, a number of food stalls, amulets and souvenir shops, as well as the occasional lottery tickets vendors. The largest section of the park is the hell area, located immediately after the Buddha's life story sections. Two signs directing to the *apāya* sections already appear at the entrance to the park. The first being a large towering sign that reads "Buddhist Park, Hell Realm" followed by a board that notes "you are approaching the hell area, welcome".

In the Bang Saen's tourism website, the park is promoted by emphasising its impressive hell section. It is described as a learning centre which aims to act as a reminder to steer from evil and to instil dread children as to committing *baap*³² (misdeeds).³³ This specificity, pointing out the attention to wrong doing, alludes to the centrality of the hellish depictions in the park.

1.2.3 Wat Mae Kaet Noi, Chiang Mai.

Wat Si Don Chai Pa Tung Ngam is also famously known as Wat Maek Keat Noi, a name assigned to it after the village of Mae Kaet Noi in Chiang Mai, where it functions as the focal point of the area serving the locals, and is thus is the name that will be used throughout this thesis. Due to its frequent appearances in Thai media, and to its proximity to the city of Chiang Mai, this park too, is popular with domestic tourists. The entrance area to the park consists of scenes from the Buddha's life story, as well as a heavenly realms' pagoda. Amongst all the depictions, there is no doubt that the predominant section in the park is that of the *apāya*. It is extremely large and explicit, and is probably the most gruesome amidst all the parks studied in this thesis.

³² Note on the term *baap*: in order to convey the concept of misdeed, from now on I will use the term *baap*. Deriving from the Pāli *pāpa*, it is usually translated as sin. However, due to the latter Judeo-Christian connotation, its use might convey the wrong meaning. *Baap* means wrong conduct which has *kammatic* ramifications, and as such I will use the term *baap* throughout the thesis.

³³ <https://www.saensukcity.com/wat-saensuk.html>

The construction of the park began in the late 90's, but the park was inaugurated officially in 2009, and its expansion continues until present day, having new images erected constantly.³⁴ The idea to build the park was formulated by the temple's abbot Phra Kru Wisaanjariyakun, who commissioned local artists to create the images, having the sculptures in the park first sketched with the help of a muralist. The abbot's idea of creating the park began with a dream he had, in which he received a divine message that he should build a 'hell-on-earth' in order to educate practitioners about Buddhist cosmology and *kamma*. Having graduated as a *dhamma* scholar in an advanced level,³⁵ the abbot, who has extensive knowledge of Buddhist cosmology, strongly believes that it is essential to teach the laity about the consequences of *kamma* and that the most effective way to do that is through visual images. The inauguration of the park was marked with a ceremony called *bang suang* – a realm crossing offering ceremony which is meant for worship and respect of the beings in all three worlds, and to summon the *devatas* for their blessing and protection. In this case the ceremony was also conducted in order to inform the beings in all worlds about the erection of the park. The ceremony was held while performing specific chants and particular offerings of fruits, sweets, flowers and incense.³⁶ A *phra phoo*, a local medium who has the ability to connect with the spirits, was invited to participate in the ceremony. Offerings to the deities that were given during the ceremony, were later placed in a pit dug on the grounds on which the park was built. The first hell scene image erected was the scene of *Phra Malai's* visit to hell, a prominent narrative which will be discussed in detail subsequently. The park's construction was funded by donations and earnings from teachings that the abbot himself carried out.

As noted earlier, Wat Mae Kaet Noi is extremely gory. This is expressed via very graphic imagery that spares no place for imagination. When I inquired about the detailed depictions of bodily organs and horrific images of torture, Phra Kru Pisanjaryakun noted that although these features were criticised, he maintains that the subject should be presented in an accurate manner, and his view is that softening the imagery would distract from the desired effect.³⁷

³⁴ Throughout my visits which began in 2003, until my last one in April of 2022 new images kept appearing while the construction of more was taking place.

³⁵ Thai sangha members are obliged to complete dhamma education which level is associated with their ranks.

³⁶ Account on the *bang suang* ceremony can be found in Irwin, 2018.

³⁷ Phra Kru Wisaanjariyakun, in conversation with the author, October 2013.



Figure 4: Gory depiction of hellish tortures, Wat Mae Keat Noi, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2016

1.2.4 Wat Po Chai Sri, Udon Thani

Situated in Ban Pue District on the highway leading to Udon Thani is Po Chai Sri temple, or as it is locally known, Wat Luang phor Nak. The temple can be seen from the scenic road leading to it, passing through vast rice fields. The large temple complex expands over four acres. In addition to the cosmological park which includes representations of the mount *Sumero* constellation, the lower heavens, the *himmapan* forest and the realms of the *apāya*, the temple also consists of two *salas* (halls used for gatherings and ceremonies), a *vihara*, monastics' *kutis* (living quarters), and a hall dedicated to *Phra Upakut (Upagupta)*,³⁸ the latter situated the centre of a lake around which vendors sell food and drinks. A field next to the lake has been designated for a 19-meter wide and 39-meter-tall Buddha protected by the *Nāga* image, which was in the midst of construction when I last visited. The temple is well known for its ancient Buddha protected by the *Nāga* image – *Luang pho Nak*, hence the temple's local nickname. Carved in 808CE, this statue was stolen and returned to the temple four times. Potent powers attributed to the image spur a magical air around it, enhanced by the numerous miraculous stories accounted by some of its devotees (Asoko, n.d). In addition to this famous image, people come from around the area as well as from other provinces to visit temple's abbot, Phra Pawana

³⁸ The Buddhist monk *Upagupta*, who operated in northwest India over two thousand years ago, and who is endowed with potent abilities, is venerated today in Thailand, specifically in the north and north east provinces. For more on this, see Strong, 1994.

Vimon, who teaches meditation, sacralises amulets, performs protection rites on cars and motorbikes, practices divination, and blesses his followers.

The cosmological park in Wat Po Chai Sri is the creation of Phra Pawana Vimon. It was built between 1994-1996 by the local villagers who were instructed by the abbot as to the designs and their arrangement. According to the abbot, the images in the park are based on canonical sources, namely the *Tipiṭaka*, as well as the abbot knowledge which was cultivated using a meditation technique that is applied and taught by him, and is said to enable the successful meditator seeing the different cosmological realms in the mind's eye, a notion which I will return to shortly. The abbot refers to the park as a didactic tool. As noted earlier, the abbot maintained that a visually stimulating space can help keep the younger generations interested and to learn about the results of positive or negative *kamma*.³⁹

1.2.5 Wat Muang, Ang Thong

Spreading over approximately 28 acres, Wat Muang is famous for its golden seated Buddha image, the largest in the world, measuring 84 meters tall. Established by its first abbot, Luang Pho Kasem Achansuphoo, it was an abandoned temple said to be built in the late Ayutthaya period and destroyed by the Burmese-Siamese war.⁴⁰ In December of 1982, the abbot realised that the area of the deserted temple can be used for *dhamma* practice and asked the locals to assist in its construction. With funding collected from donations, the construction continued until August 1984, when the temple was officially inaugurated. The extensive park was built in the following years, during the 1990s (McDaniel, 2016). The temple and the park's mission, as noted in the temple brochure is: "a place to learn the Buddhist teachings, and practice meditation for monks and lay followers, build a hospital for monks, a distribution centre for handicraft made as part as the royal project⁴¹, to act as a tourist attraction for Thais and foreigners alike" (Wat Muang, n.d). The current abbot of Wat Muang is Phra Kru Supaturakhet Sunthorn.

In addition to a 92 meters tall Buddha image,⁴² the park includes an *ubosot* (prayer hall), a *vihara* which houses Luang Pho Kasem Achansuphoo's coffin, a lake, a small market area, representations of historical scenes, depictions of the *Jātaka* tales, installations of Thai literary

³⁹ Phra Pawana Vimon, in conversation with the author, August 2016.

⁴⁰ The park includes a representation of a war scene noting this specific historical Period.

⁴¹ The OTOP 'one *tambon* one product' is a programme which aims to support local Thai products.

⁴² Built in honour of the late king Bhumibol Adulyadej.

works such as *Kun Chang Kun Paen*, statues of deities which includes Hindu and Chinese gods, images of famous ascetics, and a large *apāya* area.

As accounted above, Wat Muang was explored by McDaniel as an example of a Buddhist leisure location. McDaniel notes that not many monks in Wat Muang manage day to day activities, and the latter are run by nuns and lay women. He suggests that the park is mainly devised by lay people and situates it amongst other spectacles which he refers to as socially disengaged (2016:108-112). While McDaniel's account is informative, it is important to note here that in many temples around Thailand, the day-to-day activities are run by nuns (*mae chi*) and lay followers, while the high-ranking monks fulfil ceremonial duties. In this way for example, Cook discusses the system in which the monastery accounts are run by *mae chi* in conjunction with the monks, and organise the household expenses. The nuns therefore mediate much of the economic exchange between the temple and lay society (2008:17). As this is a common demeanour around Thai temples, the delegation of administrative duties does not diminish the involvement of the monks and the abbots who, as this dissertation maintains, are the main creators and operators of the parks.

1.2.6 Wat Pa Lak Roi, Nakhon Ratchasima

Wat Pa Lak Roi in the village of Ban Lak Roi, in Non-Thai district of Nakhon Ratchasima was built as an extension to another temple located 7km down the road whose abbot, by Phra Kru Siriphatarakon, the founder of the park. Both temples follow the tradition of Luang Pho Chan, which is a Thai forest tradition, hence the term *pa* in the temple's name, literally meaning forest. In 1977, a group of monks settled on the grounds where the temple stands today, operating a monastery solely for their own practice. In 1984, The monastery opened as a temple to public, and became the local temple of the village. The construction of the park began in 1991, funded by donations, under the instructions of Phra Kru Siriphatarakon.

The park's sign and booklet note that this is an *utayan gan sukka*, which translates as 'educational park'. The grounds consist of an activity hall,⁴³ a *vihara* in front of which there is a large image of Rahu the king of the *asuras*,⁴⁴ classrooms that are used as a Sunday school for local children and is operated by the residing monks as well as lay volunteers, monuments for

⁴³ The activity hall includes a shop in which amulets and books written by Phra Kru Siriphatarakon are sold. Interestingly, there is also a display of an outer realm item: two male *nirapon*, these are said to be the creatures that grow on the *nariphala* trees that are found in the mythical *himapaan* forest. This is curious, as the *naripon* (also called *makalipon*) are described in the Traiphum as female maidens (TrpA:394). The most famous Naripon in Thailand are a pair (female) that resides in Wat Phra Prang Muni in Sing Buri.

⁴⁴ See page 37, the *asura* being the realm beneath the human realm.

Thai royals past and present, representations of daily village scenes, a historic monument for Tao Suranari,⁴⁵ a pavilion for the Chinese goddess Khwan Yin, mechanically operated displays of North-eastern songs (*Issan*), a zodiac sign installation, images of deities, several Buddha images, a lake with some seating areas around it, restaurants and shops selling local crafts, as well as lottery ticket vendors, and representations of the cosmic realms, amongst which a large area dedicated to the *apāya*. The temple booklet explains the rationale in the creation of the hell area (*daen narok*): “The hell section imagery was created for educational purposes. (It conveys) the principles of *dhamma* focus on those who have aversion towards faith (belief). The images are examples to teach the people of future generations, to be wary of *baap* and not to hurt other humans or animals” (Wat Pa Lak Roi, n.d).

1.2.7 Wat Santi Nikhom, Lampang

Wat santi Nikhom Samakkhi Tham is located in Kho Kha district, Lampang, and is headed by the abbot Luang Pho Sa’aad Khsonjito. The temple was established in June 1982 with the support of lay followers from the area. In 1992, a storm hit the area and the *ubosot* collapsed. Alas, the Buddha image inside it was not damaged at all. This event was perceived as a miracle after which the locals were encouraged to go ahead and resume the construction. The erection of the cosmological representations area started in the year 2012.

Wat Santi Nikhom has a renowned meditation program that is managed and run by the residing nun Mae Chi Chanida Wilaisiri. Large number of lay practitioners (*nak thaam*) arrive to stay at the temple for meditation retreats, amongst which schools on organised trips. The temple also works in collaboration with the Nitthi Kosonjito foundation, running a scholarship programme for students from the district of Kho Kha.

As Luang Pho Sa’aad is a disciple of Luang Pho Kasem,⁴⁶ the temple has a *vihara* dedicated to the abbot’s teacher, as well as to other renowned ascetics, which is used for activities that take place during days of observance. In addition, the temple grounds consist of a residential area for *sangha* and practitioners, two shops selling sweets and food as well as prayer books and amulets, a *vihara* dedicated to the Chinese deity Khwan Yin⁴⁷, a large prayer

⁴⁵ Thao Suranaree, or as locally called *Yaa Mo*, is also represented in a monument at Nakhon Ratachisma town centre. A local hero, she is remembered and venerated for having defended her people during the Laotian invasion in 1826.

⁴⁶ Luang pho Kasem is considered to be an *arahant*, thus has been elevated to a status of a saint. The pride of Lampang, he has a *vihāra* in Lampang town centre is dedicated to him, as well as an extremely large image of him that is housed in a temple carrying his name.

⁴⁷ I was told by the nun that the reason for the *vihāra* dedicated to the Chinese Kwan Yin is that the abbot, Luang Pho Sa’aad, discovered through meditation practice, that he was a Chinese monk in his past life (Mae Chi Chanida Wilaisiri in conversation with the author, February 2020)

hall, an installation with representations of buddha images for days of the of the week respectively,⁴⁸ a *vihara* for the great teachers as discussed above, a prayer and activity hall, a small lake with a meditation area, and the cosmological park. The park's layout here is unique to Wat Santi Nikhom, as it is situated vertically in a building that simulates the cosmos on its three levels' configuration (see fig.4). The basement includes the *apāya*. The ground level is representative of the earth – this level is complimented by a depiction of the four continents and the *Himmapan* forest, located adjacently to the building. The second level is dedicated to the heavens, with murals of heavenly beings known to us from the *Triaphum*, but also include Chinese deities. The third and highest level represents the formless realms and the *nibbāna*, this round space at the top of the building includes hundreds of Buddha images which are embedded in the wall, impressive colourful columns made of Lampang's ceramics and an adorned case containing a Buddhist relic.⁴⁹ The case is placed on a base on which the different zodiac signs are minted, demonstrating the relations of the park with astrology, which will be discussed below.



Figure 5: The Three Worlds Stupa, Wat Santi Nikon, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2021

⁴⁸ Images representing different mudras, are also associated with the days of the week. This will be discussed when looking at astrology.

⁴⁹ Lampang is well known throughout Thailand for its traditional ceramics. This is expressed in the area via myriad museums, factories and shops.

1.3 The Buddhist Cosmos and the Apāya – an overview

“There are more things in Heaven and Earth Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”⁵⁰

The Buddhist universe is centred around the *Sumeru* Mountain (*Khao Phra Sumeru*), which is surrounded by four continents: *Pubbavideha* in the east, *Aparagoyāna* in the west, *Uttarakuru* in the north and *Jambudvīpa* in the south, the latter being the continent on which we humans live and where the past and future Buddhas operate (see fig.5). The sun and the moon circles are conceived above the four continents. Within this scheme, there are thirty-one planes of existence, which are divided into three groups: the realms of formlessness (*arupa loka*) where the inhabitants consist entirely of mind with no physical bodies, the realms of form (*rupa loka*) where the heaven dwellers - the *devatas* reside, and the realms of desire (*kāma loka*) inhabited by the lower heavens and the humans. The *kāma loka* also include the four states of deprivation, collectively called the *apāya*, namely: the *asuras* (demons or titans), the *peta* (hungry ghosts), the animals and the hells (Sadakata, 1997:25-40, TrpA,375-379, TrpR 271-281&358).

In the rebirth scheme that characterises the cycle of samsara (*sansaruwat*), the *apāya* - the realms of woe are undoubtedly of the most horrific states of birth. These include within them the hells and the ghost realm.⁵¹ Within this system, extending around the four gates of each hell, is the central operating mechanism of the cosmic scheme - Yama's land (*meuang phra yom*). This land is the destination of the deceased, where they arrive immediately after their death, and where their next rebirth is determined in accordance with their *kammic* accumulation. These three abodes: *narok*, *lok pret* and *meuang phra yom*, each extensive and intricate, have vast representation within the cosmological parks' portraiture.

While discussion on rebirth and *kamma* will be included in the next chapter, I would like to mention here the role which *bhavaṅga* Plays in the different cosmic life form expressions. As explained by Gethin: ‘unwholesome resultant investigating consciousness (*akusala-vipāka-upekkhāsahagata-santīraṇa-citta*) is considered to result from the twelve verities of actively unwholesome *citta* motivated by delusion and greed, delusion and hate, or merely delusion. A being who experiences this as his or her *bhavaṅga* must be one of four kinds: a hell being, an animal, a hungry ghost or an *asura*’ (1994:19).

⁵⁰ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.

⁵¹ Both these realms populate beings who are referred to as *opapātika*, who are born without any visible cause, that is with no parents (PTS, 168).

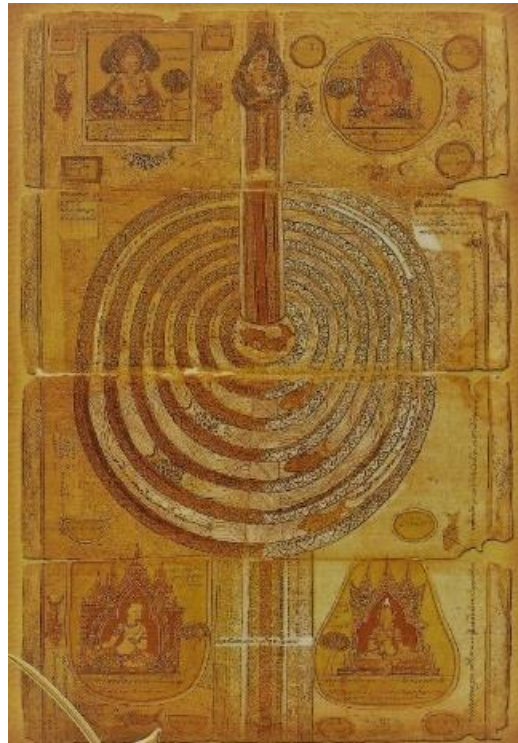


Figure 6: The Four continents, TrpW

1.3.1 The Apāya in The Parks

The ambience of horror which plays on the pathos of its denizens, have made the *apāya* representations in the parks the most popular. Furthermore, many of the images in these sections of the parks became somewhat iconic, and act as a point of reference to cosmological narratives on their own merit. Seeing this, a question arises, why is it that the *apāya* depictions became so well attended and favoured by the parks' visitors?

This issue can be understood in terms of the lure of horror and the cathartic experience that it manifests. Visions of hell have been fascinating humans around the world for centuries, a fascination that is expressed in literature and art through time and place. 'The hollow deep of hell', as coined by Milton in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, manifests a range of emotions, which the parks impinge upon. By stepping into the park, one is stepping out of this world and into another. The lure of the representations of the realms of woe also derives from their other-realm-like mysterious aspect, as these dimensions are unknown. As White notes, generally the force at work in horror might be defined as the trigger of our basic fear of the unknown, our fear of being unable to deal with our environment (1971:8). In this context, the parks enable the audience to visit territories that are usually inaccessible, and experience the thrill of fear in a safe environment. That being said, it is also important to address horror in the Thai context

within which the parks operate, and the way in which it is informed by Buddhist narratives, a correlation that was pointed out by Jackson (2004). Indeed, horrific elements ranging from terrifying creatures that reside in the *apāya*, to mediation on corpses (*asubha kammaṭṭhāna*), to ghosts that have been ‘budhhasized’,⁵² show that an interrelation between horror and Buddhism characterises the Thai treatment of horror and its motifs. All these ‘buddhorrific’ elements are expressed in the *apāya* sections in the parks, as asserted above, and thus can be applied as an explanation to the popularity of these sections.

1.3.2. Sources

I will now discuss the sources of the representation and conceptualisation of the *apāya*, which I have used in this study. These can be divided into canonical and indigenous, textual and visual.

1.3.2.1 Pāli canon

Apāya related materials in the Pāli canon include: the *Devadūta Sutta* (Discourse on the Deva Messengers), which brings about the meeting of the deceased with Yama and the questioning as to the encounter with the five divine messengers namely: birth, old age, illness, crime and death. The *Sāleyyakasutta* (Discourse to the People of Sālā), where The Buddha details the conduct that leads to a birth in the lower realms of existence, and notes the core practices that should be undertaken by lay practitioners to elevate their *kamma*. the *Bālapaṇḍitasutta* (Discourse on the Fools and the Wise), which refers to states of ignorance vs. awareness, and their influence on *kammic* fruition. The *Dhammapada*, in which the evil characteristics that lead to a birth in the hells are listed. And the *Petavatthu*, a collection of hungry ghosts’ narratives that illustrate the actions which may lead to a birth in this realm.⁵³

An additional canonical source, and a significantly prevalent one at that, being the subject of numerous murals in Thai temples, is the *Nimi Jātaka*. This the story of one of Buddha’s past lives, when he was born as the virtuous king Nemi Kumāra, who was the ruler of the Videha kingdom and resided in the city of Mithilā.⁵⁴ King Nimi was a great devotee who performed almsgiving, kept the five precepts and observed the Buddhist auspicious days in accordance with each quarter of the monthly lunar position (*wan phra*). He impressed the heavenly gods

⁵² For example, see Fuhrman on the Nonzees’ cinematic translation of the story of the ghost Mae Nak into a Buddhist parable (2009).

⁵³ According to Von Hinuber the text thought to be added to the canon during the time of the second council (1996:102), a period suggested by Skilling as a hundred years after the passing of the Tathāgata (Skilling, 2009:56), roughly 4th century BCE.

⁵⁴ Modern day Janakpur, Nepal.

so much, that they decided to invite him to visit them in their divine abodes, sending a charioteer named Mātali to collect him. Having been given the opportunity to visit the different realms, Nimi decides to visit the hells first, and witness the fate of those who have sinned. The hells that are described in the *Nimi Jātaka* are fifteen in number and are the auxiliary hells that surround the great hell *Sañjīva*.⁵⁵ The description of each hell in the story includes its features and the sins that caused its inhabitants to be born in it. This is communicated to the reader through the dialogue between Nimi and Mātali.⁵⁶



Figure 7: Nimi and Mātali visiting the hells, Wat Pumin, Nan, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2016

1.3.2.2 Thai Literary works

The most important work for the understating of cosmology as it dispersed in Thailand, is the *Traiphum* or *Traiphumikatha*, composed by King Phaya Lithai of the Sukhothai Kingdom. It is an elaborate literary work that illustrates in great detail the three planes of existence.⁵⁷ The exact dating of the text is debatable, nonetheless, the date that is commonly accepted by

⁵⁵ See pages 90-95

⁵⁶ See appendix 5.

⁵⁷ I use two Thai versions of the *Traiphum* in this study: the 1987 version, translated into Thai from an original manuscript in the Khom language by the Thai National Team for the Anthology of Asean Literatures, abbreviated as TrpA; and the Wachirayan National Library version, abbreviated as TrpW. In addition, I also refer to the English translation by Reynolds 1982, abbreviated as TrpR.

scholars is 1345 A.D (Reynolds,1982:5).⁵⁸ Several scholars have discussed the text cosmographic attributes (Reynolds, 1982, Schwartzberg, 1994); the ideal kingship and political aspects that it introduces (Reynolds, 1982, Jackson, 1989, Payyutto, 2012); and its influence on the Thai artistic landscape (Ivarsson, 1995, Brereton, 2017). The *Traiphum*'s significance as a part of the formation of cosmological ideas within the Thai world view is undeniable. As noted by Ivarsson, the cosmological elements and symbols found in this text inform later cultural and artistic traditions in Thailand (1995:57).

As this thesis will demonstrate, elements from the *Traiphum* appear in representations of the *apāya* in the parks. Furthermore, the *Traiphum* has been the subject of murals and scriptural art, which in turn inspired contemporary works, which are also reiterated in the parks. These textual seeds that stemmed from the *Traiphum*, expanded through time and via variety of mediums, attest to the way in which Buddhist teachings are communicated through platforms that are not necessarily the textual authorship.

While conducting interviews with lay Buddhists, I have learned that while many of my interviewees have heard of the *Traiphum*, most never read the actual text. Only two people confirmed they have actually read it. One is an MA graduate who read it at university as part of a Thai literature course;⁵⁹ the second, a young man who practices at Wat Santi Nikhom and has great interest in cosmology, which led him to explore literature on the subject.⁶⁰ Thus, the parks act as a platform of contemporary transmission of the text, as a part of a multi mediatic way of expressing cosmological motifs, impregnated within different societal levels.

As extensions of the narratives that unfold in the *Traiphum*, I will also refer to the *Lokapaññatti*, a 1442 text, describing the planes of existence, has been confirmed to be one of the *Traiphum*'s sources (Von Hinuber, 1996:183); and the *Traiphum Lok Winitchaya Katha*, which is a treatise on the *Traiphum* written between 1794-1801 by Phraya Thammapracha.

An additional classical text that has an immense impact on the parks, is the story of *Phra Malai*. The Thai versions of this account are said to derive from a 15th century northern Thai text which was translated into central Thai around the 17th century (Ferguson and Johannsen, 1976:658). The tale was written and told in each of the different Thai dialects, and has been narrated in courtly poetry as well as in colloquial rhyme. It was passed down in oral traditions, handwritten manuscripts and printed books. For centuries, it has influenced the content of

⁵⁸ See Vickery, 1974.

⁵⁹ Gai in conversation with the author, August 2016.

⁶⁰ Wit in conversation with the author, February 2020.

sermons and the practice of a number of different rituals (Breereton, 1995:2). Traced back to an earlier Ceylonese work known as the *Malai Sutra*, which was written in the 11th century (Ferguson and Johannsen, 1976:658), research conducted by Denis suggests that the character of Phra Malai, can be traced back to an actual *thera* named Maliya, who lived in Sri Lanka in the 2nd century BC (Denis cited at Breereton,1995:36). The story tells of the *arahant* Malai who, through accumulated merit and meditation, manifested the ability to travel the different realms of existence. Along his journey he encounters king Yama, Indra, and the future Buddha Metteyya. Through the dialogues he conducts with the three deities, details of the hells, the heavens and ideas as to the future arrival of Metteyya to the human realm unfold. In terms of its position amongst Thais, the Phra Malai is often read at temple occasions such as funerals, Buddhist auspicious days and other ceremonial functions. In addition, it is a popular narrative of ‘lay’ literature having numerous adaptations in the forms of children books, comics and graphic novels etc. It is also taught in Buddhist classes within Sunday school which are operated by temples which many children attend at a certain point.

1.3.3 Murals and Manuscript art

As I have mentioned above, cosmology have long been a prevalent subject of murals. Thai Buddhist art and mural paintings deal with concepts of Buddhist cosmology and the metaphysical geography of the universe.

Manuscript imagery can be found in surviving copies of texts such as *Phra Malai* (Igunma, 2013), *Nimi Jātaka* (Matics, 1979), and the *Traiphum* (Ivarsson, 1995, Breereton, 2017). Amongst the hellish depictions that can be found in these manuscripts are descriptive images of *pret*, hellish scenes such as the thorn trees and the boiling cauldrons as well as other torments and hellish denizens.

Buddhist murals in Thai temples are a visual tool which is intended for a wider audience as they ensure an easy recognition of Buddhist ideas and the facilitation of the underlying lesson (Ringis, 1990: 87). While many traditional murals, some of which will be presented in this thesis, depict scenes of the *apāya* in accordance with their respective textual descriptions, the more recent contemporary murals also demonstrate the way in which Buddhist art has been evolving and reflect the incorporation of modern elements into the Buddhist milieu (Johnson, 2017). The influence of murals in the parks will be demonstrated within this thesis, looking at their sources and resemblance to the imagery in the parks.

1.3.4 Contemporary materials

As maintained above, the core chapters of this thesis also draw on contemporary popular culture material, as this provides an insight into the ideas that are communicated in the parks and shared knowledge on which the park operate. The way in which textual ‘meta sources’ have been translated into popular content is symbolic of the formation of contemporary Thai Buddhism as a whole. Thus, looking at the context in which the parks operate must also take into consideration these mediums. The dissemination of *apāya* narratives via contemporary mediums, and the way it operates in the parks, is a key component in their investigation. Furthermore, the parks are essentially an expression of this adaptability to the contemporary world that Phillips alludes to, as they make the Buddhist teaching relevant and even more so, vibrant, so in this sense they are a part of this contemporary Buddhist sphere.

Films, soap operas, music, TV shows, popular books, blogs and magazines are popular because of their wide consumption. This in turn, makes them an essential element to be considered when looking at the evolution of the cosmological narratives as they unfold in the parks, and as such will be incorporated throughout this study. When choosing these materials I considered their treatment of the relevant topic, their popularity in terms of the distribution (presentation in shops and online), or their presence in libraries, school etc., and their echo within the virtual arena, as the discussion surrounding them pointed out to their familiarity.

1.3.5 Altered States of Consciousness

Altered states of consciousness such as dreams, meditation and near-death experiences (NDE), are essential to the understating of the parks for two reasons. First, these types of states have in some cases been the source of inspiration for the creation of the parks. Secondly, accounts detailing these kinds of experiences reinforce the narratives of death and rebirth, Yama’s land, *kamma* and merit, all of which are expressed in the parks.

Let us begin with the way in which these types of states have been inspiring the erection and the imagery in the parks. As noted above, Phra Kru Wisaanjariyakun, the abbot and the park creator of Wat Mae Keat Noi was inspired to build the park following a vision he had whilst dreaming. The significance of dreams in Buddhism is already apparent in the eminent

story of Maya's dream prior to the birth of the Buddha.⁶¹ Patton, who looked at the role of dreams in the development of Burmese sacred places, discusses the way in which for Buddhists in Myanmar, dreams are foundations of omens and divine revelations and are part of a suprasensible world that has an ontological status. Referring to dreams as 'other-worldly knowledge' he presents a study of physical materialisation of dreams via the construction of religious spaces (2018). In the same way, via utilisation of this 'other-worldly knowledge' Phra Kru Wisaanjariyakun materialised his dream and built a space which replicates the cosmic realms.

Other abbots, namely Phra Pawana Vimom of Wat Po Chai Sri, Luang pho Sa'aad of Wat Santi Nikhom and Luang Pho Nennoi Pothisato of Wat Wang Sean Suk, both were inspired by altered states of consciousness that were achieved via meditation. During these meditation sessions they were able to visit the different realms and thus gather first-hand information about their structure, the atmosphere, the different punishments inflicted and the overall operation of the *apāya*. In the case of meditation, it is the attainment of the *jhānas* that enables its utilisation as a tool for traveling the realms.⁶² As Buswell notes, Buddhist travel need not be limited to the confines of this physical world. Deeply engrained in Buddhist cosmology is the notion that profound meditative absorption and spiritual insight can offer advanced adepts access to realms of existence (2009:1061). Thus, as these states are embedded in the Buddhist world view and are accepted amongst Buddhist practitioners as validated practice, they ultimately act as legitimisation for the parks. Furthermore, these abilities of the abbots are attributed to their spiritual vigour which attracts visitors to the parks. To this end, it is important to mention that though the abbots account much of the imagery in the parks to their own personal experiences, they are all abbots well versed in the Pāli canon and the Pāli language as their education as senior monks is mandatory, and enforced by the supreme sangha council. This knowledge therefor, must have taken part in their image structuring, whether subconsciously or not.

While meditation and dreams have been a legitimising force in the construction of the parks, NDE's, near death experiences of Thai practitioners, which are recounted via different mediums, are essential as testimonies for the narratives that are depicted in the parks. First, they

61 Maya's dream can be found in detail in the introductory chapter of the Jātaka commentary, the Nidānakathā (146-147). The Nidānakathā, translated by T. W. Rhys Davids 1880 A revised edition by Ānandajoti Bhikkhu, 2020 <https://www.holybooks.com>

62 As explained by Gunaratana "The jhānas themselves are states of deep mental unification characterized by a total immersion of the mind in its object. They result from the centring of the mind upon a single object with such a degree of attention that inner verbalization, the discursive function of thought, is arrested and eventually silenced, brought to a stop" (1980:12).

add gravity to the narrative of the journey of the dead, from the collection by the *yomatoot* to the meeting with Yama. Secondly, these kinds of experiences also tell us about how *kamma* operates by way of stories, which include accounts of encounters with relatives or beings with whom those who died and returned have *kammatic* ties, or via transferable goods that the deceased donated when they were alive, or were donated for them to later be received at the time in which their consciousness was altered and their body was inactive. Altered states of consciousness have to be acknowledged as a significant factor to paint as detailed picture of the parks as possible, as they provide an outer worldly information on a topic which essentially is other worldly.⁶³

This study then will incorporate such accounts in order to shed light on the way in which intangible sources too, have an impact on the formation of cosmological narratives which are expressed in the parks.

1.4 Overview of The Thesis

The core of this thesis is composed of three chapters, each adheres to a perspective cosmological feature of the *apāya*, as follows:

Chapter Two looks at the process of cosmic judgment and is thus cantered around depictions of Yama's land. It considers the way in which the parks simulate the journey of the deceased from the moment of his or her death to the arrival in front of Yama and his record keepers. It examines the way in which the parks stress Yama's position as the *kamma* regulator – the cosmic judge, and perpetuate the prominence of *kamma* in the rebirth scheme, while demonstrating clearly through imagery and text that good or evil actions are all recorded and will ripen accordingly.

Chapter Three explores the hells, looking at wrongdoings and retribution. It will delve into the way in which the hells' narrative supports adherence of the five precepts, which are consecutively proposed as a manual for avoiding birth in the *apāya*. Furthermore, this chapter will look at how the parks and the temples they are affiliated to provide the opportunity for visitors to undertake the precepts, under the authority of the *sangha*. In this chapter I will also discuss the

⁶³In relation to this topic, a PhD thesis written by Kongpetch Krynkana titled “Beyond After Death: Constructing Experiences of the In-betweenness Based on Contemporary Thai Sacred Spaces and Near-Death Experiences,” explores popular sacred spaces and the effect of contemporary culture on devotional offerings against NDE testimonies, as well as exploring the disparate state of contemporary Thai consciousness (2020).

inclusion of modern-day societal issues into the Buddhist cosmological scheme, making the sins and retribution in the hells current and relevant.

Chapter Four examines the realm of ghosts. Here, I will consider the *pret*, the hungry or suffering ghosts known to us from the Pāli canon, and the way they were incorporated into a broader milieu of Thai ghosts - the *Phi*. I will argue that ghostly portrayals accentuate the *sangha*'s meritorious significance. Hence, the agency that is constituted by the *sangha* takes on a dual application. First and foremost, it has a significant role as a channel between the humans and the ghosts, this realm and another, which is based on their meritorious position. Stemming from this position, the *sangha* is also portrayed as having the power to subdue 'misbehaved' ghosts, extending their agency to become somewhat of a 'Buddhist ghostbusters'.

2. Cosmic Judgment: Yama's Land Representations

2.1 Yama's Land

Fundamental to the Buddhist cosmological narrative of rebirth, Yama's land is depicted almost in all parks that are included in this research.⁶⁴ Yama's land is not positioned in the cosmic scheme as a realm of its own, rather, it is a domain which is incorporated into the hellish topography as it extends to encompass the four gates of each of the hells (TrpA:49).⁶⁵ Yama's land acts as the gateway which sets in motion one's mobility between realms. Upon death, the deceased is taken by the *yomatoot* (Yama's envoys, the harbingers of death) to report to Yama, who along with his secretaries, assesses the deceased accumulated *kamma* in accordance with their actions and determines their next destination, that is their next rebirth. Therefore, the journey of the deceased begins with the arrival to Yama's land. This, in turn, is mirrored in the parks, as the visitors' journey into the *apāya* begins with the depiction of Yama's land.

2.1.1 Yama's land – the actors

Yama's land, as presented in the parks, includes King Yama, the merit and the *baap* secretaries, the *yomatoot* (the harbingers of death), and the *yomaban* (Yama's guards, responsible for enforcing the punishment within the hells).⁶⁶ As follows:

King Yama has several names in Thai:⁶⁷ *Yomaraj* - literally meaning King Yama, *Majuraj* - the king of death, *Yomaban* or *Yompaban* - Yama the ruler, or *Phra Yom* - lord Yama. In his position as the cosmic judge and as the regulator of *kamma*, Yama is described as a just and righteous king. His discernment is conveyed in the *Traiphum*: "Yama king possesses dhamma to

⁶⁴ Excluding Wat Po Chai Sri, where the representations are divided into five hells which corresponds with the precepts respectively (see pages 97-99).

⁶⁵ Often in Thai sources, Yama's land is referred to as *meuang phra yom*, literally meaning Yama's land or the country. This is at variance to the other realms (the hell, realms, the ghost realms etc.) which are referred to as *bhumi*, a term that means world or realm.

⁶⁶ As will be demonstrated later on in this chapter, in Thai narratives a spirit child is often incorporated into Yama's milieu (see page 67).

⁶⁷ The names listed above are common names that are often used in the parks, by practitioners and in Thai language popular sources and were used while conducting this research. In addition, Chamnong notes the following names or referral idioms: *thammarat prarat haeng thaam* (the king of *dhamma*), *gatanot mi tisud aan tam laew* (the greatest there is), *Somwethi phumoonpai samaisemo* (That who constantly rotates), *Gan Phragan* (time), *Thanuthathorn Phumrongwai Sueng ganlongtot* (the one who bestows punishment), *Ontok Phutam(plong) naisudthai* (the one who materialises at the end) (2016:95). All these titles refer to Yama's duties while emphasising his royal position, constant presence and duty as determining fate.

a very high degree; whenever he investigates any affair or wields his authority over a plaintiff or a defendant, he consistently does it honestly and with righteousness” (TrpR:69).

Yama’s origins are rooted in Indo-Iranian mythology. As the story goes, Yama encounters mortality by experiencing death, and comes to be the first being in the underworld, subsequently becoming its ruler. Hence, his position as the ruler of this realm came to supersede his other roles (Siklós, 1994:169). Relating to Yama’s Vedic roots, Sankarnarayan, Matsuda and Yoritomi analysed hymns dedicated to him in the *Rg Veda Sankaranarayan*, and concluded that “Yama stands for the personified link between the two worlds...Yama is the bridge... Furthermore, Yama touches one of the deepest human realities, the fact of death” (2002:309).⁶⁸ This idea of Yama as a personification of the bridge between life and death, can be further extended and assumed as the bridge between one birth and the next.⁶⁹ Considering the parks, this perception of Yama can be applied to the spatial situation of Yama’s representations which is, as noted above, the starting point of the carefully planned ‘descent’ into the *apāya* that the visitors experience. Therefore, Yama’s land depiction in the parks is a bridge of sort, both symbolically, as Yama is a personification of this bridge between life spans, and physically, as his depiction acts as a buffer between the outer human world from which the visitors arrive, to the cosmic journey they are about to embark upon. This notion will be discussed further when looking at the spatial situation of Yama’s imagery.

Yama’s attributes are mostly consistent, with the occasional variance in his attire. He is depicted as either red or black in colour, or faired skin with red attire, dressed in royal garments, with a crown that often is adorned with skulls and at times also includes horns. He usually is seen seated with one leg on the ground while the other folded. In one of his hands, he holds a sceptre which is frequently adorned with a skull, and in the other he holds a rope (meant to latch onto the *winyan* – the spirit of the dead), a book (referring to his record keeping duty), or nothing at all (in which case he might be seen pointing towards the ground – that is towards the hell realms).

⁶⁸ The two worlds being the world of the dead and the world of the living.

⁶⁹ In Tibetan *thanka* (religious scroll paintings) Yama often is seen as holding the samsara wheel of existence, a depiction which also situates him as a driving force in the migration between life forms. For more on this see MacLaughlin, 2013.



Figure 8. Yama's image at Wat Wang Sean Suk, Jpeg, Ronit Wang, 2013

The *baap* and the merit Secretaries as will be demonstrated in this chapter, the depictions of Yama's court usually include two secretaries, the *baap* secretary and the merit secretary. This as seen in the parks' representations as well as in other mediums. According to the *Traiphum* (TrpA:48). and the *Lokapaññatti* (Lkp:82), these secretaries are *devata* - deities. As noted above the deity secretaries are usually depicted as a pair in visual representations. However, the *Traiphum* describes four secretaries (TrpA:48). When looking at the *Lokapaññatti* (Lkp:82) and the Pāli canon (MN:223-230) there is no reference to the number of secretaries. When considering the record keeping system, the *Traiphum* describes the way in which the good deeds - *boon* are written on a golden plate and the bad deeds - *baap* are written on a plate made of dog skin (TrpR:69), It might be that this dual dichotomy is the reason for the simplified representation which includes two secretaries only, each responsible for a plate. However, this remains a speculation.

Yomatoot, the *yomatoot* are Yama's emissaries, who come and collect the deceased to be seen by Yama at his or her moment of death, in this sense they are the harbingers of death. As will be detailed subsequently they often appear in NDE's and moment of death narratives.

Yama's guards, also referred to as the *yomaban* are those whose duty is to enforce the hellish punishments within the hells.⁷⁰ The *yomaban* are exclusively present in the auxiliary hells, the *usot narok* and the small hells, the *yomalok* (meaning they do not operate in the major hells). The *Traiphum* details their origin story, noting how does one transmigrate to a birth as a *yoamban*: “Those who are the *yama* guardians, in the human world they did evil deeds and also some meritorious deeds. When they died these beings were born into one of these hells where they remain for fifteen days, while another group of *yama* guardians kills them, cuts them with knives, throws weapons at them and stabs them until the fifteen days are over. Then they change into *yama* guardians for fifteen days. This alternation continues for a very long time because the effect of the evil deeds these beings have committed has not yet been exhausted” (TrpR:68).

2.1.2 Yama's land – the arrival of the dead scene

The arrival of the deceased to Yama's land is the predominant scene that is depicted in the parks This moment is described in the *Traiphum*:

“Anyone who dies, arrives first of all, to Yama's land and has to report to the Yama King; The Yama King then asks that person, ‘what merit or evil deeds have you done? Quickly now, think back and speak the truth!’ At that time four devatā who prepare a record of the merit and evil deeds that people have done are present and hold that record in their hands. In the case of a person who has made merit, the devata write the name of that person on a bright golden tablet. The devatā raise this tablet on to Yama King. The Yama King raises the tablet to his head, expresses his praise, and rejoices with them; then he places it on a golden table decorated with the seven gems, which have rays and are beautiful and bright. As for those who have committed evil deeds, the devatā put the record on a tablet made of dog skin...The devatā take out the record on the table made of dog skin and read it to them, and they confess that the account is true. The Yama King and the devata then order the Yama guardians to take them and to force them into the hells where the suffering is appropriately light or heavy in accordance with the lightness of heaviness of the evil they have committed” (TrpR:69-70).

This scene illustrates the way in which each individual's *kamma* is meticulously measured. It also accentuates Yama's position as the cosmic judge. By this description it is made clear that although Yama and his secretaries maintain the records and make sure that the process

⁷⁰ *Yomaban* is one of the names that are used to refer to king Yama, as noted above.

adheres to the truth, ultimately the fate that befalls the deceased is determined only by his or hers own accumulated *kamma*.

In this chapter I will explore Yama's land portrayal as it appears in three parks: Wat Pa Lak Roi, Wat Muang, and Wat Mae Keat Noi. I will maintain here that in each of the parks discussed, Yama's land depiction was spatially situated in accordance with a well thought design arranged by the park creators, constructing a path that leads the visitors around the parks. In this way, Yama's land acts as a bridge, as discussed above - connecting this world and the *apāya*, which functions as the starting point of the visitors' experience.

From a didactic point of view the parks' depictions of Yama are essential both for understanding the journey of the dead, as well as the inevitability of *kammic* retribution. On this wise, Yama's land representations are a tool to perpetuate the idea of individual production of *kamma*. Furthermore, this idea is embedded in a framework of a societal deterioration of morality that is apparent at present day, as we are in the midst of the decline of the *sāsana* timeline. Thus, this chapter will include a reading that is composed of two layers in which Yama's land operates: the individual and the collective, both of which are expressed via the depictions in the parks.

2.2 Yama's Land Representations in the Parks

2.2.1 Wat Pa Lak Roi

Yama's land depiction in Wat Pa Lak Roi is located at the edge of the hell area. It is composed of a cave, in front of which and in the middle Yama's image is seen seated, orange in colour, adorned with regalia.⁷¹ One of Yama's hands points towards the cave and the other is placed on an open book. The book is depicted open so that two pages are seen. One side reads "Sinners / those who have committed *baap* and did not believe the teachings of the Buddha / they will be taken by the *nirayaban* to be born in hell". On the other side it reads "Those who are meritorious/ people who did good and good only, will join Shiva and will know endless happiness/ *sathu* (amen, or praise)". The sayings on the book are situated in accordance with the directions where Yama's secretaries are seated, their body in dark green as they are dressed in simple red attire. The merit secretary is positioned to Yama's right, and is seen attending to two elderly people seated on an elevated platform, dressed in white temple clothes, the kind used in temple retreats. These are the

⁷¹ In parts Wat Pa Lak Roi depictions are coloured in shades that are similar to the original colours that are attributed to the depictions, probably due to shortage in paint or difficulty to find the right shade of colour. Thus, Yama is orange instead of red and his secretaries are dark green instead of black.

deceased whose meritorious acts are accounted for. On Yama’s left-hand side, the *baap* secretary is judging two beings – a naked man and women, who are kneeling on the floor in front of him while detained with chains by the *yomatoot*. These are the deceased who committed *baap* (See Fig.10).



Figure 9. Yama’s land Wat Pa Lak Roi, JPEG, Ronit Wang 2016

The differences between the deceased characters’ position on each side clearly demonstrate that those who performed merit and good deeds are treated with respect, they are dressed and seated on an elevated platform. The use of the term *sathu* indicates the praise they receive from Yama and his secretaries. On Yama’s book it is said they will be joining Shiva. According to the *Traiphum* Shiva is said to reside in a city replete with silver and gold populated by the *kinaris*, located on Mount *Kelasa*, subsidiary to the *Sumeru* centred geography.⁷² A place of happiness and joy, it is a part of the magical *Himavanta* (*himmavan*) forest and a blissful state of rebirth indeed (TrpA:408). The sinners, on the other hand are led by the *yomatoot*, chained and naked. Their humiliation is a clear indication of the bitter fate of wrong doers, destined for a miserable rebirth in the *apāya*.

The cave in Yama’s depiction creates the feeling for the visitors that they too are going through the journey of the deceased, by entering a dark enclave towards which Yama points. A sign above the cave reads: “Yama’s establishment – verdicts as to the cases of hell beings”. After

⁷² Identified with mount Kailash in Tibet in Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions.

passing Yama and his secretaries the visitors enter the cave where the hellish scenes are depicted. With the insertion of a ten Baht coin they can also hear the horrific screams of the hells.⁷³ The scenes in the cave include: hell's denizens that are seen slashed by the *yomban* and pecked by large crows that are seen roaming around. Amongst the scenes in the cave is one Phra Malai image, the appearance of which will be discussed subsequently.

2.2.2 Wat Muang

Yama's land installation in Wat Muang is located at the entrance to the hell section of the park. The representation is adjacent to a depiction of a Thai funeral, which includes an adorned coffin next to which images of several monks holding ceremonial fans (*talaphat*) while chanting (see Fig.11).

Here, Yama is red in colour and dressed in Thai style regalia, and is seen holding a sceptre adorned with a skull. He is seated in the centre between his two secretaries, on his left the *baap* secretary, dark in colour with a black book laid in front of him, and on his right the merit secretary, coloured in white and before him a golden book. Similarly, to Yama, both secretaries are dressed in traditional Thai attire. Facing Yama and his secretaries are a *yomatoot* with a man and a woman, their genitals merely covered in tiny cloth as they are detained in chains and kneeling in a *wai* position (slight bow, with the palms pressed together in a prayer-like fashion).⁷⁴ Next to the installation a sign reads "When humans produce (bad *kamma* due to) offence/ at the time of their death they are brought (to Yama) so their penalty will be considered/ In accordance with their accumulation of *kamma*/ then their destiny will come upon them".

Insofar, Wat Muang leads the visitors to the meeting with Yama and embark on their journey to the hells by indicating to the initial starting point of this journey— the funeral, the final separation of the dead from his or her earthly life.

⁷³ 10 baht equals approx. £0.20.

⁷⁴ Differently to other parks, the hell denizens in Wat Muang are all depicted with their genitals covered, this is probably a decision made by the park creators to prevent embarrassment amongst park goers.



Figure 10. Yama's land and the funeral depiction, Wat Muang, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2016

2.2.3 Wat Mae Kaet Noi

In Wat Mae Kaet Noi, Yama's land is located at the centre of the park. A pathway created by images of deceased who are brought to be judged by Yama, and are depicted while cuffed and adjoined one another in chains. The detainees are arranged in two lines, one on each side, in between which the visitor is invited to walk towards the scene where Yama and his secretaries determine the fate of the deceased. The walk amongst the beings who await their judgment, creates a sense of being one of them, experiencing the route one takes after death. At the end of the pathway, Yama can be seen seated, situated centrally, red in colour with Thai royal dress and crown. In his hands, he is holding a pen adorned with a skull with which he is depicted writing onto a folding book (*samut khoi*) (see fig.11). To the left of the king, the *baap* secretary is depicted, seated on an elevated area and surrounded by several skulls. He is red in colour, bearded, and has horns on his head. He is dressed in a cloth knotted with a skull shaped buckle. In one of his hands, he clasps a pen adorned with a demonic looking cap, and with the other hand he points towards a lower point, as if indicating towards the abyss of hell. With a fierce look on his face, he writes on a plate which is pinned to an image of a black dog, which is an explicitly visual demonstration of the dog skin' plate on which the deeds of the wrong doers are written, as mentioned above (see fig.12). Opposite the *baap* secretary and to the right of Yama, is the merit secretary. He too is red, bearded and has horns on this head.⁷⁵ He is wearing Thai style attire which is adorned with gold,

⁷⁵ The depiction of the secretaries adorned with horns is specific to Wat Mae Keat Noi. It is tempting to speculate that it stems from Yama's representations with a horn crown.

and is complemented by golden necklace and bracelets. He is holding a pen with a golden cap, as he writes onto a golden plate. The expression on his face seems serious but at the same time compassionate, (See Fig.13).⁷⁶



Figure 11: King Yama, Wat Mae Keat Noi, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2013



Figures 12&13, the *baap* secretary(left) and the merit secretary (right), Mae Kaet Noi, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2013

⁷⁶ In addition to the park's fixed representation of Yama's land and the infamous scene of arrival to his land, this depiction was duplicated in the parade that took place during *wan ploy phi*– the day of release of the ghosts', an event which will be discussed in detail in chapter four.

In addition to the main Yama's image as described above, scattered around the park (in no particular order) are four more Yama images, two in red colour and two coloured in blue and all consist of the following features: a third eye marked with a trident, a crown adorned with horns, a chest ornament made of skulls and in its centre a head of a bull, and Thai Royal attire. In all four images Yama is seen seated with one leg crossed, while holding a rope and a sceptre.⁷⁷ These images that can be found around the park communicate a reminder to the visitors as to Yama's omnipresent and watchful eyes which are constantly all around. In this way all actions are seen by him and none can be hidden. At the back are of the park, there situated one more depiction of Yama. In it, his physical attributes and attire are similar to the images described above. Alas, here Yama is seen while he is surrounded by several figures of infant spirits, some of which are portrayed crawling while other are depicted crying. This appearance of infants in the Yama's land scheme will be further explored shortly.

2.3 Spatial location of Yama's land in the parks

While the depictions of Yama's land are situated differently in each of the parks discussed here, all are designed in a way that correspond with Yama's cosmic position as the regulator of *kamma* while also serve as markers for the visitors' path.

In Wat Mae Kaet Noi the installation is situated at the centre of the park. In such a way, whichever entrance the visitor will use, he or she will inevitably find themselves in Yama's land. This choice of spatially situating Yama's land at the centre of the park clearly demonstrates the noting of Yama setting the wheels of *kamma* in motion, an idea that can be found in the *devadutta sutta*. While the individual is responsible for his actions, as can be seen by the examples of the sinners from both sides of the pathway, it is Yama and his secretaries who records the actions and ultimately determine the individual's subsequent rebirth. This is further emphasised by the additional Yama images which gaze upon the visitors around the park, serving as a reminder that we are constantly watched.

Wat Muang located Yama's land at the entrance to the hells, along with an adjacent depiction of a funeral service. This situation mimics the scriptural cosmological mapping of Yama's land right at the gates of hell. In addition, the funeral scene invites the visitors to reflect on the moment of departure from the human life and into the transitory stage of reporting to Yama. This depiction,

⁷⁷ It can be assumed that the bull on Yama's chest ornament refers to the Vedic tradition according to which Yama is described as a bull, see Siklós, 1996.

marking the transition between lives, was well described by Holt, who noted that the deceased leaves behind the familiar vicissitudes of human life and enters a new modality of being beyond. Funeral rites serve as a means to facilitate this transition (1981:1). The funerary reference is also connected to the *Phra Malai Klon Suat*, the chanted version of the *Phra Malai*, which was usually performed at funerals or memorial services (Brereton, 1995:93) and maintains Yama's position in the cosmic scene via Phra Malai's encounter with the king who addresses the individual's *kammic* responsibility, as will be discussed below.⁷⁸

Similarly to Wat Muang, Wat Pa Lak Roi positioned Yama's land at the edge of the hell. An additional feature in this park's installation is the dark cave into which Yama invites the visitors. The separated enclave creates a sense of momentarily stepping away from the human realm and entering another world, an altered space which is dark and somewhat claustrophobic very much like the hells. As the visitors walk into the cave via the entryway that was pointed by Yama, they are guided by a path that leads to exit, on the other side, thus having emerged out of the hellish moment they experienced. This resonates with the idea that the deceased who await their sentence, do so in the proximity of the hells, which Yama's land surrounds the hells, thus acting as a kind of a purgatorial space.⁷⁹

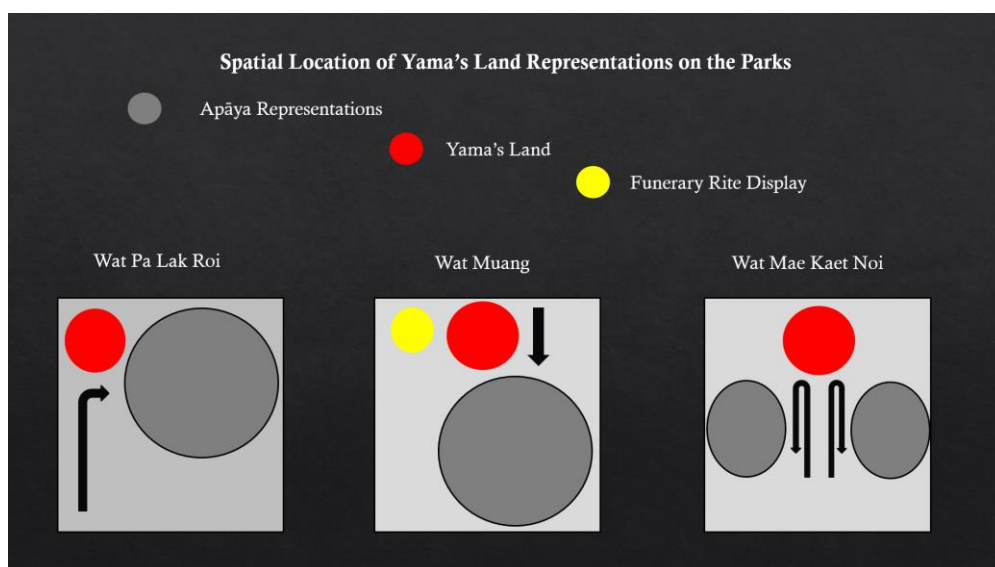


Figure 14. Spatial location of Yama's land in the parks, drafted by the author.

⁷⁸ To this end, Brereton also discussed the way in which the *Phra Malai Klon Suat* accentuates the idea of retribution, which according to her is *kammic* and comic, meaning that whilst sins and their outcome are described, certain episodes, such as the one that tells of the consequences that await a corrupt government official, have a comic effect (1995:115).

⁷⁹ A similar cave can be found in Wat Phumin in the northern city of Nan. The cave is located just outside of the main *vihāra* and in it representations of hellish punishments inflicted on the hell denizens, an image of Yama as well as Phra Malai.

2.4 King Yama beyond the parks

Representations of Yama extend beyond the parks, and can be found in numerous sources, from scriptural narration to popular mediums, as well as documented experiences of altered states of consciousness where Yama appears. As described above, the majority of Yama's land representations are centred around the scene of the deceased's arrival in front of him and his secretaries, where their *kammatic* accumulation is to be assessed. The scene from the *Traiphum* that appears above, and have been the theme of Yama's land depictions in the parks, has also been reiterated in several other platforms, a few of which will be discussed here.

Replicated on the big screen, the scene of arrival to Yama's land was brought to life by Sathit Pradistarn and Teekayu Thamnitayakul in their 2005 horror film *Narok* (Hell). The film encompasses the story of a documentary film production crew (Mask Mass production), who travel together for work purposes. Driving at night, the driver falls asleep and their van crashes into a truck. As a result of this horrific accident the crew members all awake in hell. The characters' state is construed to the viewers, who can see that their physical bodies are in a state of coma at an on-earth hospital, while their *winyans* (life essence) experience a liminal stage in which they endure a macabre journey through the gory hell. The group then arrives to Yama's land, where Yama is seated on a large elevated throne, he is red in colour and wearing royal attire, with a crown adorned with horns. The hall is dark with a reddish hue, with skulls scattered around, creating an eerie sensation (see fig15). As the group stands before the king. One of the secretaries, who is positioned next to Yama, opens a folding book (*samut khoi*) on which writing in Khom script can be seen.⁸⁰ He then reads aloud in Pāli (with Thai subtitles):

“The lord of all *winyan*, each has *kamma* of its own, when deceased they will be assessed considering the account written on a dog's skin. These seven souls have *kamma* that was carried out through time. If one killed living beings, one will be sent to Sañjīva Hell. If one performed a theft, one will be sent to Kālasutta Hell. If one performed a sexual misconduct, one will be sent to Saṅghāta Hell. If one used wrong speech one will be sent to Roruva Hell. If one consumed alcohol one will be sent to Mahā Roruva Hell. Provided that the *winyan* still not exhausted its *kamma* it will need to repay on the grounds of the hell realm. I now turn to King Yama (Majuraj) to determine.

⁸⁰ An ancient Thai script used mainly in religious scriptures, share similarities with the Khmer script and is ultimately derived from the South Indian Pallava Script (Virunhapol, 2017).

In a deep and determined voice, Yama then speaks:

“Each has a different destiny in accordance with their *kamma*. Each soul will ripe the fruit of their collected *kamma*. In the event that the soul has not yet exhausted its positive *kamma* it will return to earth. All must accept the results and until that time comes, all will stay on the grounds of hell”.



Figure 15. The characters arrive to Yama's Hall, from Narok DVD, Saha Monkul Film Production, 2005

This idea in the film, according to which the deceased wait for their final verdict in hell is often mentioned in near death accounts, as I will demonstrate later on. I shall return to this film in the next chapter, looking at the hells. The appearance of the scene in the film also demonstrates Possamai's view, which was mentioned above in the discussion on popular culture, as to the use of media as a platform for the transference of religious ideas (2005).

While the scene in the film draws to a large extent on the *Traiphum* and shares the same elements with the park's depictions of Yama's land, a delve into scriptural sources brings an added narrative to the theme, one that may enable us to understand the gravity of the role that *kamma* plays in the encounter with Yama.

The moment of arrival in front of Yama is described in the *Devadūta Sutta*, the Sutta of the Deva Messengers (Thai: *devatoot*). As the scene unfolds, Yama asks a person who arrives before him if he encountered the five *deva* messengers during his lifetime, the messengers being: birth, old age, illness, crime, and death. The person confirms he indeed encountered all the signs.

He is then asked by Yama why, in light of these sights, it did not occur to him that he is liable for all these occurrences and therefor is responsible for his own actions. The person replies: “I was not able to...I was indolent”.⁸¹

This scene is telling by several aspects. First, it gives an account of Yama as a just ruler, who engages in conversation with the person in front of him and encourages him to consider his actions and his choices. Secondly, it teaches us about the five *deva* messengers and the importance of awareness and attention to the nature of life, which ultimately can act as a guide to mindfulness and right conduct. An additional aspect to the story becomes clearer when looking at the following extract from the *Phra Malai* story, in which king Yama explains to the *arahant* the way in which the encounter with five messengers and the subsequent questioning about it, encourages conscious thinking as to the most basic teaching, that of suffering:

“The truth of the law is that when the dead arrives at the doors of other realms, these will open in accordance with the deeds of that person. If he performed good deeds the doors of the heavens will open, if he performed evil deeds the doors of the hells will open. This occurs with no mercy or deductions. However, he will be given the opportunity and will be inquired about (possible) good behaviour, by being asked about the five messengers, several times. This is to make him conscious of good deeds that he perhaps performed, until he cannot think of any, then he will be punished...I ask about suffering. Every form of life endures suffering: old age, sickness, death and rebirth. When one replies that they saw these things, I then ask ‘what were you thinking?’ and if the answer is that this did not emanate consciousness, then I ask two or three more times, to provoke thought about misery... consciousness as to the realities of human life... that is dhamma, but some people do not utilise it... still I give him the opportunity, but if this person has sinned, and his wisdom is hidden, mercy cannot be given to him, the spears (of the yomaban) will stab him”.⁸²

Here, Yama’s equitable judgment process is emphasised, adding significance to his portrayal as a just ruler in the *Devadūta Sutta*. This, by maintaining that the verdict as to the impending rebirth is determined in accordance with the person deeds and his deeds only. Indeed, Yama affirms this to Phra Malai by noting how the next rebirth unfolds. This is further illustrated by Marasinghe who notes that Yama appears as a sympathetic onlooker who does not interfere in any serious way in the operation of the *kammic* law (cited in Siklós, 176:1996). Saying that, it seems that the use of the term ‘sympathetic’ does not align with Yama’s visual depictions, when

⁸¹ MN130. Trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995: 1029-1036.

⁸² PMNS:4-6.

considering Thai portrayals, in the parks and elsewhere, most of which depict him as serious and perhaps even fearsome. Albeit, Yama's position as a just ruler is emphasised again and again.

In addition, as described in the sutta after pressing and cross-questioning the deceased about the fifth messenger, 'King Yama is silent'.⁸³ This was explained by Thanissaro Bhikkhu 'In Asian Buddhist kingdoms, there was a custom that when a king was sentencing a criminal to death or to be tortured, he would not actually express the sentence, but would simply fall silent. The Commentary counsels that if a student asks not to hear the description of hell (which follows from this point), a teacher should teach the student meditation and then wait until the student has reached stream-entry before returning to the description of hell'.⁸⁴ Thus, Yama's silence also marks his ability to set in motion the punishment and mobilize the fruition of *kamma*- setting the wheels of *kamma* in motion.

I will now look at Yama's visual attributes. As demonstrated, in the parks, his features are similar to those surveyed in the beginning of this chapter. One interesting parallel is Yama's depiction in Wat Mae Keat Noi which is entirely identical to one mural that can be found at Wat Phra That Doi Kham in the city of Chiang Mai, on the walls of a *vihara* that was renovated in the year 2000 (see Fig.16). Wat Mae Kaet Noi is located in greater Chiang Mai, and so there is a geographical proximity between the two temples.



Figure 16. King Yama, Wat Phratat Doi Kham, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2016

⁸³ MN 130.9. Trans. Horner, 1957.

⁸⁴ <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.130.than.html#fn-3>

The above-described elements of Yama's land as they are expressed in the parks, that is the visual attributes of Yama and his subordinates, the collection of the deceased by the *yomatoot*, and the scene of arrival in front of Yama and his secretaries, all are affirmed in accounts of NDEs (near death experiences) and visions that were experienced amongst practitioners and diviners. A recurring feature in these accounts are the *yomatoot*, who often appear in visions relating to the moment of death. Murphy notes that one motif that occurred in nine of the ten cases of Thai NDEs that he studied, was the arrival of the *yomatoot*. Included amongst the descriptions he encountered are what he refers to as the 'classical' *yomatoot* who come in pairs and are extremely large. Amongst his informants, one person experienced the harbingers of death as two white robed young men. Excluding the latter, Murphy Noted that

the most common instances are those of the large pair of *yomatoots*, stating their business directly in the Thai language - for example "we've come to take you to hell" (2001:164).

What Murphy described as the classical *yomatoot* came about in a conversation I had with Pern, a practitioner at Wat Santi Nikhom who herself witnessed the *yomatoot* as they came to collect a dying man. This happened when she was in the hospital attending to her ill father, who shared a room with another man who died at the same time she was in the room. During those moments she saw two *yomatoot* entering the room holding chains, they were extremely tall and large, and red in colour. They approached the man, detained him with the chains, and took him away with them. According to Pern, this was all very quick. The man's physical body stayed lying on the bed and immediately after their departure the electrocardiograms machine bipped and the nurses ran into the room and determined the man's death.⁸⁵

The meeting with Yama himself sometimes comes about in altered states of consciousness' visions, such as that of Mo Plai Praigrachib, a medium who channels Yama.⁸⁶ Based on her encounters with him, she described Yama's appearance as tall and large bodied, red in colour and with a threatening demeanour (however, she also noted that he is able to change his appearance, she learnt this as she expressed her fear when she saw him, and since then he appears to her in the form of a handsome man).⁸⁷

The moment of arrival to Yama's land upon death was conveyed in an account that became well known, by a woman named Patcharin Burichitinan, who experienced an NDE after falling of the second floor of a commercial building. In her account, she describes only seeing the feet of

⁸⁵ Pern in conversation with the author, September 2021.

⁸⁶ The word *mo* is a shortened version of *mo doo* which means a clairvoyant, a medium or an augur.

⁸⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVZdDdUTHZ4&t=708s>

Yama at first, as she heard him say “it is not yet the time for this mortal to transcend”. At that moment, she tells, she thought to herself that she would like to see his face, and suddenly, as if he read her mind, he revealed himself to her, and she saw a beautiful deity. Different from the depictions in the parks and other media, as well as that of Mo Plai, Patcharin describes Yama as pink in colour, dressed in a golden attire.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, her story asserts the journey of the dead and the meeting with Yama narratives.

In light of these accounts, I would like to return to the appearances of Yama and his milieu as expressed in the parks. In an interview I have conducted with the artist who is the sole creator of the imagery at Wat Santi Nikhom, Kitipong Geosrinam, he talked about the way in which for the most part he was given the artistic freedom to depict the hells as he wished, along with some guidelines given to him by Luang Pho Sa’aad, the temple’s abbot. Saying that, Kitipong made it clear that the visual attributes of Yama, the *Yomatoot* and the *yomaban* as red in colour, and Yama dressed in regal attire while the *yomatoot* and *yomaban* are seen wearing loincloth (*pha khao ma*), were specifically instructed by the abbot in order to mirror their actual appearance.⁸⁹

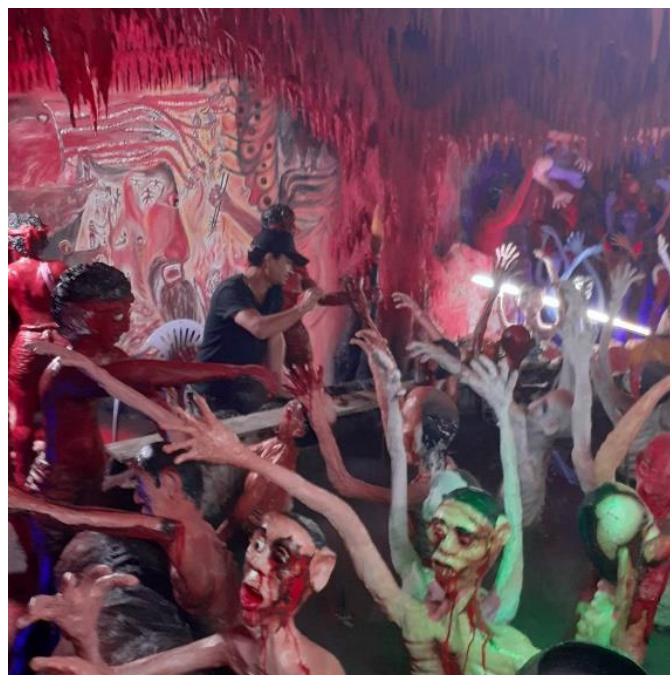


Figure 17. Kitipong Geosrinam at work, Santi Nikhom Temple, Jpeg, Ronit Wang, 2021

⁸⁸ <http://oknation.nationtv.tv/blog/print.php?id=153512>

⁸⁹ Kitipong Geosrinam in conversation with the author, September 2021.

The meeting with Yama, along with his record keeping secretaries, also brings about the bureaucratic nature of their positions. Beyond the depictions of the secretaries in the parks with their registries, Wat Pa Lak Roi also conveyed this bureaucratic element through the choice of words in the actual representation. In this way, the sign above Yama's cave reads: *samnak phaya yom*, the word *samnak* is used when referring to an institute or a bureau, thus it translates as 'Yama's bureau'. Noting the process of judgment performed by Yama and his secretaries' connection to the veracity of the process, Ladwig remarks as to the records which they maintain: "the book into which the deeds of the candidate are noted down represents in its bureaucratic accuracy the law of *kamma*" (2012: S91).

As mentioned above, the records are divided into two types. Good deeds are written on a golden plate, while wrongdoings are written on a plate made of dog skin. It can be presumed that this is a reference to the next destination of the deceased, as the heavens are known to be adorned with gold while many of the hells are populated by extremely large dogs who viciously attack the hell denizens. While in Wat Muang and Wat Pa Lak Roi the list of deeds of the dead are depicted as documented on a *samut Khoi*, the representation in Wat Mae Keat Noi is explicit – portraying the *baap* secretary writing on a plate which is situated on an image of an actual dog, and the merit secretary writing onto a golden plate.

At the same time, I would like to mention two examples that portray Yama and his secretaries equipped with modern day technology. In the cartoon *Pipop Yomaraj* the merit secretary who is referred to on the show as Marutayom, and the *baap* secretary who is referred to as Marutayoo (both literally meaning death), are seen working with laptops. Another example is the video clip *Abay (apāya)* where Yama is seen using a computer,⁹⁰ and the deceased person who arrives before them is made to watch his life on a large screen.⁹¹ These technological gadgets that are attributed to Yama and his operation are yet another example of the way in which Buddhism is adapted to present day, as discussed earlier with relation to Phillips (1992) and Stolow (2005).

Moving on, to the portrayal of the deceased who arrive to Yama's realm. Differences can be detected between the representations amidst the parks. Wat Pa Lak Roi presents the images of both evil doers and meritorious people. The sign next to the sinners notes that they did not believe the teachings of the Buddha. In Wat Mae Kaet Noi and Wat Ang Thong, the characters that arrive

⁹⁰ This video was created by the DMC TV, a channel operated by the Dhammakaya movement, as discussed in the introduction chapter, see page 44. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyRNRHfQHqQ&t=310s>

⁹¹ This reminded me somewhat of the scene in which the deceased characters see their earthly lives on TV screens in Albert Brooks' 1991 film 'Defending Your Life'.

before Yama are clearly sinners. Portraying this scene, Wat Mae Kaet Noi depicts a line of wrongdoers chained to one another waiting to be seen by Yama, each portrayed in accordance with their sin. These include (all noted in adjacent signs): an alcoholic, a drug addict, a thief, and one who used foul speech. In Wat Ang Thong we find a male and a female who are chained by the *yomatoot* while as detailed above it is written that their deeds will be counted. This emphasis in both parks on the encounter of the wrong doers with Yama not only tells the visitors about their grim fate, but also provides one with suggested preventative measures that are communicated via the added wording in the signs, alluding to the opposite behaviour to that of the sinners. In addition, it also points out the commonality of lack of adherence to the Buddhist teachings and the prevalence of sin, caused by the lessening of faith, as will be discussed below in relation to the decline of the *sāsana*.

This notion of a Buddhist decline, which is expressed via sinful action of individuals, was emphasised in the information page of a soap opera named *Yomaban Jao Ka* - Lord Yama. Aired on channel 7, Mondays- Fridays at 6pm between the years 2013-2014, and composed of a total of 264 episodes, the series is set in and around an apartment block which is built above a lift that leads to the gates of Yama's land. Each episode depicts a different story, presented by guest characters who either arrive to the building or have some sort of relationship with one of the regular characters who live and work in the residence. While these occurrences take place Yama and his entourage watch and discuss them. In certain instances, the characters die and arrive to Yama's land. In others, the plot is resolved on earth. All episodes end with a moral lesson communicated to the viewers via the dialogue between Yama and his entourage.⁹² In the show, the secretaries are referred to by the plate they use for their record keeping, the dog secretary (*suwaan lekha*) and the gold secretary (*suwana lekha*). The dog secretary is dressed in black while the gold secretary is dressed in white with gold jewelry. As noted, the show's webpage describes the rationale behind the show as being based on the idea that the practice of Dhamma is declining and the human world is slowly destroyed.⁹³ This notion of the decline of the *sāsana* derives from the Buddhist idea that we live in an oscillating universe, an unsteady existence, according to which there is a progressive evolution and devolution of the cosmos.⁹⁴ This outlook which transfers the *kammic* apparatus from the individual to the collective will be discussed later when considering the premise of the parks.

⁹² See appendix 7 for a detailed description of the show's premise and examples of two episodes.

⁹³ <http://drama.ch7.com/detail/28710> accessed 25.4.2016

⁹⁴ This idea appears in the *Aggañña sutta* (Primeval sutta) DN 27, and the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* (the Wheel Turning King) DN26.

Yomaban Jao Ka also introduces an additional character, who joins Yama’s entourage - the golden boy, *kuman thong*. His character is integral to all occurrences as part of Yama’s, whom the boy refers to as “uncle” (*lung*), entourage. In the show the boy was a ghost of a young boy who died in the building and was collected by the *yomatoot*. The character of the young boy is based on a unique type of amulet, a *kuman thong*, literally meaning golden baby, also called a spirit son in ancient tales. A *kuman thong* amulet was originally made from a dead unborn fetus, ripped out of its mother womb. The fetus would then be taken to a cemetery for the conducting of the ceremony to invoke its spirit. The body was roasted until dry whilst chanting incantations of magical *gāthā* (recitation formula),⁹⁵ which is meant to evoke the power of the *kuman thong*.⁹⁶ The spirits of unborn babies are believed to be especially potent, perhaps because they contain all the energy of the un-lived life (Dokya cited at Baker and Phongpaichit 2010:316). This iconic fetus spirit is considered both dangerous and powerful.⁹⁷



Figure 18. Yaomaban Jao Ka Poster ⁹⁸

⁹⁵ The term *gāthā*, which will appear in this thesis quite often, is discussed by Kourilsky who asserts that in Thai Buddhist culture it could be considered to be somewhat equivalent to the Sanskrit *dhāraṇī*, as they both refer to verses that are believed to be memorised and recited in order to produce a particular effect (Kourilsky,2018:4).

⁹⁶ The *kuman thong* first appearance is attributed the tale *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, a great classic of Thai literature. The main character Khun Paen is well admired for his charm, his handsome features and his great courage as an excelled warrior. The power attributed to him also relates to his *kuman thong*, which accompanies him in the battlefield. A short but intense scene in the story detail the way in which Khun Paen is making a *kuman thong* from a fetus he extracted from woman who died while pregnant. Before going to the field, he equips himself with essential aids: 'I'll forge a sword, buy a horse and find a spirit son to give me the expertise and knowledge to overcome my enemies' (trans. Baker and Phongpaichit, 2013:316). This scene is depicted in Wat Muang.

⁹⁷ Nowadays, the *kuman thong* are illegal, and therefore very rare and can only be found on the black market for a very high price. Instead, there are *kuman thong* amulets that are made of metal or wood and are kept in bottles of sandalwood oil (Tambiah,1984). Although illegal, the original practice of *kuman thong* that is made from a real fetus, is still performed within black magic circles. The powers that are attributed to the *kuman thong* include good luck, protection against enemies or those who are harmful, protection of one’s residence and even love.

⁹⁸ <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/IVKg8fS31f8/maxresdefault.jpg>

This curious addition to Yama's land also appears in the cartoon *Pipop Majuraj* (Yama's world), which was mentioned above. Aired on Channel Seven as well, the animated series follows daily events in Yama's land and in the human realm, looking at their interrelation. In the show Yama is portrayed with his common attributes, however, he is depicted as somewhat chubby. Along with him are the merit secretary and the *baap* secretary (Marutayom and Marutayu), a *yomatoot*, and a character named Jakaban who due to his *kamma* was sentenced to be a slave of Yama for 9 trillion years.⁹⁹ On the subject of the appearance of toddlers in the show, there are two baby spirits who are similar in their appearance to the *kuman thong* in *Yomaban Jao Ka*, and whose origin story is introduced in the first episode. The two were found by the secretaries and the *yomatoot* while they were roaming the human realm (in the same way they are portrayed to be doing in *Yomaban Jao Kha*). Both were found dead, abandoned by their birth parents, one in a garbage bin, and the other in the river. The babies are then brought Yama who feels sorry for them, saying that they were too young to produce negative *kamma* in the short life they have lived on earth. Yama then asks permission from the great *devatas* to adopt the two kids. He is given the permission and is requested to raise them to be good beings until they exhaust their *kamma*. He then names them: Bun (merit) who is dressed in a blue Thai attire, and *Baap* (sin), dressed in red. Yama appoints the two with the responsibility of traveling to the human realm and making sure that the humans are well behaved. To do so, Bun is assigned with a hawk and *Baap* is assigned with a vulture. In this same episode, the birds fly the boys around the cosmos and guide them through the *Sumero* mountain system, after which they begin their endeavours on the human earth, witnessing different events that precede the arrivals to Yama's land where scenes of judgment take place.

In the parks, there are two cases in which depictions of child spirits are included in Yama's land. The first is Wat Santi Nikhom in Lampang, in which Yama's land is located at the entrance to the hell area. Next to Yama and underneath two *yomatoot* who stand on each side of the depiction, there appear three baby images who look somewhat creepy. When asking the nun and practitioners at the temple what are these images, I was told they are *luk krok*. The *luk krok* are yet another kind of potent baby spirits. However, they differ from the *kuman thong* in that they are spirits of babies who died prematurely inside the womb and then taken out. I was told by one of the temple goers that the *kuman thong* are *thep*, that is they are divine beings, while the *luk krok*

⁹⁹ Jakaban's character is depicted as naughty and silly, and is often ridiculed by the other characters, contributing to the comedic element of the show.

who also hold potent powers, are ghosts.¹⁰⁰ This idea of ghost babies leads us to the representation at Wat Maek Keat Noi, as mentioned earlier, where Yama is seen seated amongst a group of babies in different positions (crawling, lying, sitting). Next to one image of a crying baby is a sign noting “the tears of the poor child whose mother took a pill and got rid of him before he was due”. Hence, the images of babies here are referred to aborted fetuses who arrived to the land of Yama before they were born. While abortions, from the position of the mothers and their illegality and moral applications will be discussed in detail in the chapter three, it is indeed curious to see the way in which the spirits of the dead fetuses appear in Yama’s land and are associated with Yama.¹⁰¹ Considering all the representations above, which denote some sort of a connection between baby spirits and Yama’s land, this seems to be a repetitive theme.¹⁰² These spirits, are surrounded by myths, beliefs and practices which reflect their ambiguous, liminal status. They are usually seen as dangerous and powerful spirits or ghosts, which have to be appeased on the one hand, but on the other can be beseeched for good luck and success (Cohen, 2012:4). Further to my queries about these spirit babies, Mae Chi Chanida of Wat Santi Nikhom told me that these are children who do not have anyone to take care of them, perhaps their mother was unable to, thus Yama took them in even though it is not his duty, rather, he does it out of compassion.¹⁰³ This notion supports the portrayal of Yama as a just and kind *devata*. I have yet to detect any mention of baby spirits in scriptural sources or traditional illustrations. It is tempting to speculate that their liminal position might be connected to the intermediate phase that the *winyan* goes through in Yama’s land, a phase that does not conform to the Theravāda doctrine of instant rebirth and yet reappears when discussing the moment of encounter with the yama or rather could be associated with the *samphavesi* but this is just an assumption. Insofar, while this is a clear example to the way local themes were integrated into the Buddhist cosmological scheme, the roots to this association are still obscure.

¹⁰⁰ Pern, in conversation with the author, September 2020.

¹⁰¹ An interesting case relating to baby ghosts, took the headlines in 2010. In November that year, illegally aborted fetuses were discovered in Wat Phai Nguen temple in Bangkok. As the story unfolded, the police discovered that a woman who herself performed illegal abortions was hired by clinics to take the fetuses to the temple. They were collected together by an undertaker's assistant in the temple morgue, where they were kept until they dried up and thus easier to burn. During the police investigation, a possible monks' involvement was ruled out. It was not determined whether they intended to hand over the fetuses for black magic practices (Cohen, 2012:8). A Thai horror film, 'The Unborn Child' *Sop Dek*, 2002, directed by Poj Arnon, was released in 2011. Based on the events in Wat Phai Nguen temple, it portrayed the aborted fetuses' spirits as vengeful creatures that hold grudge against anyone who was involved in their killing: the parents, the person who performed the abortions and those who took part in the storage of the bodies.

¹⁰² For more about spirit babies see Sinnott, 2014.

¹⁰³ Mae Chi Chanida in conversation with the author, September 2021.



Figure 19. Yama and the spirits babies, Wat Mae Keat Noi, JPEG Ronit Wang, 2016

In the exploration of Yama's land representations, another issue appears, one that generally resonates throughout the *apāya* area, and that is nudity. The sinners who arrive before Yama are portrayed naked (excluding Wat Muang which covered the characters' genitals). Their nudity persists as they become denizens of the hells, or if they become *pret*, thus pointing for it being one of the features of the *apāya* dwellers.

Considering the Buddhist scriptures and the Thai-Buddhist approach to nudity it is possible to comprehend its meaning while considering several aspects. The first is that proper clothing is essential for both laity and *sangha*. The duty of monks to be dressed at all times, including when on temple grounds, is expressed in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, which details the rules of discipline for *bhikkhus*, the *Pātimokkha*. One of the rules maintains that a *bhikkhu* should always be dressed, even within his private quarters "nakedness is unbecoming, unsuitable, improper, unworthy of an ascetic, not allowable and not to be done".¹⁰⁴ In Thailand, it is expected from practitioners when visiting the temple to be dressed respectfully and refrain from provocative attire, this is emphasised in some temples, where large signs are situated at the entrance, providing guidelines for proper

¹⁰⁴ VP I:306

attire.¹⁰⁵ This points to a close connection between respect to a place of worship and to the *sangha*, and modest clothing. Exposure of the body may also be linked with the third Buddhist precept which asks to refrain from *kāmesu micchācāra*, translated by Collins as “wrong behaviour in regard to (sense-) desires” (1990:189).¹⁰⁶ The body is linked with sensual desire which leads to misconduct, “the human body is subject to the wayward imperatives of sexuality and doomed to decay and death” (ibid). As demonstrated chapter four, the *pret* are often described as roaming around naked. In the *Petavatthu* it is said that the hungry ghosts’ nudity is a punishment for misconduct in former life.¹⁰⁷ The hell denizens and the *pret* are stripped from their clothes, being humiliated, left with no possession and are vulnerable as to the notion that ‘the body as the origin and the sphere of suffering’ (Hamilton, 1995). Furthermore, nudity resonates with the foul bodily functions which feature in some of the hells, being pus, defecation and blood.

While the account above demonstrates the way in which certain issues arise from the depictions of Yama’s land in the parks, as well as how these topics are attended to within a wider range of materials, another form of sustenance of Yama has developed in Thailand and that is via his veneration, as I will now discuss.

2.5 Veneration of Yama

Beyond the perpetuation of the narrative of Yama, there is a clear indication in the parks that Yama is being venerated as a deity, which seems to be a developing phenomenon within the Thai Buddhist landscape.¹⁰⁸ Yama’s representations in the parks receive offerings on a regular basis. These include fizzy drinks, fruits flowers and incense. In addition, when accompanying visitors to Yama land some ask Yama for a permission to enter the *apāya*, thus acknowledging his authority as the lord of the realms.¹⁰⁹ This worship extends beyond the parks and has several expressions. A number of temples house Yama images, some of which are specifically known and frequented for their Yama statuary. One such temple is Wat Thep Nimit in Nakhon Pathom, which is well known

¹⁰⁵ These signs mainly appear in well visited temples and are also written in English for tourists. Some temples also provide clothes for proper coverage that a visitor can borrow in case he or she do not have suitable clothing.

¹⁰⁶ The five precepts will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, looking at hell representations.

¹⁰⁷ PV1.20

¹⁰⁸ The reason I describe this phenomenon as developing is that according to my own encounters with temples, amulet manufacturing and Yama related practices, they seem to have grown significantly in the past few years.

¹⁰⁹ Asking the lord of a place for permission to enter a space is often done and can be detected when entering spaces which are marked with a spirit house (*san phra phum*). A related practice is that of placing a coin in rented houses, hotel rooms and most commonly in temple accommodation assigned for practitioners of meditation retreats, to mark the renting of a place from its owner whether it be a physical or a symbolic one.

for its potent Yama image, located at the back area of the temple behind the main *vihāra*. Yama is seen in a dark colour in regal attire, with a crown adorned with horns (see fig.20).



Figure 20. Yama’s image at Wat Thep Nimit, JPEG, Ronit Wang,2020

Yama is seen seated with one leg folded, one hand on his knee while the other holds a rod. In front of him a sign with a suggested recitation, the *gāthā phra yom* (as detailed below) which is meant to be read while lighting candles, offering a flower garland and incense, all of which available for purchase at the shop located behind the statue.

An additional temple which houses a Yama image is Wat Samphran in Samut Sakhon where Yama is depicted while holding a scale on his shoulders, representing the measurement of deeds done by him and his subordinates, surrounded by offerings of flowers along with a sign including the *Yama gāthā*.

A recent addition to the Yama’s veneration milieu is a royal temple named Wat Bua Khwan in Nonthaburi, which features a golden Yama statue, that was endorsed by the creators of the show “The Real Ghosts” (*chong song phi*, literally the ghost channel) which is aired on channel 8. The gold pouring ceremony, in which the image is consecrated by pouring melted gold into its

cast, for Yama's image was held on the auspicious *Loy Krathong* day that fell on the 31st October 2020 which is also, as mentioned in the event poster, the western Halloween.¹¹⁰

The *gāthā phra yom* is as follows:¹¹¹

Patometam parajivinam

May (the result of) this merit

Sukhato Cuti

will generate blissfulness

Cittameta nibanam

birth in *nibbāna*¹¹²

Sukhato cuti

will generate blissfulness

Guidance as to usage of the formula and its benefits were published on the medium Mo Plai Praigrachib's social media platforms. According to her, paying respect to lord Yama will grant one's success. She notes that the recitation should be done while burning two incense sticks, as the smoke of the incense is a channel to the deities. According to her, the number of repetitions may have different effects: reciting twice has the benefit of worship and to pay general respect, five times for entrusting merit with Yama to be transferred to the deceased, and seven times is will promote health and prevention of accidents.¹¹³

The operation of Mo Plai herself is an example for the cultivation Yama's worship. The medium who was introduced above, got well known thorough TV appearances and an active YouTube channel, and has 13.1k followers on Instagram and 452k subscribers on her you tube channel. Mo Plai channels Yama himself, passing on his message. She was able to see him since she was a young girl of 12 years of age. While information is communicated to her by him, she is able to predict the future and provides guidance to followers as to correct performance of rituals

110 Loy Krathong is a festival which takes place on the full moon of the 12th Thai lunar calendar and is celebrated by floating a Krathong made of leaves, which contains flowers and a candle in a ritual that is meant to honour and thank the water goddess, the festival is held in temples and became an integral part of the Buddhist festival calendar. For more on this festival see Agarwal, 2012.

111 A note on the translation. This is a loose translation that I have managed to extract using Thai -Pāli dictionaries and some assistance from a colleague at Chulalongkorn University, Jakkrit Ployburanin. It is also important to note here that while this formula is translated here in order to gain an insight to the worship of Yama, during some conversations I had with practitioners, I found that some believe that these types of recitations should act as illegible mantras, in the same way as a *dharani*.

112 interestingly *nibbāna* being the ultimate destination here, rather than the heavenly abodes as discussed in this chapter.

113 @navaracha, 2020.

and spiritual advice.¹¹⁴ She also made the headlines predicting events such as the disappearance of the Malaysian airlines plane and the Covid19 pandemic. Mo Plai's work also acts as an example for the production and distribution of Yama's imagery. On the 23rd June 2020 she conducted an elaborate concertation ceremony for a variety of amulets and religious paraphernalia amongst which dozens of Yama images.¹¹⁵

The recent developments in Yama's worship, as expressed in the parks and within the Thai Buddhist domain, are significant in that they transfer Yama's position from the king of the dead to the king of the living. Doctrinally, he is a just ruler that has no hand in changing one's *kammatic* accumulation. However, the worship movement has situated him in a powerful position, where devotion to him is understood in terms of his ability to bestow protection, aid and merit.

2.6 Yama as the *kamma* regulator

*Kamma-result proceeds from kamma,
Result has kamma for its source,
Future becoming springs from kamma,
And this is how the world goes round.*¹¹⁶

As demonstrated above, Yama's land representations in the parks stress his position as the *kamma* regulator - the cosmic judge. The location of Yama's land in the parks and the depiction of the arrival scene, underline the journey of the dead, who regardless of their *kammatic* accumulation, arrive to the gates of hell first to be seen by Yama and have their actions, accrued over lifetimes, assessed. In order to probe this idea, let us first explore *kamma* as it is understood in a Theravādin Buddhist framework.

The *Anguttara Nikaya*, expresses an emphasis on the individual responsibility for one's own actions "whatever deeds they do of such they will, good or evil, be heirs."¹¹⁷ Hence, upon death, one's own doings are carefully considered, a time to face all the deeds performed, for good or for bad. The regulators of this calculated mechanism are Yama and his secretaries. Yama's position as the *kamma* regulator, and as the one who puts the results of *kamma* in motion, is important in

¹¹⁴ From interviews in channel 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3IT3gOpxyg> and MCOT https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGp_7S6FyIM&t=169s

¹¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65DXO5kqyZY>

¹¹⁶ Vism:19.

¹¹⁷ AN 5.57

the transmigration between one birth and the next. While *kamma* operates during every single moment of our being, an essential aspect of *kamma* that the parks emphasise is the accumulation which determines the next life, and which is assessed by Yama.

In order to understand the operation mechanism of *kamma* as linking the old and the new existence within the rebirth scheme, two central terms should be considered: *Cutticitta*, which is the death consciousness -¹¹⁸ that is the last *citta* of the last life, and *paṭisandhi*, literally meaning reunion, or linking, one of the functions of consciousness (*viññā-kicca*) - a *kamma* resultant type of consciousness that arises at the moment of conception, i.e with the forming of a new life in the mother's womb.¹¹⁹ In order to understand the function of these two terms, let us first explore dying and rebirth. A 'person' is seen in Buddhist thought as a series of clusters of events (physical and mental) that occur in a 'human' pattern. Thus, change is not understood in terms of a primary substantial essence remaining constant while its secondary qualities change, rather solely in terms of the causal connectedness of different qualities. There is no primary substance that remains constant. Therefore, death is simply the breakage of a particular configuration of events. And at the same time that death occurs 'rebirth' then arises: a new pattern of events, which although certainly connected with the old, may be of a different kind. A man may be reborn as an animal, a god may be reborn as a man etc. The workings of *kamma*, of action and result are essentially a matter of intention and these mental events are crucially determinative of the nature of the new pattern of events (Gethin 1998:142-143).

Kamma is instigated by volition, or intention that is determinative of the *Cutticitta*, and the *paṭisandhi*, which can be good or bad. Thus, this moments in which the *Cutticitta*, and the *paṭisandhi* occur are crucial and awareness to intention is efficacious. This is emphasised in the parks and in death preparation teachings.

In order to explore *kamma* as it is taught in the Thai context, I turned to a text book used in Buddhism classes in schools,¹²⁰ to examine the way in which it is taught. I found that the focus is on the flow of *kamma*, embedded in the threefold cycle that is composed of: *vipāka* – the ripening of *kamma*, *kilesa* – defilement (which takes effect as long as the *Samsāra* keeps manifesting) and *kamma*, which is a result of the interrelation between the two (anon. 20). This scheme illustrates the importance of causality and thus the potential role of intention.

¹¹⁸ BD ,2004:51.

¹¹⁹ BD ,2004:53

¹²⁰ Distributed by thitioporb.com

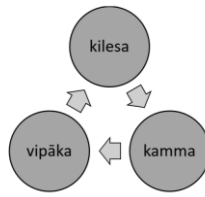


Figure 21. Threefold *kammic* cycle, structured by the author.¹²¹

The parks operate on the idea that knowledge of the Buddhist teachings can lead to awareness to intention and as a result the production of positive *kamma* (both for the creators and for the visitors). This is clearly expressed in the representations of Yama’s land in the parks, as noted above.

This notion of the ability to transform one’s *kamma* through cultivation of the Buddhist teachings appears in different forms, including parables.¹²² A notable one is the famous tale of Angulimala, a serial killer who optimised his *kamma* in spite of his bad deeds, after meeting the Buddha and joining the *saṅgha*. This story is well known amongst Thais and is told in different mediums, including a 2003 motion picture carrying the former killer’s name, as well as books and cartoons. Furthermore, an installation presenting Angulimala, where he is depicted chasing the Buddha wearing a necklace, adorned with 999 fingers taken from his victims, is displayed in the hell section at Wat Wang Saen Suk. This story illustrates how cultivation may bring about a change producing favourable *kammatic* outcomes. To this end, as Langer notes: “in *Abhidhamma* terms, however, it is not a question of good *kamma* ‘cancelling out’ bad *kamma*, but rather of certain *kamma* (good or bad) not coming to fruition” (2007:16).¹²³

2.6.1 winyan/khwan

It is important to mention here the Thai term *winyan*, which derives from the Pāli *viññāṇa*,¹²⁴ which is paired with the term *khwan* that can be translated as a soul or life essence. This set of words is used to describe the incorporeal essence of a human being in the Thai world view. In order to scrutinise this pair Tambiah utilised Mendelson’s term ‘cultural doublets’. The *khwan* is

¹²¹ In accordance with study book *thaam suksa chan ek* by thitiporn.

¹²² On this matter Kourlisky’s study of the *Uṇhissa Vijaya sutta*, is of relevance as this is a Pāli recitation that is said to have the potency of releasing one from his or her *kammatic* fate (Kourlisky, 2016).

¹²³ See *ahosi kamma* p.77.

¹²⁴ It is important though to distinguish between *winyan* and *viññāṇa*. As in a canonical sense, the *viññāṇa* leaves the body at the moment of death and instantly enters another body at the moment of conception, but at doctrinal level the mechanism is more complex. The term *winyan* have turned to be a general word relating to ghostly entities, mainly those who are in beteen states.

able to leave the body at any time - it can leave the body temporarily which is the cause of an illness. At death the *khwan* leaves the body permanently, followed by the *winyan*. After death, therefore, the concern is only with the fate of the *winyan* and its subsequent transformation (1970: 58). In this sense, the carrier of *kamma* is the *winyan*, hence the *winyan* is the essence that is related to rebirth. Collins elaborates this further, situating his discussion within the frame work of dualism in Buddhism, saying that the body comes to an end at death, whereas consciousness continues (1990:188). It is the *winyan kammatic* condition that will determine in which realm its changeable physical embodiment will exist.

2.6.1 Individual Optimisation of *Kamma*

Insofar, Yama's position is that of the greeter of the *winyan* and the judge, in a sense of monitoring, of its *kammic* accumulation. With this in mind, the representations in the park relate to the amelioration of *kamma*, by emphasising the ability to change it for the better whilst also providing methods for its optimisation.

In order to understand the way in which positive *kamma* effects one's outcome, let us begin with an NDE story that demonstrates the way in which favourable *kamma* can tip the scales:

"I found myself in the judgment hall of Yama's palace. I knew that they were ready to judge me for my sins. A giant rooster appeared, and told Yama that I had killed him. He emphasized that I had tried to kill him again and again. The rooster also said that he remembered me exactly. An entire flock of roosters also came and testified that I had killed them. I remembered my actions, and I had to admit that the roosters have told the truth. Yama said that I had committed many sins, and sentenced me to many rebirths as a chicken, as well as other types of birds. But, quite suddenly, an enormous turtle appeared. It screamed at Yama, saying 'Don't take him, he is a good human, and should be allowed to live'. Yama asked the turtle: 'What did he do to help you?' The turtle answered: 'Long ago, I almost died because another human wanted to eat me. This man prevented him, and so I was able to live my life'. Yama asked the turtle if he had any evidence. The turtle asked to be turned upside down, and told Yama to look at his underside where he would see the man had carved his name on all these years ago. Yama saw the man's name was there just as the turtle had said, and he believed the turtle's story. Yama announced that he was cancelling the sentence, and told me that when I revived, I was to take a vow not to kill any living thing. " (Suwannathat cited at Murphy, 2001:168).

This story delineates the gravity of good deeds and the way they can change one's faith and supersede bad *kamma*. An idea that also echoes in the story of Angulimala presented above. This brings about the *ahosi-kamma*. A term that is included in the text chanted by monks in merit

making ceremonies (*sankhatan* or *tham boon*), which are dedicated to the practitioners and/or their relatives. *Ahosi kamma* is *kamma* with no outcome. If the circumstances required for the fruition of *kamma* are missing, or if through the preponderance of counteractive *kamma* they are too weak, no outcome will be produced. This is referred to as *ahosi kamma*, literally meaning ‘kamma that has been’, in other words ineffectual *kamma* (Naynatiloka, 2005:92), or lapsed or defunct *kamma* (Payutto, 1993: 338). The wording for the request for the materialization of *ahosi kamma* can be found in the below *anisong*.¹²⁵

*‘I ask for ahosi kamma, (to apply) for the kamma that was accumulated in any life period. May the lord of kamma allow for the ahosi kamma so (other) kamma will not be accumulated... I ask the ahosi kamma for all things, and I respect the Buddha to prevent future accumulation of kamma. By virtue of this anisong, may I ask for myself, my family, and my relatives, and my benefactors, may we have happiness, prosperity and goodness (good things)’.*¹²⁶

The request for the *ahosi kamma* is an appeal to the *kamma* regulator (that is Yama) to acknowledge the merit that is being performed, and act of devotion to the Buddha at that is taking place at present, thus asking to alter past *kamma* of which the result might not be favourable, and to turn it into an *ahosi kamma*, that is ineffectual. When performing a merit making ceremony at the temple and this request is made on behalf of the practitioner by the monks, who act as fields of merit, the gravity of this request is greater, thus believed to increase one’s chances for it to be granted.

These merit making ceremonies demonstrate the way in which merit (*bun*) can act as a tool for the optimisation of *kamma*.¹²⁷ In Theravādin cultures, merit has a unique position in the *kammatic* plot. Keyes talks about the centrality of merit as a religious performance that acts as a form of spiritual insurance. According to him merit is conceived almost as a substance that this-worldly virtue or power stored up to be used at death to ensure a good rebirth (Keyes, 1983). Merit is accumulated not only individually but can also be transferred to others – whether dead or alive.

¹²⁵ *Anisong* (Pali: *ânisamsa*) are short Pāli and vernacular texts that praise acts of merit, like giving books, food, and images to the *Sangha* (McDaniel, 2006). To this end it is important to mention that *samut khoi* – folding books which contain *anisong* are not only chanted in merit making ceremonies, they are given as an offering to the monks. In the north of Thailand, they can be bought in devotional shops and are composed in the vernacular *kham meuang* along with Pāli segments.

¹²⁶ Somdet To version <https://www.srisangworn.go.th/>

¹²⁷ On this topic of *kamma*, an interesting article was written by Somboon and Perapone about inherited *kamma*, that was passed down from ancestors. For more see Somboon and Perapone, 2017.

While I will discuss merit transfer and its ability to change one's fate broadly in chapter four, it is important to mention here that merit in this sense correlates with behaviour in accordance with the teachings, which is suggested in the parks as a way to produce positive *kamma*. Hanks situates this discussion in terms of cosmic hierarchy, noting that it depends on merit (*bun*) or virtue (*kwaamdi*) or graded series of penalties (*baap*). In this way one's action leads to his or her respective position. He then compares this to social order; one can move freely up and down on the ladder of social standing. Similarly, merit is a determining explanation of mobility between positions (1962). Hence, the performance of merit can optimise *kamma*, as asserted in the parks via Yama's land imagery. Furthermore, the location of the parks in adjacency to the temple, and the presence of *sangha* make the visit to the parks, not just an enjoyable didactic experience, but also an opportunity to participate in merit making ceremonies, or make a donation towards the operation of the parks and the temple, which is also considered meritorious.

Another aspect of merit that came up in one of my interviews is that of the materialisation of the object donated in other realms, as I was told by Pern, who was in a coma for three months due to meningitis. During that period, she remembers that every time she felt hungry there appeared before her the foods she has donated in the past in merit making ceremonies, such as instant noodles, fruits, Thai sweets etc. The food was not consumed by her but rather appeared in her mind's eye and she felt full.¹²⁸ This story illustrates belief in the benefits of merit as they can also transpire via situations where the need of the merit maker is being attended to, even retrospectively. The efficacy of merit is secured with the use of specific chants designated for this purpose. As Tambiah notes the characteristic of language perhaps brought about the elevation of the word as supremely endowed with mystical power (1968:84), by that operating sympathetic magic.

In such a way, shops that sell merit making packages, construct them using different commodities. There are packages which include a torch that might be beneficial for someone who needs a guiding light, others have medicine and are especially potent when making merit for the sick.

If looking at the benefit of merit as a potential *kamma* alternator, this may extend beyond this life and transpire in the next one. As noted above, in the parks a notion of a better rebirth is often perceived as a birth in the heavens. This was further enhanced in *dhamma* talks, and came about during interviews I have conducted with practitioners. Considering the Buddhist teachings according to which the true aim of the practitioner is release from the *samsāric* cycle by perfecting wisdom (*paññā*), that is the ultimate goal of *nibbāna*, a question arises: why is it that a good rebirth

¹²⁸ Pern in conversation with the author, September 2021.

as conveyed in the parks, and generally accepted amongst lay practitioners, is one in the heavenly abodes and not *nibbāna*? In a conversation I had with Nok, an employee in the education sector from Bangkok who considers herself a devout Buddhist, attends the temple often, and finds significance in merit making which she ensures to perform during festivals and on personal occasions such as birthdays and memorials, she told me that she cultivates merit in order to optimise her chances to be born in heaven. When I asked why didn't she aspire to reach *nibbāna*, she chuckled and said that this will be an unrealistic aspiration as only those who reach enlightenment can reach *nibbana*.¹²⁹

Indeed, I found that there is a general conception that nowadays- at this time of decline of the *sānana*, only a few practicing monks reach *arahantship*, and in turn they are revered as saints. Furthermore, a nun who resides at Wat Thep Nimit told me that she would like to be born as a man in her next life because only men can fully ordain as monks and cultivate right practice which ultimately will lead them to *nibbana*.¹³⁰ To this end is it interesting to mention Gombrich somewhat problematic statement, that still may explain the nun's point of view, saying that any human being irrespective of stats may attain enlightenment, but it is widely believed to be much harder for women (1971:197).

Hence, for the lay followers and practitioners who are not fully ordained, the ideal yet realistic rebirth is one in the heavenly abodes.¹³¹ The glorification of birth in heaven is expressed in the *Traiphum* "you should engage in merit making, alms giving, observing the precepts, meditate and share *metta*, care for your parents, elders, teachers, monks and those who observe the precepts. Having done so, you will be born in heaven" (TrpA:327). The meeting with Yama then, if one has accumulated positive *kamma*, will lead to a better rebirth. Also, as the parks convey, the encounter itself will be more pleasant. An example for this was noted above, in Wat Pa Lak Roi, where the meritorious couple wearing white were sitting on an elevated platform and fully dressed in contrast to the chained sinners.

With this in mind, another key point to remember, is that the actual moment of death too is a crucial juncture that can influence the outcome of the next rebirth. The moments before death are described in the *Traiphum* as the beginning point of a transitional state in which the dying person

¹²⁹ Nok in conversation with the author, July 2016.

¹³⁰ Nun at Wat Thep Nimit, in conversation with the author, February 2020.

¹³¹ Full ordination for females is prohibited in Thailand, in the claim that the *bhikkhunī* lineage has died out. Thus, it is not transferable. If women want to become ascetics, they can take on a *mea chi* role. Although a movement for full female ordination was started in Thailand by Bhikkhunī Dhammananda it is still not accepted by the Thai *sangha*. For more see Seeger, 2006 and Falk, 2007.

sees glimpses of where he will be born next: “Human beings who are at the point of death, if they are going to fall into hell, see flames of fire, the iron kapok tree...if they will be born as a human being, they see a lump of flesh...” (TrpR: 214). While these sights at the moment of death might distract one from producing a positive *citta* at the last moment, the importance of right thoughts during this moment has a stronghold in the teachings. As maintained by Langer, in the Theravādin doctrine, a special significance is given to the quality of the last conscious moments at the time of death. It is regarded auspicious to die with a religious thought, which can be directed to the buddha, the *dhamma* and the *saṅgha* – this is a determining factor of rebirth (2007:18). In interviews collected by Langer it was unanimously agreed that the frame of mind at the moment of death is the determining factor for the place of rebirth. To die in an angry frame of mind might—even for very virtuous people—result in rebirth in a low or unpleasant existence. Similarly, to die in a good, happy frame of mind, remembering meritorious deeds or a word of the Buddha, could, even for a bad person, result in a good rebirth (Ibid:15)

Stone indicates that Buddhist tradition has always regarded a calm and mindful death as a ‘proof’ of a person’s spiritual attainment, demonstrating that individual’s mastery over the death process. The prototype is the Buddha himself, who on his deathbed is said to have ascended and descended through the levels of meditative trance before entering final *nirvāṇa*, recapitulating in his final moments his attainment of supreme awakening (2016:1). While all *kammas* accumulated, whether good or bad and either’s fruition extends over different time spans and existences. The characteristics of the immediate new existence is affected by the *kamma* that is realized at the time of death.

In order to explain the operating force that sets the *kammas* that will arise at the time of death and condition rebirth, a fourfold classification of *kamma* is used: weighty (*garuka*), habitual (*bahula*, *āciṇṇa*), proximate (*āsanna*), performed (*kaṭattā*) (Gethin, 1994:21): weighty *kamma* always bears fruit in the next existence. In this way, negative weighty *kamma* can arise due to performing severe offences (Thai *anan triya kaam*, Pāli: *ānantarika-kamma*)¹³² and leads to immediate rebirth in the hells. In contrast, good weighty *kamma* has to do with attainment of high mental states and can result in an immediate birth in the heaven. This type of weighty *kamma* is unique in that it comes to immediate fruition while most types of *kamma* may take *kalpas* to materialise. The habitual *kamma* can be positive or negative. It derives, as it is named, from one’s habits and daily conduct. The third type of *kamma* is the proximate *kamma*, it is a memory that could arise at the moment

¹³² see page 105.

of death and in the absence of any of the former noted types of *kamma*. As Langer illustrates, the *Visuddhimagga* and *Abhidhammāvatāra* situate the habitual *kamma* higher in its proximity, thus the sum of total deeds comes to account at the time of death and if one conduct is good overall, then most likely the *kamma* which will come to fruition at the moment of death will set the conditions for a favourable rebirth. However, Langer continues by noting that the *Abhidhammatthasangaha* gives precedence to third type of *kamma*, the proximate *kamma*. That means that there is an opportunity to change one's misconduct. Even if one's habits and conduct were positive throughout, if a bad deed comes to mind at one's death bed, then it could affect the next rebirth to be an unfavourable one, or vice versa (2007: 59-60).

This discourse of right thought at the moment of death, is apparent in the teachings transmitted by different masters in Thailand. For example, a revered *bikkhu*, named Phra Visalo, who often engages with this topic, initiated an educational programme, teaching health workers the benefits of the Buddhist doctrine and right understanding at the time of death. The programme is aimed at enabling them to accommodate the emotional needs of the dying patients, and the latter own personal insight as to death and dying. Phra Visalo recommends three methods to elevate the *citta* at the time of death: chanting, meditation while repeating the name *put-to* (Buddha),¹³³ or visualising the Buddha.¹³⁴ This is further affirmed in the *Maha Kammavibhanga Sutta* nothing that while many different kinds of *kamma* are created in one lifetime, some may influence the last moment before death, which is in turn is the basis for the next life.¹³⁵

The work on the optimisation of *kamma* continues after death as well. It comes into practice through the ritual construction of a new fetus at a funeral, as death also signifies a new birth. In funerary rituals, the text that is used for this matter is the *mātikā*. It is in fact, a list, a table of contents with the Abhidhamma's description of the mind's intentions, influences and moral and immoral tendencies (McDaniel, 2009:94). This illustrates the way in which despite the Theravāda doctrine of instantaneous rebirth the ritual practice surrounding the intermediate state has continued. The most common text that is used in Thai funerals is the *abhidhamma cet gamhī*, the seven books of *Abhidhamma*. When chanting these books, the body is protected and released from suffering and the syllables help guide the body to a good rebirth (ibid:97). In addition, four syllables are written on a piece of paper and put in the mouth of the dead, the syllables being: *ci*

¹³³ Reciting the name of the Buddha *Put to* as a mantra while meditating is one of the most common meditation- *Pawana* methods that is practiced and taught in Thai temples and meditation retreats.

¹³⁴ https://www.visalo.org/article/D_dhamBumbud12_2.htm

¹³⁵ MN:136

for *citta* - mind, *ce* for *cetasika* - mental factors, *rū* for *rūpa* - visual object, and *ni* for *nibbana* - extinction (of defilements) (Wells, 1960).

These prospects of individual optimisation of *kamma* as detailed above, operate within a wider scheme of societal behaviour. Yama's land depictions in the parks not only suggest methods of individual salvation, they also position moral issues within a social sphere that is at the midst of an ongoing decline, as will be discussed next.

2.6.2 Yama's Land Collective Aspect in light of The Decline of The *Sāsana*

The representations of Yama in the parks, point to the individual's own capacity to take the optimal path aiming for a pleasant rebirth, right from this present moment and onto the moment of death, and even further to the next rebirth. Nonetheless, the individual must navigate in a wounded society facing a collective moral decline, an idea which is embedded in the Buddhist doctrine and apparent in way of crime, corrupt authorities, substance abuse and so on. Amongst the myriad *apāya* representations in the parks, the human behaviour that brought the denizens of the suffering realms to be born in this unfortunate condition, is mentioned in way of signage as well as actual scene depicting humans committing sin.¹³⁶ The latter is expressed in the parks via enactments of sins such as abuse of drugs and alcohol, killing, fighting as well as reference to corrupt politics (see fig.22).



Figure 22. A depiction of a drug addict, Wat Mae Keat Noi, Jpeg, Ronit Wang 2013

¹³⁶ Humans share a unique condition, as they can experience both suffering and delight and have to capacity to understand the *dhamma*.

These representations mirror the grim state of the world and the abundance of malevolence, which coincide with the Buddhist theory of decline, that is the decline of the *sāsana*.¹³⁷ Beliefs in the finite duration of Buddhism are evident in the canonical scriptures and Buddhist writers have predicted the eventual disappearance of their own religion, offering explicit timetables for its extinction (Nattier, 1991). This idea is perpetuated in the *Phra Malai* story. When Phra Malai visits the *Tavatimsa* heaven he meets and converses with the future Buddha Matteyya (*Phra Sri Ariyamet*), who tells him about the 5,000 years period, when the human condition faces moral decline having lost the notion of all the Buddhist teachings, and after which he will be reborn in the human realm as the next Buddha. The time of the disappearance of the Buddha’s teachings is described in the text as an abominable period of chaos, violence, destruction and death “at that time all the beings will be doomed, they will not have knowledge of merit and honesty, only sinful (*baap*) *kamma*, no shame in wrong doing” (PMNS:157). According to the *Phra Malai* versions, some righteous people will escape and hide in the mountains during this turmoiled period. Once Matteyya will descend to the human realm, the righteous people will reappear, and a moral utopian society will be created.¹³⁸

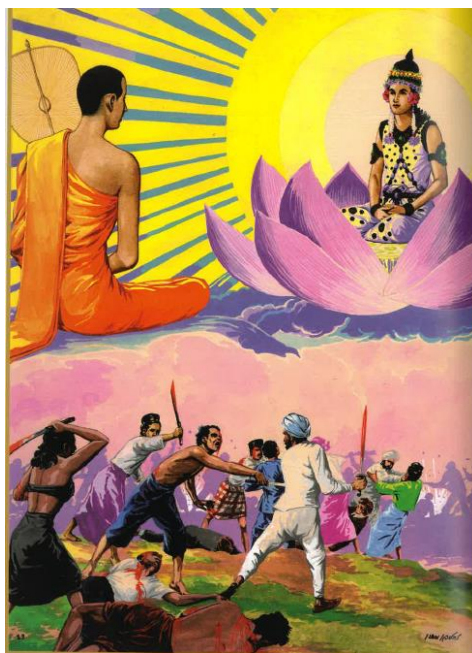


Figure 23. Matteyya tells Phra Malai of the moral decline, by Hem Vejakorn¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Variations on the Buddhist Decline theory can be found in different schools, such as the *mappō* theory in Japan. For more see Marra, 1988.

¹³⁸ A birth in the time of Matteyya is considered auspicious too. Brereton discusses the way in which recitation of the *Vessantara Jataka* in one day and one night, is given in the text of *Phra Malai* as a formula for birth in this period and in this way emphasizes the importance of observing the *Vessantara Jataka* recitation at the *Bun Phra Wet* festival (2017:113).

¹³⁹ P.84

Nguyen whose extensive research gives an account of Northern Thai Buddhist literature circulated from 19th century to early 20th century, discusses the way in which northern Thai writers transformed the decline of the *sāsana* into a narrative about a disharmonious historical period for the moral community caused by the mechanics of *kammic* cosmology (2014: 45).¹⁴⁰ If we return to the notion that was raised earlier, where the individual strives to be reborn in heaven rather than reaching *nibbāna*, this notion can be explained further by the perception that the decline of the *sāsana* is also expressed in the loss of one's ability to gain full enlightenment. As noted earlier, it is widely believed in Thailand that the true *arahants* are rarely found at present day if at all.

In light of the notion of the decline, the position of Yama as the cosmic judge receives further magnitude, as the cases that are assessed in his land mirror the state of society. While the visitors in the parks are reminded of their individual responsibility, the representations of the *apāya* which are first introduced via Yama's land, that serves as a bridge, also narrate the signs of the decline through depictions of *baap* and evil.

An example for gauging of the decline of the *sāsana*, and its connection to Yama can be found in the soap opera *Yomaban Jao Ka*, mentioned above, which as maintained, declared the rationale behind its creation as the idea that the practice of *dhmma* is declining and the human world is slowly destroyed.¹⁴¹

This notion of decline is current and present on a daily basis as it is embedded in the Thai calendrical system, referred to as the Buddhist era (BE), which operates within the 5000 years decline scheme. According to this system the current year, in which this is thesis is being finalized is the year 2565. Diller and Juntanamalaga trace back this timely placement to the 14th century king Lithai (author of the *Traiphum*) noting that the 14th century writings of the king and other inscriptional sources devote detailed attention to 'placing' the present moment within the 5000-year era between the Buddha's passage to *nibbāna* and the end of the current age of the world (2000). Hence, we are in the midst of the decline, half way through, and moral deterioration is apparent and demonstrated in the parks through representations of the *apāya*, while Yama's land act as an admonition, which operates on both an individual and a social level. The punishments afflicted on the sinners correspond with their sins, stressing the narrative which transfers the *kammic* apparatus from the individual to the collective. This is further enhanced via the hellish

¹⁴⁰ The texts Nguyen looks at are: *Phuttha Tamnan*, *Tamnan Phya In*, *Tamnan Thammikarat* and *Tamnan Bhikkhuṇī Thon*.

¹⁴¹ <http://drama.ch7.com/detail/28710>

representations that will be demonstrated in the following chapter, where some of the sins are perceived as damaging not only to the individual but to society as well.

This point in time that we are at - in the midst of the decline, is linked to astrological determinations and cosmological shifts.¹⁴² This was expressed in a message that was composed by Wat Santi Nikhom's temple *sangha* and circulated amongst practitioners via LINE, in April 2020:

Hello, this is to inform you about some matters in advance so that you can prepare properly. At this moment, our world has arrived into the half-Buddha time. There have been many changes in the whole world, every life, more or less, was affected...On Tuesday, April 21, 2020, which falls on the 14th day of the waning moon of the 5th lunar month, it is the day when the doors of all dimensions open. Our world will be the weakest. (We will be sustainable to) negative energy from other dimensions and hells' gates, some hell beasts will come out. On this day, April 21, the worlds will overlap with our realm. Energy will be directed to the human world from the time when the sun rises and the dawn of the next day, during wan phra. Please keep safe. Stay at home. Please be patient, don't go out... only for one day this year. Because of negative energy, toxic energy waves. Will rush to our world. Anyone who is weak, may encounter a wind blowing. Please stay at home and don't go anywhere. Drink clean water, Eat only cooked food. Be patient today. No matter what sound you hear day or night, don't say a word. Close the window blinds. Stay calm, don't make noise and turn on the light in the shrine at your house, keep it on all night and keep the house as bright as possible. (You may hear) strange sounds that have never been heard, be mindful, don't say hello, if you can help it, walk as quietly as possible, only in the area of the house. Do not go out of the house... Whoever pays homage to the Lord (Buddha) informs the gods and they will not let anything into the area of the house...Be patient and mindful. The merit protects everyone.

While this message is related to the decline of the *sāsana* as being a determining factor in the sensitivity of the human world in face of the dark forces that are to be released on that day, it also affirms that merit has the ability to protect and guide those who preform it, pointing to the interlacing of the individual and the society.

The discussion above illustrates the way in which the decline of the *sāsana* is reiterated via different mediums, from popular culture to temple discussions, thus making the topic current and dynamic amongst temple goers and within the social sphere.

¹⁴² As discussed in chapter one.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined Yama's land representations in three parks, Wat Pa Lak Roi, Wat Muang and Wat Mae Keat Noi. The scene that all parks depict is that of the arrival of the dead to before Yama and his two secretaries, the merit secretary and the *baap* secretary.

While the depictions are quite similar in their features each park situated the depiction differently. However, all spatial positioning was designed by the parks' creators to set a starting position for the visitors' journey into the hells, by that simulating the actual journey of the dead.

As demonstrated in the chapter, the scene of arrival in front of Yama has been recapitulated in varied mediums, on the big and the small screen, in temple murals, in classic literature and in accounts of NDEs. Before I continue to scrutinize the narratives this scene conveys as were discussed in the chapter, it is important to note that these retellings of the scene reveal its centrality in the Thai Buddhist discourse of death. The parks echo an accepted conception of what is to come when one departs one life form and transmigrates into another. It is Yama that sets these wheels in motion and regulates the *kammatic* flow.

This position of Yama as accentuated in the parks, reaffirms the theory of *kamma* which is central in the Theravāda perspective. Furthermore, it reminds the visitors of the Buddhist teachings according to which one can optimize his or her *kamma* by right thought and intention.

In addition, another narrative that often comes about within Thai Buddhist teachings is that of the decline of the *sāsana*. The wrong doers who are brought Infront of Yama symbolize, beyond their individual misdeeds, a societal decline that aligns with the deterioration that the world is facing at present. As demonstrated, this is also communicated in *Phra Malai* and in *Yomaban Kao Ka*, and is considered a reason for cosmic fluidity at certain times according to the Buddhist calendar.

Yama's land representations also point towards a developing practice in the Thai arena and that is veneration of Yama, where his position is shifting from the king of the dead to a king of the living, elevating him into a powerful position of a deity that is able to bestow protection, aid and merit to those who venerate him.

The following chapter will examine the way in which these ideas are addressed in the parks, as the visitor enters into the depth of the hells. Propagating the five precepts as a form of manual that can assist in the bettering of *kamma*, the issues that Yama's land surfaced come to a suggested solution.

3. The Way into The City of Woe: Representations of Hell

“By evil deeds, those evil ones, shall go to the realm of woe”.¹⁴³

3.1 The hell realm

Lowest within the cosmic scene, birth in the hell realm is undeniably the most horrific outcome of negative *kamma*. The depictions of this gory place, lit by the reddish glow of burning cauldrons and blazing fires, and dinned with spine tingling screams of tortured denizens, occupy a significant part of the cosmological parks and are the most popular with the visitors. This chapter will explore these representations, while paying attention to the way in which they correspond with the five precepts. The latter are consecutively proposed as a manual for avoiding birth in the hells. This in response to the issues that were raised in the preceding chapter, individual optimisation of *kamma* and communal loss of morality. Furthermore, the parks and the temples they are affiliated to, provide the opportunity for the visitors to undertake the precepts.

I will begin with an exploration of the hells’ cosmography, achieved by juxtapositioning textual sources. This will include an overview of the hellish scheme, followed by a description of the different hells, the punishments that are afflicted within them, and the deeds that lead to birth as a hell denizen in each respective hell.

3.1.2 The Hells - an Overview

The Thai term for hell is *narok*, deriving from the Pāli *niraya*, literally meaning to go asunder, to go to destruction, to die.¹⁴⁴ It is told that the beings in *niraya* never have even one single moment of pleasantness. They have to suffer the full results of their evil *kamma* from the beginning to the end of their life in hell. The length of time spent in hell depends on the power and efficacy of evil *kamma* done by each individual (Sunthorn, 1976:5).

In the discourse of the fools and the wise, the *Bālappaṇḍitasutta*, the Buddha uses a simile to describe the hells, by telling the story of a thief who as a punishment for his crimes was stabbed with a hundred spears three times: in the morning, at noon and then again in the evening, but still did not die, having to endure tremendous pain with no relief. The Buddha then says, that the anguish that this man suffered, if compared to the anguish in hell, is like a small stone in comparison to the Himalaya: “That man’s experience while he is stabbed with three hundred

¹⁴³ Dhp:22.

¹⁴⁴ PTSD:370

spears compared with the anguish of the *niraya* hell...does not amount to even that an infinitesimal fraction, it cannot even be compared".¹⁴⁵

The hells are 456 in number,¹⁴⁶ divided into three groups: the first group consists of the major hells -*Mahā Narok*, which are mapped into eight box shaped pits, situated one beneath the other.¹⁴⁷ Each *Mahā Narok* is surrounded by 16 median auxiliary hells called *Usot Narok* - four on each side. The *Usot Narok* are encircled by small satellite hells which are called *Yomalok* – ten on each side. Insofar, each level consists of 57 hells, so that the total number of the hells is, as mentioned above 456 (see fig.25).¹⁴⁸ There is also an additional unique hell named *Lokanta*, which occupies the ‘empty’ space between the three *cakkavāḷa* (world systems) (TrpW 25 – 36).¹⁴⁹

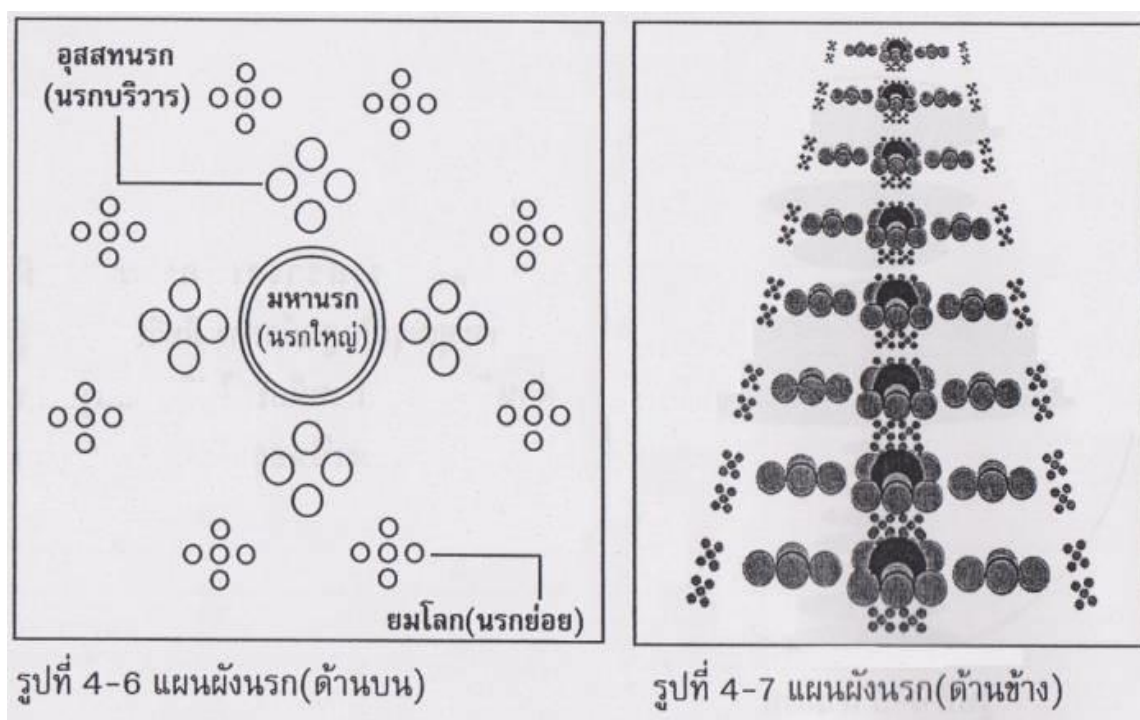


Figure 24. configuration of the hells¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ MN129

¹⁴⁶ This number relies on combined data extracted from: Lkp 69-81, TrpR 66 - 82, NS 51-82, NJ 57-66, TrpW 28-35

¹⁴⁷ The hells are located below the *Jambudvīpa* continent, as detailed in the introduction chapter.

¹⁴⁸ For a detailed list of the hells and their descriptions see appendix 8.

¹⁴⁹ One *cakkavāḷa* is composed of the three worlds as described in chapter one.

¹⁵⁰ <http://book.dou.us/doku.php?id=md408:4>

3.2 The hells and The Five Precepts

As this chapter maintains, the punishments afflicted in the hells, come to expression in the parks' depictions, which are often horrifically explicit. In the *Mahā Narok* which are the eight large hells there are no *yomaban*. That being said, the *yomaban* appear in all the parks' representations. Thus, it is plausible to assume that the hells that are being depicted in the parks are the *Usot Narok* and the *Yoamlök*. However, the imagery is quite chaotic and elements from the *Maha Narok* also appear amongst the depictions, as well as images of ghosts and other elements that do not necessarily appear in the scriptures. This points to the imagery that appears in the parks being based to a large extent on the creators' own interpretation of the hells. The varied influences on the imagery include liturgical sources but not exclusively. To this end, the hellish punishments in the parks, attend to modern day issues. This is in addition to the classic imagery familiar to us from the text, the murals and the manuscripts paintings, thus the incorporation of contemporary motifs to the imagery as discussed in the introduction chapter is evident.

A notable recurrent theme in the parks' hellish depictions is that of the five precepts, and the way they align with the realms of woe. Braarvig has suggested that hell is an ever-recurrent motif in the Buddhist tradition, and thus forms part of edifying story-telling for the sake of the religious education of the lay community (2009:257). In light of this, the parks utilise the gory hell motifs for didactic purposes. These motifs are presented in a way which is interlinked with the five precepts, as the punishments are often for sins that were caused by their breakage. Hence, this story-telling advocates the precepts as a formula for the optimisation of *kamma*; by adhering to the precepts, one can avoid committing misdeeds and be saved from a rebirth in the hell realm.

The five precepts, are referred to in Thai as the *sin haa*, from the Pāli *pañca sīla*, the five *sīla*. They are: *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*, abstain from killing, *adinnādānā*, abstain from stealing, *kāmesumicchācārā*, abstain from sexual misconduct, *musāvādā*, abstain from false speech, and *surāmerayamajjapamādatthānā*, abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness (Payutto, 2016:239). In the book of the eights of the *Anguttara-Nikāya*, the precepts, making a prominent canonical appearance are communicated as a recipe for virtuousness:¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ It is interesting to mention here that the *kammatic* ramifications of adherence, or lack of adherence to the five precepts is perceived in certain circles to affect physical appearance. In this way, according to the teachings of Luang Pho Thammachayo, the abbot of the infamous Dhammakaya Temple, following the precepts will determine one's beauty. In a documentary on the temple, one of the temple's practitioners talks about the way his dark skin is evidence that he did not follow the precepts in past lives. A man who followed the precepts in his past lives, he says, will be handsome with white and bright skin (Come and See, 2019).

“When, Mahānāma, a lay-disciple abstains from taking life, abstains from taking what is not given to him, abstain from sexual misconduct, abstains from lying, and abstains from spirituous intoxicants; the cause of indolence - then a lay disciple is virtuous.”¹⁵²

In the discourse to the people of *Sālā*, the *Sāleyyakasutta*, the Buddha discusses not-*dhamma*, that is volition of body, speech and mind and its consequences in the form of birth in hell.¹⁵³ A direct connection can be identified between not-*dhamma* and the precepts, via wrong actions in regards to body speech and mind, namely: body – first precept, second precept and third precept, speech – fourth precept, mind – wrong view which might lead to breakage of all four precepts, and in addition can be caused by heedlessness due to the clouding of the mind under the influence of intoxicants, the fifth precept.¹⁵⁴

In addition to these not-dhammas, when considering the sins that lead to birth in the hells, as detailed in the lists above, a correlation can be connoted between these sins and breakage of the five precepts. In this way, birth in all of the *Mahā Narok* is a direct retribution for the breakage of the first precept, taking life. The *Usot Narok* and the *Yomalok* inflict the outcomes of the breakage of the first precept, as well as the additional four. The following three hells are and the hells are the punishment for those who took others property by force or engaged with embezzlement, a breakage of the second precept: The *Vetarāni*, the first hell within the *Usot Narok* named after a river that runs through it and is filled with tangled rattans that have huge thorns made out of fiery red iron and are in constant flame (TrpW 28-29, TrpR 71-73, NJ 57-58). The *Asinaka*, which is the third in the *yomalok*, in it the hell denizens have sharp nails which they use to scratch their own flesh and eat it as food (NS 81), and the *Ayukhola*, which is the fifth in the *yomalok*, where the hell denizens are starved, so that they are forced to eat flaming iron which burns them from the inside (NS 81).

The *Thūsapālāca* the seventh hell of the *Usot Narok* this hell is covered by red fiery iron plates which blaze up and burn the hell denizens. The hell denizens then jump into a river which appears clear to seek for relief, but then the water turns into atrophied rice and chaff which the denizens

¹⁵² AN 8.25.

¹⁵³ MN 41.

¹⁵⁴ To this end there is a weightier set of rules, the eight precepts, adding three more precepts. The eight precepts are usually undertaken during meditation retreats and *wan phra*. The three additional precepts are: 6. refrain from taking food at an unreasonable time 7. refrain from dancing, singing, music, and unseemly shows; from the use of garlands, perfumes, and unguents; and from things that tend to beautify and adorn 8. refrain from using high and luxurious seats and beds (Gomes, 2009).

try to eat, but when it reaches their stomach, it fires up and shut out from their anuses (TrpW 31-32, TrpR 75-76, NJ 59). This hell is the destination for those who presented their merchandise dishonestly, a deceitful behavior that can be linked to breakage of the fourth precepts. The following three hells are all dwellings of those who's negative *kamma* was produced as a result of breakage of the third precept, of abstaining from sexual misconduct, and these are: The *Sañghāta*, an *usot narok* where the hell denizens' bodies are half human half animal. They dwell between two large still mountains that roll over them and crush them, while intense fire is blazing (Lkp 73-74, TrpR 66-67, NS 55). The *Vasira*, another *usot narok* in which the *yomaban* grab the hell denizens by their feet, hang their heads into a pit, and then beat their bodies with fiery clubs until they are shredded into pieces (TrpW 34, TrpR 78, NJ 61). The third hell is the *Lohasimbālī*, which holds a kapok forest with countless trees, each Yojana tall with extended long flaming thorns.¹⁵⁵ The hell denizens, both male and female, are forced to climb up the trees by the *yomaban* who use spheres to push them up. The women are sent to reach to their lovers but never reach them. In this way the denizens climb up and down while they are being slashed by the tree thorns (TrpW 34-35, TrpR78-79, NJ 61). The last hell that is associated with the third precept is the *yintapaasa* and is a *yomalok*, in it there are two fiery mountains that operate like compressors and crush the hell beings (NS 82,83).

Another hell is the *Thamaphkata*, a *yomalok* where the hell denizens are forced to lie on hot iron plates while the *yomaban* then force feed them with boiling copper (NS 81). It is the destination for those who broke the fifth precept and indulged in intoxicants.

As I established above, breakage of the precepts can be the cause of wrong behavior which may lead to a birth in one of the hells. Thus, the precepts provide a guideline, or a formula, that if followed, will avert the production of negative *kamma*. Furthermore, one hell - the *Sorajati*, is the abyss where those who abused, injured or killed people who adhere to the precepts dwell. This confirms that the observance of the five precepts not only enables an ascent in the cosmic scheme, it also provides a sort of empyrean protection, as the mere act of hurting a person who keeps the five precepts is an offence that is retributed in birth in hell.

The *Sunakha* and *Lohitapubba* are hells where those who killed monks and parents are reborn. Killing an ascetic is a most severe offence. While the next chapter discusses the way in which monks are considered to be fields of merit, it is interesting to note here, that the idea of hells in which extreme punishments are inflicted on those who abused either monks or parents, classify

¹⁵⁵ A *yojana* equals 11.2 kilometer.

the latter in the same group. Saying that, the group of monks could have been added later, as the text were mainly written by monks, so there is no necessary connection to parental authority. Saying that, there is still a relation here to the somewhat parental or familial status of *sangha* that is apparent in Thailand. In the Thai language, revered abbots are often referred to by the title *luang pu* or *luang ta*- meaning grandfather, or *luang pho* meaning father.¹⁵⁶ The ten precept keeping nuns are referred to as *mae chi*,¹⁵⁷ literally meaning mother.¹⁵⁸ This parental aspect that is philologically assigned to *sangha*, is expressed in the construction of the ascetic role in Thai temples, where there is an emphasis on communality, that is maintained by a nurturing relationship between *sangha* and practitioners. This in turn, supports and maintains a reciprocal relationship between *sangha* and laity, which will be examined in the next chapter. In this respect, it can also be said that this parental notion strengthens the authority bestowed upon the *sangha*, whose teachings are transmitted in the parks, as beyond their expertise as trained monks and nuns, there is an overall sense of forbearance in their recommendations since they carry an air of familial concern for the practitioners. Here too, when considering the severity of punishments afflicted on those who hurt ascetics in the hells, the status of the *sangha* is further established as they are positioned aloft the cosmic scheme. This elevated status could be related to the authors of the texts who were monks.

3.3 In the Depths of Hell: hell representations in the parks

I will now present some examples of hell depictions, and demonstrate the way in which they are arranged in accordance with the five precepts. This section will include the following parks: Wat Po chai Sri, Wat Pa Lak Roi, and Wat Santi Nikhom. In addition, I will also introduce some relevant scenes from Wat Mae Keat Noi in Chiang Mai, which relate to the idea of the five precepts both on an individual level and a communal level¹⁵⁹.

3.3.1 Wat Po Chai Sri

The hell section at Wat Po chai Sri is situated at the edge of the park, and can be reached after passing through the representations of the heavenly abodes and the *himaphan* forest. In this park, the hell section is composed of five hells, directly corresponding with the five precepts. Almost all

¹⁵⁶ *Luang* is a respectful title used when addressing revered Buddhist monks.

¹⁵⁷ The term *chi* is used to describe people who have undertaken a more extensive set of precepts and reside in temples exercising rigorous practice.

¹⁵⁸ In such a way, whilst I was staying at Wat santi Nikhom, I've noticed that the practitioners, guided by the residing nun Mae Chi Chanida, dropped the *chi* altogether and referred to her simply as *mae* – mum.

¹⁵⁹ See appendix 9 for hell representations table.

the hells are also named in accordance with their Pāli precept title counterpart. The hell representations are adjoined by large plates on which the description of the hells is engraved. Curiously, the plates also include a prediction of the following life span of the hell denizens, to which they will be born after exhausting their *kamma* in the specific hell.

Narok Pantipata –the name of this hell is derived from *pāṇātipātā*, the first precept. It is described as the hell for those who have killed. In this gruesome hell, the hell denizens have human bodies and animal heads. This feature is similar to that of the denizens of the *Saṅghāta* hell, which is the destination for killing animals. Amongst the animals depicted are frogs, roosters and pigs; all very popular as meat products in Thailand, implying the offenses of those who kill animals for their livelihood. The persecution in this hell comes in the form of cuttings the hell beings' heads off with an axe, and stabbing them with double headed spears and pitchforks. A black dog is seen seated next to one of the hell wardens with his mouth covered in blood, suggesting it also took part in the infliction of the torments. The dogs, who feature in the *Sunaka* hell, are therefore incorporated into the park's *Pantipata* hell. The following life form, as noted on the plate describing this hell, is said to be as a human with a short life span, weak and unhealthy (see fig.26).



Figure 26. Wat Po Chai Sri, Narok Pāṇātipātā, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2016

Narok Atinatana – named after the second precept, *adinnādānā*, this is the hell for those who stole, robbed and engaged in corruption. Here, the denizens are confined in a cage made of hot iron, their bodies dissected by the *yomaban* with large saws while they are lying on hot iron plates and large dogs pray on their entrails. Others are seen buried underneath a large pile of hot grain while vultures poke them. The grains relate to the type of wrongdoing that causes birth in the

Thūsapalā hell, mixing atrophied rice and straw with good grain for sale, a form of deceit that is related to breakage of the second precept as well. The rebirth that awaits the denizens of the *Atinatana* after serving their *kammatic* sentence in the hell, is that of a poor human, who suffers from constant failure in business, and may also experience incidents such as flooding, robbery or being a victim of deception.

Narok Simbali – this hell is the dwelling of those who are punished for breakage of the third precept *kāmesumicchācārā*. However, in this case, it is named and described in accordance with the *Lohasimbali usot narok* and the *simbali Yoamlak* - the hells for those who performed sexual misconduct. This hell consists of a large tree with 16-inch-long thorns, on which the hell denizens are forced to climb by the hell wardens, as well as vicious dogs that lurk at the bottom of the trees, waiting for their prey. At the top of the trees, vultures await, forcing the hells denizens to climb back down, so on and so forth. These beings in the *Simbali*, once reborn, will be humans who have many enemies.

Narok Musa – named after the fourth precept, *musāvādā*. This is the hell for those who lied. In this hell the hell denizens' hands are tied to their backs while their tongues are being pulled by the *yomaban* with large tongs. At the same time, they are also being stabbed and injured. This hell is similar in its features to the *Usot Narok Lohabaḷisa*, in which the denizens' tongues are being caught by fish hooks (rather than tongs) which is the punishment for deceitfulness. The rebirth that awaits the dwellers of the *Musa* hell is that of human who is always accused of lying, being constantly misunderstood, and has an unpleasant voice.

Narok Mo Tong Deang – in accordance with the fifth precept, *surāmerayamajjapamādatthānā*. this hell is described as the destination for those who indulged in intoxicants. In this hell, its denizens are cast into a huge burning and flaming cauldron and are force fed fiery melted copper. This hell is literately called red copper cauldron hell, and is similar in its features to the *Lohakumbhi* which is the destination of those who hurt ascetics, as well as the *Lohakumbah* hell in which birth is the result of killing. However, the cauldron in this representation is said to be a punishment for the fifth precept of consuming intoxicants. The force feeding of boiling copper can be found in the *yomalok Thamaphkata*, where those who broke the fifth precept are born. The beings in *Mo Tong Deang*, once reborn, will be humans who suffer from mental illnesses.

Beyond the hellish representations that are specifically arranged in accordance with the precepts, Wat Po Chai Sri perpetuates adherence to the precepts by providing opportunities to take them on temple grounds. On weekends, a collective *sankhatan* (merit making ceremony) is held.

During the *sankhatan* the practitioners listen to a short *dhamma* talk by one of the monks and recite the recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma and the *Sangha* formula, which is followed by taking the five precepts upon themselves. During weekends and holidays large number of practitioners from around the country, arrive to the temple, to visit the revered abbot Phra Pawana Vimom, who practices divination, sacralises amulets, and endows vehicles with protective *ghata* inscriptions. During these rituals, the practitioners are instructed to undertake the five precepts. In addition, every week on *wan phra* a group of locals, the majority of whom are elderly women, come to spend the night at the temple while taking the eight precepts. During their stay, they join the evening and morning' chants with the monks and nuns. In the evening of their stay, a *dhamma* talk is given by one of the monks. Upon their departure from the temple, they cease the observance of the eight precepts and resume the five by reciting a formula, which will be introduced as we continue.

As mentioned in the chapter one, a transcendent experience in which one may witness the hells as well as other cosmological planes, can be achieved by practicing meditation. The *paṭikkūlamānasikāra*, a meditation technique that focuses on the 32 parts of the body, is the method practiced by *sangha* and practitioners in Wat Po Chai Sri, instructed by Phra Pawana Vimom. The idea of witnessing the hells is considered to be as an experience with a cautionary effect, which prompts the development of right understanding and the benefits of the five precepts, as a tool to avoid birth in the dreadful *apāya*.

3.3.2 Wat Pa Lak Roi

The extensive hell section at Wat Pa Lak Roi spreads over a vast area within the park. The hell area (*daen narok*) is the first section to which the visitor is led to, passing the main *vihāra* and a small lake, by that acting as a starting point to the visit in the park. The hell area is delineated and can be entered through a gate made of skulls, mighty birds, and two human heads, one on each side.

The hell scenes in the section are scattered, in a chaotic manner, whilst pathways woven between them guide the visitor throughout. The scenes include amputated bodies of hell denizens, some stabbed, cut open, roasted or pierced. Amongst these imbrued sights, two cauldrons are situated, into which the *yomaban* are seen forcing the hell denizens to plunge. One of these cauldrons includes a depiction of several characters, both males and females, scorching in it. In the centre, there stand two female figures who are seen to be wrestling. Also notable is an image

of a female that is about to be pushed into the caldron, and is seen force fed by a *yomaban* some sort of an alcoholic drink from what looks like a beer bottle. The second cauldron, which is situated nearby, also refers to the issue of drinking and as it has writing inscribed on it which says “lost one’s way in liquor”. Referring to the cauldrons’ imagery, the park booklet notes that “this is the faith of those who broke the fifth precept: beings who drink alcohol, until they lose consciousness... he who drinks alcohol will be met by Yama’s crew... Believe what the Buddha said ‘if merging with the *abaiamuk*, there one will encounter endless suffering’ please stop! For your children, your wife and for a good society” (Wat Pa Lak Roi, n.d.).¹⁶⁰

The cauldrons in this park, are associated with breakage of the fifth precept, and specific to the abuse of alcohol, an association which is frequent in other parks as well as in other repressions of the hells, and to which I shall return later. The warning in the booklet refers both to the individual damage that may result in birth in a hell where the denizens suffer tremendously while boiling in the dreaded cauldrons, and to the harm that alcoholism inflicts on one’s family and surroundings.

Another hellish depiction is situated at the edge of the hell section and is composed of a number of adjoined thorny branches, representing the hellish kapok trees. Hell denizens are seen climbing on the trees, while large vultures are lurking on the tree tops. Some of the beings are arranged in couples, a reference to the *simbalī narok*, the hell where those who broke the third precept, and engaged in forbidden romantic affairs dwell. In the temple book, it is said that the cause of death for some male and females in this hell is HIV/AIDS. This notion points to an ‘earthly’ risk that breaking the third precept brings about. Engaging in sexual misconduct, if performed carelessly, may be the mainspring to an infection with a potentially terminal illness. This intensifies the severity of the outcome, making the so-called punishment more palpable.

One curious depiction in Wat Pa Lak Roi is that of two *yomaban* carrying a rod from which characters who are depicted wearing student uniforms, are hanged by their necks. According to the description adjoined to the scene, these are students that are addicted to drugs. On the rod two geckos are situated, and by the operation of a coin a recording of the geckos speaking is operated, where they announce that “this needs to be resolved, need to help each other, this way Thai children act wickedly, if this will not be resolved in a hurry, the Thai society deteriorates, if not resolved parents will cry, this needs to be stopped at once” (see fig.27). While drug abuse is considered to be a breakage of the fifth precept, the geckos’ declaration points to the societal damage that is

¹⁶⁰ *Abaiamuk* i.e *apāya*

caused by drug usage amongst youngsters, in this way it is sided with alcoholism and sexual misconduct as discussed above, formulating a list of contemporary concerns within modern day society. It is interesting to note here that the recorded announcement does not discuss punishment but rather a call for help. Situated above the depiction of these children's fate in the hells the geckos call is for preventative measures, thus acts as a suggestive solution which in turn softens the horrific display.



Figure 27. tortured students, Wat Pa Lak Roi, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2016

Beyond these representations, around the border of the hell section, there is a set of depictions which is specific to the five precepts, arranged in accordance with each one. It is composed of five cave-like structures, each consisting of a mechanical representation of the punishment which is inflicted due to the breakage of a precept. The precept is inscribed on the cave, and includes an instruction for the spectator to insert a ฿5/10 coin, in order to operate the mechanical enactment of the penalty. In such a way, the fourth cave attends to the fourth precept, of refraining from false speech. The sign on the cave reads: “these people who lie and deceive break the fourth precept, insert a ฿5/10 coin and watch”. The scene that is enacted is that of a *yomaban* pulling out the tongue of the hell denizen with a hook. This punishment is identical to the one in the *Usot Narok Lohabaḷisa*, which is the destination for those who were deceitful during the earthly lives. The fifth cave depicts the punishment for breakage of the fifth precept, the inscription on it reads: “punishment for those who break the fifth precept: take *yaba* (amphetamine), drink alcohol and go out at night. You are invited to see”. The scene that is depicted here, is that of a hell warden force feeding a naked female hell denizen with burning copper. This punishment is akin to the

punishment inflicted in the *Yomalok Thamaphkata*, the birth place of those who consumed intoxicant substances.

Wat Pa Lak Roi, also encompass representations of the human realm, these are earthly scenes which are located at the outskirts of the park. Two of these representations relate to offences against *sangha* which are one of the causes for birth in the hells. The first a scene is that of alms giving practice (*sai bat*), in which one of the participants prevents another from inserting his offering into the monk's bowl. Another depiction shows a woman sitting bare breasted, in front of a monk, who in turn uses a gesture in which his hand is raised towards her in dismay. These two examples are added to the myriad of depictions in the parks, in the aim of pointing out wrong behaviour towards *sangha*. Not only that this kind of wrong doing might result in a birth in hell, it can also cause distress in this earthly life and damage the relationship between the *sangha* and the laity.

3.3.3 Wat Santi Nikhom

Wat Santi Nikhom displays an impressively elaborated hell section, which is situated at the basement of a building, that in a similar fashion to a *stupa*, simulates the configuration of the universe.¹⁶¹ As noted earlier, this bell-shaped structure, consists of four floors, each depicting a plane of existence. Within this scheme, one enters the hell area by descending the staircase to the building's basement. This descent, which simulates the decline to the hells which are located in the bottom of the cosmos, is further established with a common Thai term that relates to a birth in the hells - *tok narok*, literally falling to hell. This was often used by the temple residing *sangha* and practitioners when discussing the parks' hellish representations.

Upon entering the basement, the first scene is that of king Yama and his two secretaries. A sensory activated recording immediately plays upon entering. It is the voice of Yama as he laughs knowingly and says: "this is the place where those who broke the five precepts arrive... very heavy sins, such as killing, not taking care of others' belongings, wrong conduct, acting wickedly towards others and consuming alcohol to the state of drunkenness". This scene is surrounded by offerings brought to Yama by visitors, which include flowers and soft drinks.¹⁶² This depiction acts as the starting point, from which the visitors are directed into the hells, where a circular pathway leads them through the gruesome imagery.

¹⁶¹ For information about Thai *stupas* see Ringis, 1990.

¹⁶² See chapter two.

The first scene that is viewed upon entering the hells, is located on the left-hand side of the path. In it, the images of those who broke the first precept and killed a living being. These hell denizens have human bodies and animal heads. As noted earlier, this condition is described in the *Saṅghāta* hell which is the birth place of those who killed animals. Behind these creatures, there are depictions of beings hanged from a rod, while others are stunned and bitten by the hell wardens, punishments which are inflicted in the various hell as retribution for causing bloodshed. Opposite, on the right-hand side of the path, there is a depiction of two beings with rooster heads, who are seen facing each other while being mangled by the *yomaban*. As per the residing nun's explanation,¹⁶³ this is the fate of cockfights organisers, cockfighting being a lucrative industry which is widespread in Thailand and is associated with animal abuse and illegal gambling.¹⁶⁴

Continuing along the path, hell denizens are seen beaten, stabbed and decapitated by the *yomaban*. This area consists of punishments for the breakage of the second precept, stealing. This is specifically elaborated to the spectator with an image of a person stealing what seems to be a donation box, as the consequence is displayed immediately behind him where the same person is seen in hell, where he is beheaded with a disc shaped weapon.

Moving on, the visitors are surrounded by nine thorn trees on which those who broke the third precepts, and engaged in sexual misconduct, must climb. Here, the images of naked denizens are of both males and females. At the bottom of the thorn trees, dogs are lurking, their barks can be heard through the speakers. while at the three tops large crows await the denizens. Amongst the trees, other hell denizens appear, their tongues clutched by the hell wardens, the punishment for breakage of the fourth precept and engaging in false speech.

Between the above scene, there are six cauldrons which seem to be boiling (an effect achieved by fountain mechanism), inside which hell denizens are tormented (see fig.28). In addition to the flaming cauldrons some beings are force fed hot copper by the *yomaban*. Both of these representations are attributed to the breakage of the fifth precept, indulging in intoxicants. While the denizens in the hellish realm are depicted as either black or fair. To this end, I was told by the

¹⁶³ Mae Chi Chanida Wilaisiri in conversation with the author, February 2020.

¹⁶⁴ Although practiced widely, gambling is perceived negatively in Thailand. It appears as one of the sins committed by the character of a man who is born into the hell realm in the *Abay* video produced by the Dhammakaya Foundation. Warren notes that by the mid-twentieth century, most forms of gambling have been made illegal in Thailand, a situation that persists until today. He then gives an account in accordance with the Buddhist teachings, whereas gambling is one of four harmful vices, that all good Buddhists should avoid. There are six particular ways in which gambling leads to suffering: first, when one wins, one provokes resentment; second, and conversely, when one loses, one regrets the money lost; third, gambling consumes one's wealth; fourth, as a gambler, no one believes what you have to say; fifth, one's friends will look down upon you; and, lastly, nobody will wish to marry you. Moreover, it is generally considered that gambling comes under stealing, the second of the five precepts (2013,137).

head nun that hell denizens' colour in the actual hells is black, a feature that she first learned about from the abbot and later witnessed herself when she met a hell denizen while meditating. Midway through the pathway, opposite the representations of flaming cauldrons, a TV screen which is operated with the activation of a sensory device, plays a video that lists the sins that lead to birth in hell.



Figure 28. Boiling Cauldrons and thorn trees at Wat SanthiNikhom, JPEG, Ronit Wang 2021

Towards the end of the spine-tingling journey just before existing, the visitors arrive to a spectacle of several hell beings who are seen to be leaving the hells, after exhausting their bad *kamma*, and on their way to be born into a different existence. A *yomaban* is seen pointing his finger towards them, as if warning them not to return. This notion, of moving forward in the cosmic scheme reminds the visitor that restoration is possible, as discussed in the last chapter.

While the scenes described above are familiar to the spectator from scriptures, temple murals and popular culture, the emphasis in this park as well, is on the breakage of the precepts as a direct cause for punishment in hell. This interpretation is further conveyed by the temple abbot, Luang pho Sa'aad, and the residing monks and nuns, as it is pointed out repeatedly during activities such as merit making ceremonies, meditation retreats and school visits. During these types of activities, and similarly to the other parks discussed here, there is an opportunity for the participating individuals to take the five precepts upon themselves by recitation of the formula, which is included in the ritualistic liturgy.

As noted earlier, Wat Santi Nikhom is well known for its retreat (*patibat tham*) facilities. Practitioners can stay for a number of days, practice meditation, engage in temple work and participate in rituals and *dhamma* talks, while undertaking the eight precepts. In the same manner, as the practitioners at Wat Po Chai Sri, at the end of the practice period and upon exiting the temple

the practitioners conclude their retreat period by ceasing the eight, and undertaking the five precepts.

While visiting the temple, I have joined the closing session of a retreat for school students, from Anuban Kho Kha school. This group of students, aged between 9-10, stayed at the temple accompanied by their teachers (one of which is an active temple goer and a disciple of Luang Pho Sa'aad who organised the retreat), for three days, practicing meditation and learning *dhamma*. On the final day an elaborate merit making ceremony was held, in which donations to the temple were collected and a *dhamma* talk was given by Luang Pho Sa'aad. During the talk the abbot conveyed to the students that the hells and the heavens, as presented in the park actually do exist, and it is important to maintain right conduct, which can be achieved by the observance of the five precepts, in order to prevent a birth in the lower realms, and increase the chances for a better rebirth. This ceremony too was concluded by undertaking the precepts. In a later interview with Luang Pho Sa'aad, who initiated and orchestrated the construction of the park, he told me that whilst he was meditating, his teacher took him to travel the hells,¹⁶⁵ as discussed in the introduction chapter.¹⁶⁶

In merit making ceremonies at the temple, during the times of the rainy retreat (Pāli *vassa*, Thai *phansa*), the gift baskets that are assembled by temple volunteers and are 'rented' by the practitioners also include folding books with texts that are to be recited by the monks on different occasions.¹⁶⁷ One of these texts is the story of Phra Malai, which is mostly read during funerals or memorial services.¹⁶⁸ In the text, there is a mention of the five *Phaya vera*, which are the five animosities parallel to the five precepts. These and are described in details the *vera sutta* of the *Aṅguttaranikāya*.¹⁶⁹

"Now, which five forms of fear and animosity are stilled?

When a person takes life, then with the taking of life as a requisite condition, he produces fear and animosity in the here and now, produces fear and animosity in future lives, experiences mental concomitants of pain and despair; but when he refrains from taking life, he neither produces fear and animosity in the here and now nor does he produce fear and animosity in future lives, nor does he experience mental concomitants of pain and despair: for one who refrains from taking life, that fear & animosity is thus stilled.

¹⁶⁵ Luang Pho Sa'aad in conversation with the author, February 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Luang Pho Sa'aad belongs to the lineage of Luang Pho Kasem Kemako of Lampang, who is considered to be an *arahant*. Wat Santi Nikhom has a *vihāra* which is dedicated to Luang Pho Kasem, as well as other revered figures, that is located adjacently to the cosmological representations' building and is used for services during auspicious days.

¹⁶⁷ The act of purchasing gift baskets for merit making, or amulets and religious paraphernalia, referred to in Thai as *chao*, literally meaning to rent. This is due to their religious value which cannot be a subject of trade.

¹⁶⁸ As I was told by a temple volunteer. Nat, in conversation with the author, September 2021.

¹⁶⁹ AN5.

When a person steals...

When a person engages in illicit sex...

When a person tells lies...

When a person drinks distilled & fermented drinks that cause heedlessness..."

3.3.4 Additional cases, Wat Mae Keat Noi and Wat Pai Rong Wua

In addition to the three temples discussed above, Wat Mae Keat Noi's extensive *apāya* section includes some relevant depictions that demonstrate the incorporation of hell narratives into the park. The first two additions reflect contemporary issues, followed by a depiction that relates to the issue of misconduct committed by *sangha*.

I will begin with the portrayals dealing with modern-day issues. In a similar manner to Wat Pa Lak Roi, Mae Keat Noi also includes a scene of school students who are punished in hell and seen hanged on hooks, beaten and bleeding. Here the reasons for this punishment are inscribed on the characters' backs, all stemming from their bad behaviour as students which includes: not listening to the teacher and not doing their homework. One female student also appears in the depiction and is said to be pregnant. The Park often hosts organised school trips, which are led by the abbot, Phra Kru Wisaljariyakun. This explicit depiction stimulates a discussion, which is aimed at spurring obedient behaviour amongst the students, an idea which will be further developed shortly.

An addition to the park that was introduced between the years 2015 – 2016, are scattered images within the hell area, which are seen to be emerging from the ground as if they are buried underneath it.¹⁷⁰ On the bodies of the images different messages are communicated via an amalgamation of illustrations and wording. Amongst these, some of the imagery includes criticism of corrupted politicians who take advantage of the less fortunate, in order to gain fame and fortune for themselves. In such a way, one image portrays politicians with faces of pigs, biting into the map of Thailand. Another depiction is that of a tycoon riding on the back of a farmer, smoking a cigar while holding a bag of money in one hand and a wine glass in the other (see fig.29), alluding to his hedonistic life style. In one depiction a politician is seen squeezing a farmer in one hand while holding money in the other, with the saying "embezzling politician". These images correspond with the hellish punishments for unjust rulers, while at the same time allude to socially

¹⁷⁰ This representation of hell denizens buried in the ground with only their upper bodies surfacing, can also be seen in Wat Rong Khun in Chiang Rai, where the path to the heavenly *vihāra* is encircled by hellish creatures which emerge from the ground, as well as the entrance to the cosmological pagoda at Wat Santi Nikhom.

engaged criticism which reflects the constant unstable political situation in Thailand, and the wealth gap within Thai society.¹⁷¹ This also alludes to a possible explanation of the popularity of the parks as the situation of these images within the park section convey a promise that justice awaits corrupt politicians after their death if they were not persecuted for their misdeeds in their life.



Figure 29. A tycoon riding on the back of a farmer, Wat Mae Keat Noi, Jpeg Ronit Wang 2016

Located at the entrance area to the park, amongst depictions of the Buddha life story, one representation relates to birth in hell as a result of offences against the *Saṅgha* and the Buddha, and also deals with offences committed by monks. This is a representation of Deavadatta (Thai: *Phra Thewatat*), the Buddha's cousin who became consumed by jealousy of the Buddha, which led him to several attempts to murder the Buddha: first by sending hitmen, and after some failed attempts, by trying to do it himself. The latter attempts included rolling a rock at the Buddha, which ended up bouncing off the mountainside and breaking into pieces, and sending a large elephant in a musth onto him, which also failed as the elephant was subdued by the Buddha's presence. Finally, Devadatta tried to cause schism in the *saṅgha* by persuading 500 disciples to follow him. Despite his great attempts Devadatta did not manage to proceed with any his plans. His abominable actions sentenced him to a birth in hell, where he arrived after the ground opened, shutting up the fires of hell from down below, and swallowed him alive. His bitter end is described

¹⁷¹ For an elaborate account of “bad kings” in the light of the decline of the *sāsana* see Nguyen, 2011.

in the commentary to the *Dhammapada* “after the earth has swallowed up Devadatta, he is reborn in the *Avīci* hell” (trans. Burlington, 78:1921), and further affirmed in the *Devdatta Sutta* “Devadatta is headed for a state of deprivation, headed for hell, there to stay for an eon, incurable” (AN 8:7). Devadatta’s story serves as an example to the bitter fate of the evil doer who accumulated the kind of *kamma* which is referred to in Thai *anan triya kaam* (Pāli: *ānantarika-kamma*). This *kamma* is produced by preforming five types of offences, which are: Killing one’s father, killing one’s mother, killing an *arahant*, draw the blood of a Buddha and causing a schism amongst the *saṅgha*, all of which lead to a birth in the *Avīci* hell.¹⁷² Furthermore, Devadatta being an ordained monk, adds gravity to the severity of his deeds, as not only he breaks the *Pātimokkha*, the monastic code but also betrays the duty entrusted to him by the community, a predicament which will be discussed consequently.

The representation in the park displays the moment when Devadatta was swallowed up into the earth, as the fires of hell surround him. Next to it a sign reads “Devadatta sucked into the ground” (*sup paen din*). The visitors can see the traitorous monk burning in the flames of hell while still wearing his monk robes. With the insertion of a coin an audio recording plays, telling story of Devadatta, while in the background, his spine-tingling screams as he burns in hell can be heard (see fig.30).



Figure 30. Devadatta swallowed by the fires of hell, Wat Mae Kaet Noi, JPEG, 2013, Ronit Wang

¹⁷² BD.12

A depiction of Devadatta can be found at Wat Pai Rong Wua as well, where he is seen in his monk robes while being swallowed into the ground. In addition, located at the same compound as him, are four more characters who are known for being sucked into the ground due to various misdeeds: Nanthamanop, who was swallowed into the earth and was reborn in the *Avīci* hell after he raped the nun Uppalavaṇṇā.¹⁷³ Nantayak, a *yakkha* who struck Sāriputta on his head and was immediately engulfed by the fires of *Avīci* that busted from the ground.¹⁷⁴ Cincamanavika publicly accused the Buddha for impregnating her, and as a result the gates of hell opened and swallowed her. Lastly, King Suppabuddha, the uncle of the Buddha, his father-in-law, and the father of Devadatta. Filled with grudge towards the Buddha, Suppabuddha blocked his way when he was going for alms, and as per the Buddha's prediction was swallowed by the earth and was reborn in *Avīci* hell.¹⁷⁵

All these stories propagate the *ānantarika-kamma*, and demonstrate the way in which the result for committing one of these offenses is a straight forward highway to the *Avīci* hell. Furthermore, in severe cases the punishment takes on an immediate effect being sucked into the ground straight into hell, without even being judged by Yama beforehand.

3.4 Spatial Location of The Representations of Hell

I will now explore the way in which the parks situate the depictions of the hells, whilst paying attention to the way in which the five precepts act as the focal point.

Wat Po Chai Sri has two entrances. The first, is from the temple side, to which one arrives after passing the *vihāra*, the activity halls and the monks' residences (*kuti*). If entering the park from this side, the first depictions that are seen are those of the heavens and the *himmapan* forest, after which, the hells can become visible, arranged at the edge of the park. The second entry point is located near a lake around which there are small shops and food vendors, for the temple visitors' leisurely enjoyment. Upon entering the park from this side one immediately sees the hells. Wat Po Chai Sri introduces five hells, each in a separate segment, representing each of the five precepts, and the direct result caused by their breakage. The hells are arranged in an ascending order from the first precept to the fifth, so that the visitor walks from one to the next.

¹⁷³ For an account of Uppalavaṇṇā's story drawing on various texts see Young, 2007.

¹⁷⁴ Yakkhapahārasutta at Udāna 4.4

¹⁷⁵ *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā* trans. Burlingame Lxi and Ix Evil – *Pāpa Vagga* 492, Dhpa-a trans. Norman Evil – *Pāpa* 116-128.

Wat Pa Lak Roi has an extensive hell area which is seen immediately upon entering the park. Here, the hell scenes are scattered in a disorganised manner, creating a sense of chaos which imitates the assumed convalescence of arrival to the hells. Whilst the idea of the five precepts resonates through the different depictions as detailed above, the edge of the hell area is bordered by specific representations which attend to each precept, located in caves in which the direct punishment for breakage of the precept is described. This structuring, where the hells are bordered and framed, create a somewhat hypothetical boundary, where the precepts serve as a buffer between right conduct and wrong doing, ultimately contributing to the production of good *kamma* and prevention of rebirth in the hells.

Wat Santi Nikhom situated the hell section in the basement of a building, creating an actual subterranean space into which the visitors physically descend. This positioning intensifies the sense of experiencing the hell, as the lowest of the realms. Once entering the section, a recording with Yama's words is operated, setting the premise for the visit in the hells, being sins that are caused due to breakage of the five precepts.

3.5 Contextualizing the Hells

3.5.1 The dramatics of horror

In a study situated within the Buddhist context, Matics notes that hell imagery dramatizes the extreme torments which accrue to those who cultivate greed, aversion and delusion in their minds. Hells comprise extreme and violent experiences, such as intense heat or cold, filth, demonic apparitions and unendurable suffering, to name just a few. Those who exercise their hatred towards others by killing, torturing, or maiming (either on a physical or psychological level) may expect a kindred rebirth in comparable realms (1979:36). Indeed, this dramatization effect is apparent in the parks, in the aim of invoking feelings of horror and dread amongst the visitors. As noted earlier the representations of the *apāya* are the most popular in the parks. This can be elucidated by the somewhat cathartic experience that the realms of woe, and their horror effect create. Pellegrini in her study of Christian evangelical hell house performances in the US, discussed the appeal of evil, noting that sin makes for a much more interesting spectacle and narrative than goodness. Sin is lush, sensual, and readily theatrical. By comparison 'goodness' is generic, saccharine, and bland (2007:924). This said, Pellegrini's study is embedded in a Christian Evangelical framework, and

while she makes an interesting point which can relate to the parks' experience, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the Thai perception of horror as it may add an additional dimension to understanding the position of the hells and the horror' affect they create. Nested in a Buddhist framework, within the Thai context notions of horror not only satisfy the human eagerness to thrill, but also act as spiritual anecdotes for contemplation. As Jackson notes "Buddhist teachings and religious literature arguably give much greater emphasis to the decay of the body than to accounts of the beauty that is believed to flow from the possession of religious merit...the ugly detestable surface is just as likely to be an object of contemplation" (2004:191).¹⁷⁶ Considering this, while the parks bestow a theatrical atmosphere to the visit experience which is intensified with the horrific elements of the hells, they also encourage contemplation on death, rebirth and morality.

It is important to note here that although the imagery is gruesome, the reactions of the visitors' range between dread and ridicule. It is very common to see them taking playful pictures with the imagery and joking at the prospect of encountering or becoming a hell being.¹⁷⁷

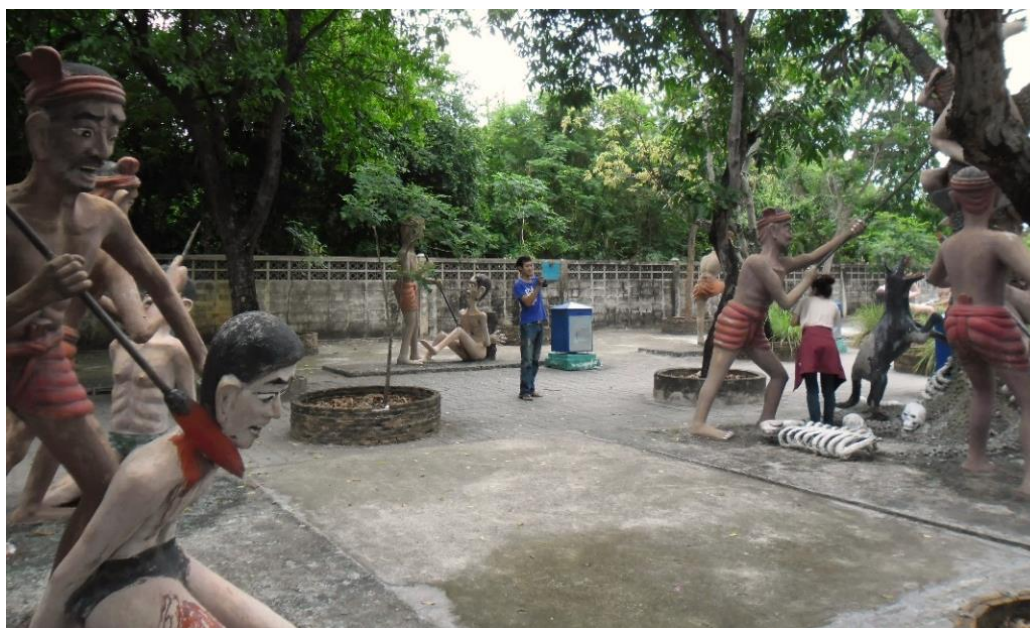


Figure 31. Visitors taking playful pictures with the imagery, Wat Wang Sean Suk, Jpeg. Ronit Wang, 2013

¹⁷⁶ For example, the *Maraṇasati* meditation practice which assumes contemplation on death, noting the decaying stages of a corpse.

¹⁷⁷ A discussion as to this reaction can be found in chapter four, looking at Thai ghost films.

3.5.2 The Nimi Jātaka

Amongst the artistic influences that inspired some of the imagery in the parks, is the *Nimi Jātaka* (*Nemiraj*) which is a popular subject of temple murals. One of the last ten *Jātakas* (*chadok*), which according to Appleton have a central place in Southeast Asian art and culture, as they illustrate the Buddha's acquisition of the ten perfections required for Buddhahood (2015: 4), the story of Nimi is well known and has myriad depictions in Thai temples. Most commonly, the scene which depicts King Nimi's arrival to view the hells along with his charioteer Mātali (the hells that are incorporated into the *Jātaka*, are the *Usot Narok*, the auxiliary hells). While the hellish imagery has representations in the parks, the images of Nimi and Mātali are absent from all the parks studied here. I will now introduce some notable Nimi murals that contain imagery that is envisioned in the parks:

One notable hell scene from the *Jātaka* that is situated on the western wall of Wat Phrataat Haripunchai in Lamphun, a temple that was built during the time of the medieval northern kingdom of Haripuñjaya, dating back to the 11th century CE.¹⁷⁸ The painting illustrates King Nimi, and Mātali the charioteer, in between heaven and hell, dressed in royal attire and seated on an ornamented chariot. The hells in this mural are represented as a mass of burning flames out of which the hell denizens seem to be struggling and crying for help. This somewhat resonates with the bodies surfacing from the ground in Wat Mae Keat Noi, as well as the image of Devadatta swallowed into the ground, as the hell beings submerge into the flames of hell.

Another example is a well-known mural of the *Nimi Jātaka* that can be found in Wat Phumin in the northern city of Nan.¹⁷⁹ The murals in the temple which was built in 1596 by Prince Chetabutr Prohmin, the governor of Nan, have become somewhat iconic, referenced in a variety of mediums¹⁸⁰. The painting of this narrative, includes detailed hellish scenes amongst which: beating and stabbing of the hell dwellers, force feeding them with boiling copper, flaming cauldrons in which, the hell denizens are tortured, and the thorn tree on which the denizens are forced to climb, all scenes that are replicated in the parks. Wat Phumin also includes a dome

¹⁷⁸ For more about the Haripuñjaya kingdom see Swearer and Premchit, 1998.

¹⁷⁹ The art in this temple was the subject of a book by Wyatt (2004), later to be criticised by Thompson for its Judeo-Christian presupposition (2017).

¹⁸⁰ For example, one famous scene in the murals, referred to as the lovers' whisper (*grasip rak*) is referenced in the 2012 romantic comedy Yes or No 2 (*Yak Rak Ko Rak Loei*), and is a popular topic of traditional dance (*ram thai*) performances.

containing a display of Phra Malai's visit to hell in way of three-dimensional imagery, as detailed in the previous chapter.

An additional famous mural of the Nimi *Jātaka* is painted on the wall of Wat Yai Intararam in Chonburi. A temple which dates back to 1412CE, the Ayutthaya period. The mural is located in the main image hall (the ubosot) on the western wall. The hell scenes in this mural are similar to those in Wat Phumin. However, their style, featuring central Siamese elements (Matics, 1979), is more detailed and the colours seem to be more vibrant. Here too, the mural is composed of different hellish scenes which we can find in the parks, including: thorn trees, and hell's inhabitants being stabbed, cut open or boiled in a copper cauldron.

Lastly, in a recently built *vihāra* on a lake (a second to the main one) at Si Khom Kham temple in Phayao, a representation of the Nimi *Jātaka* was completed in 1985 by a well-known artist named Angkhan Kanlayaphong. Painted in a northern Lanna style, the mural includes different hellish scenes amongst which a depiction of denizens being led by the *yomaban* subdued in a cangue like instrument, as well as denizens with animal heads usually associated with imagery from the Phra Malai.¹⁸¹



Fig 32. King Nimi visits to hell at Wat Si Khom Kham, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2021

As the murals indicate, and as resonated within the parks, two images which are noticeably prominent within the wide array of hell imagery namely the thorn trees and the cauldrons. Further

¹⁸¹ As noted in the introduction chapter, Wat Si Khom Kham also contains hell representations at its garden.

to their visibility in classical Buddhist art, they are also visible in popular sources which will be detailed below.

One such example is a version of *Nimi Jātaka*, in the form of a children's book concerning the above discussed Buddha's ten former lives: *Prajao Sip Chati* (10 Lives of the Buddha). This content which is aimed at young readers, demonstrates the use of Buddhist narratives for religious education. Amongst the hells mentioned here are the Cauldron Hell, *Narok Mo Tongdaeng* with a flaming iron Cauldron, and the *Lohasimbali Narok*, the thorn tree forest hell. The appearance of this imagery in children's literature points to their insemination at an early age, hence, illustrating the way in which these two images became synonymous with the hells.

3.5.3 Thorns and flames – two iconic images

These two images are further enhanced in accounts of visits to the hells that were experienced in moments of altered states of consciousness. Some of these accounts appear in TV, radio and magazines and also published in books, and are the topic of talks and seminars. One such story is of Lt.Col Phumin Ngeunsajataam who experienced a dream state in which he visited the hells. Phumin appeared in several talk shows and became a speaker, advocating *dhamma* teachings inspired by his experience. According to him, upon his arrival to hell his first vision was the thorn tree forest. He noticed that the denizens climb on different sized thorns, some large and some smaller. When asking the *yomatoot* that guided him through the hells what is the difference between the denizens, he was told that those who climb on the smaller thorns did not know that they were having an affair with someone who was already married, while those who climb on the bigger thorns knew that the person was in a committed relationship, but still proceeded with the affair. From this hell, he continued to a hell he was told was for those who drink alcohol. There, he saw the hell denizens being grabbed by the hell wardens and thrown into boiling cauldrons, where the heat was insufferable.

In an interview I have conducted with Gai, a kindergarten teacher from Bangkok, who often goes to temples and participates in meditation retreats, she mentioned to me that the first image that comes to her mind when thinking about the hells is the thorn threes. The reason Gai made the first association of the hells with these two images, is probably the way in which they appear in almost all depictions of the hells, whether traditional or modern, thus commonly associated with

the hells.¹⁸² To this end, Unebe discussed the popularity of one of these two images in Thai murals, and that is the thorn tree (2012). Indeed, the popularity of these images further unfolded whilst I was exploring the subject.

Considering the above, it is a matter of course for these images to have a significant representation within the parks. It is curious though, that the cauldron which is a punishment for hurting ascetics in the *Lohakumbhī* hell, or for killing in the *Lohakubha* hell in accordance with the scriptures, became recognized as the punishment for alcohol consumption, while according to the scriptures the punishment for this is actually force feeding of boiling copper as afflicted in the *Thamaphkata yomalok*, a punishment which also appears in the park and relates to breakage of the fifth precept. It is tempting to assume a linkage that was constructed through the association of liquid; another possibility was brought up by Mae Chai Chanida of Wat Santi Nikhom who said she thinks this connection has to do with alcohol causing nausea, and the hell beings known in many of the hells to eat vomit. The cauldron could also contain these substances.¹⁸³ however, this is just a hypothesis for the time being.

In addition to these two popular images, other hellish themes which appear in the scriptures are also present in popular culture in various mediums, attesting to the prevalence of the Buddhist hells within the Thai Buddhist cultural milieu, hence the familiarity that impinges on shared knowledge when the visitors encounter the imagery in the parks.

3.5.4 Highway to hell – a cinematic journey to the hells

“A good movie makes the audience feel like they’ve journeyed with the characters”.

Rich Moore

The hells are a prominent feature in audio-visual materials that are produced by the *Dhammakāya* foundation, which arguably has a major impact on the shaping of contemporary popular culture revolving the hells.¹⁸⁴ *Dhammakāya* practitioners practice cultivation through a

¹⁸² Gai, in conversation with the author, June 2016.

¹⁸³ Mae Chi Chanida in conversation with the author September 2022.

¹⁸⁴ Scotts presents Dhamakāya as a modern religious movement that reflects its traditional past as well as its current context. The Dhamakāya temple emerged as one of Thailand's largest and wealthiest temples by drawing its base from the urban and educated communities that benefited financially from the economic transition from agricultural society to an industrialized modern society during the 1970s and 1980s (Scott, 2009:52). The Dhamakāya temple embedded modernity in its art, architecture and marketing techniques. Dhamakāya practitioners cultivate their own power through meditation practice which enables them to succeed, situated the phenomenal success of the Dhmmakāya temple. Along with the context of postmodern Thai Buddhism, the movement's success reflects modern *sangha* reforms as well as diverse reforms of Buddhist and Thai religiosity (ibid,86). Scott also looks at the Dahmakāya controversy, derived from the extravagant wealth of the temple and which assumed a center stage in public discourse. This, according to Scott, indicates the level to which issues of monastic excess, materialism and religious manipulation matters to the Thai public at the moment in history (ibid,155). In the past few years, the movement has been in the headlines due to an investigation

meditation technique that was developed by Luang Pho Sod. According to *Dhammakāya* proponents, a successful meditator is able to visit the different realms of existence, including the hells.¹⁸⁵ *Dhammakāya* operates its own TV channel (DMC TV). One of their most extravagant and beautifully illustrated videos, is the video clip called *Abay (apāya)*, briefly mentioned in chapter two. To the sound of an eerie song, with lyrics describing the lower realms as places of tremendous suffering filled with stench and pain, the clip tells the story of a dying man and the journey he goes through from the moment of his death, to his meeting with Yama and onto rebirth in the hells. As mentioned earlier, when in front of Yama he is shown segments from his life on a screen. These scenes includes that he committed during his earthly life such as drinking, adultery, and gambling. After his realisation of the severity of his wrong doings, Yama orders the *yomabam* to take him to the hells. He is then captured by the *yomaban* who take him to the different hells where he curiously experiencing a wide array of hellish tortures: he is thrown into a fiery lake, then being stabbed with a spear, this is followed by his beheading, and his cut off head then thrown into another fiery lake. He is then led to the thorn tree that are piercing through his body (see fig.34). After that, he is held forcefully by the *yomaban* who pour hot copper on his body. He then tries to escape, but heavy rocks fall on him and crush him so that his organs are all dispersed. *Abay* seems to successfully encompass myriad punishments in a short and condensed video. Interestingly there is a relation here only to breakage of the third precept and the fifth precepts.¹⁸⁶



Figure 33. The thorns of the hellish kapok trees brutally piercing the denizens' bodies in the Abay video, DMC.¹⁸⁷

that is conducted against the abbot Luang phor Dhammajayo in suspicion of money laundering and improper use of donations. Failing to show for the DSI, the temple was raided while hundreds of followers barricaded it and resisted the raid saying their abbot is innocent. The abbot fled and his whereabouts are unknown until this day. The story was documented in a film that I mentioned in the first chapter "Come and See".

¹⁸⁵ I have had the experience of participating in one of the Dahmakāya based meditation retreats in a temple subsidiary to Wat Pak Nam, where Luang pho Sod developed this meditation. During the retreat the practitioners were asked to share the visions they had during their meditations, and a competition of sort was taking place where the successful practitioners who managed to visit the hells and describe them correctly, were somewhat worthier and preferred by the monk who was leading the programme.

¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, one might wonder why this man, whose wrong doing are quite mundane and seem to stem from carelessness rather than wickedness, literally has to go through "the circles of hell". The answer to this might have to do with the indoctrination tendency of the movement, and perhaps can be further explored.

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyRNRHfQHqQ>

The different punishments that are afflicted in the hells also appear in the film *Narok* (2005).¹⁸⁸ The film demonstrates the way in which breakage of the five precepts affects one's *kamma*, as communicated via the personal stories of the characters, who arrive in hell after their van crushed on their way to a work trip. The film manoeuvres between scenes of the characters roaming the hells, in a purgatory state, and flashbacks to crucial moments in their earthly lives, moments which will ultimately determine their fate. Let us explore these characters and their stories:

Uncle Thao (Kom Chauncheun) – The camera focuses on uncle Tao outside of the company's offices, as he kneels down and prays to the guardian spirit of the office's shrine (*san phra phum*), while drinking from a bottle of Singha beer.¹⁸⁹ Tao's apparent dichotomy between the religious to the sinful resonates throughout the film. In one scene for example, while still on earth, Tao advises the youngsters to behave well in order to generate good *kamma*. This is perceived by the audience as ironic, as it is already known that his own actions are dubious in nature. The oldest member of the crew, hence the affectionate nickname uncle, Tao is married and is a father to a young daughter. Uncle Tao is such a heavy drinker that during his earthly life, he was so consumed by alcohol that he neglected his daughter and physically abused his wife. Tao's character sets an example of breakage of the fifth precept. Furthermore, it illustrates the warning in the temple book of Wat Pa Lak Roi where drinking is said to hurt one's family.

Lae (Baworanrit Chantasakda) - Lae was driving the van when it crashed. In fact, it crashed because he fell asleep. During the film Lae seems like a fun-loving young man who develops close friendship with a female character named Aon. Later on, we discover that Lae had an affair with a married woman. The woman's husband found them together, and then in an act of rage he killed the woman and then committed suicide, leaving Lae to carry the burden of guilt. At a certain point in hell, Lae meets his former lover but she slips away, referencing the lovers that climb up and down on the thorn trees and never manage to reach one another. Lae's action is a vivid example of breakage of the third precept, sexual misconduct.

Chod (Punyapon Dhajsonk) – Selfish and arrogant Chod takes advantage of his good looks and charm to court women. He is what is referred to in Thai a *jao choo*, literally meaning 'the owner of mistresses', a term describing an unfaithful man who likes to manipulate different women for his self-satisfaction. Chod leads on both female members of the crew, Ja and Kim. His relations

¹⁸⁸ For plot summary see chapter 2.

¹⁸⁹ Spirit houses are a widespread manifestation of Thailand's animistic life. If anyone erects a building, they must provide accommodation for *Phra Phum* – the 'lord of the place' (Freeman and Shearer at Reichart and Khongkhunthian, 2007:1).

with Ja results in an unwanted pregnancy. Chod's lack of empathy and selfishness is consistent in hell as well, as he is willing to abandon his friends in order to save himself. Chod's character moves on the scale, between breakage of the third precept, of sexual misconduct, and the fourth precept of deceitfulness.

It is clear that the five precepts resonate throughout the film along with other moral and social topics. The way in which the creators of the film structured the hells, juxtapositioning traditional depictions and modern elements, makes the film an interesting illustration of the way in which the hells are portrayed in popular culture. The idea of the precepts as a focal point of the film gets further affirmation in the production company's information web page which categorised the hells that appear in the film under five rubrics which correspond with the five precepts as follows: 'The hell for killing living beings' , 'The hell for lying, thinking wrong thought and hurting parents' (here interestingly the issue of parent child relationship is an added value), 'The hell for stealing' , 'The hell for alcohol', 'The hell for sexual misconduct'.¹⁹⁰ The use of audio-visual means for the conveyance of the hells, sheds light on the context in which the parks operate as it conveys the way in which these topics are treated in popular culture conversing with the parks as both platforms offer an experience. Cho discusses the unique multimedia experience offered by motion pictures that has the ability to create 'real time 'experience, or the sense of 'being there' (Cho, 2003). Both films discussed above offer a cinematic journey into the abyss of hell. The film makers created an untrammelled world of suffering and torment. This world that is created is what Plate calls a 'constructed world', where everyday perceptions of space and time are altered (Plate, 2009, 164). In *Narok*. being a full feature, certain elements in the film such as the personal stories of the characters, drama that intensifies due to fractions between the characters and occasional comic innuendos that are accomplished by the ridicule of the characters' weaknesses - all situate *Narok* in a broader definition of films that was determined by Galloway, and that is 'dark cinema': a meta-genre that embraces the macabre and disturbing, shocking and profane, dire and devastating extremes of the contemporary films. Dark cinema encompasses the horror genre but extends to exploitation film, black comedy etc. (Galloway, 2006, 9).¹⁹¹ The journey which the audience embark upon along with the characters fulfils Hallisey and Hansen (1996) three aspects as discussed in the first chapter: Prefiguration - the purgatory element which was added to the narrative via the characters 'in-between' status has an effect in enlarging the viewers knowledge of past and present, precepts broken and

¹⁹⁰ <http://sahamongkolfilm.com/saha-movie/hell-movie-2548/>

¹⁹¹ Galloway in his work, discusses the Japanese film *Jigoku- hell* (Galloway, 2006).

consequences. Configuration by getting to know the characters they become relatable, thus a sense of opaqueness as to their moral persona is developed. Lastly, refiguration as the plot gets resolved so does the transformative experience of the viewers who learned the consequences of *kamma* and breaking the precepts through the characters' journey.

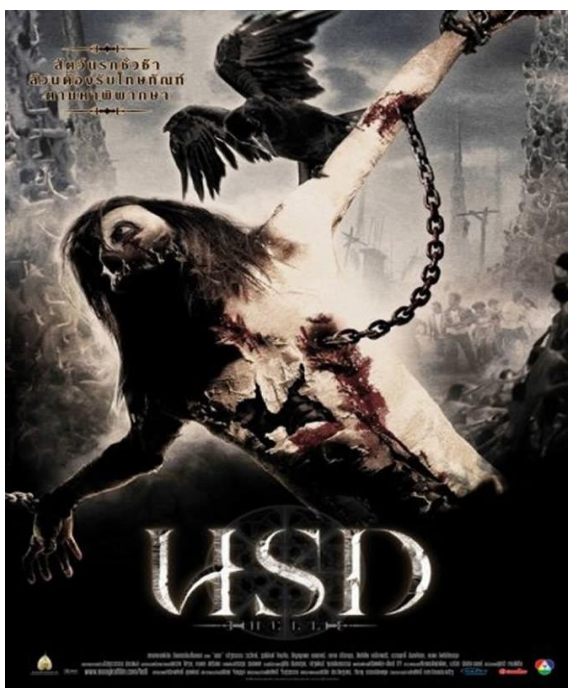


Figure 34. The cover of Narok DVD Saha Monkul Film Production, 2005

The parks utilise this evolution of the hellish narratives, allowing the visitors not only to witness the hells but also to take part in a sensory experience of these dreadful realms, making the visit into an interactive and entertaining endeavour.¹⁹² Since the hellish themes are often depicted in varied media, this experience is based on shared knowledge, bringing about familiar concepts that are associated with the hells. In addition, the imagery, in its didactic context prompts the call for action, which is suggested by the parks' creators, and is the adherence to the five precepts, as will now be discussed.

¹⁹² As discussed in chapter one, when talking about the choice to use the term 'parks'.

3.6 The Five Precepts as a Manual for Avoiding Hell

The advocacy of the five precepts as it unfolds in the hell sections, materialises as a solution to both issues that were introduced in the previous chapter discussing Yama's realm: individual salvation, where the five precepts act as a suggested method to induce positive *kamma* on an individual level, and the decline of the *sāsana*, an idea for which the five precepts act as an apparatus, as they engage with current social issues of decline within Thai society, and their adherence is accentuated as a method to elevate positive communal conduct.

Let us begin with individual salvation. As demonstrated above, the parks align the hells with the five precepts. The representation of the hells, therefore, serves as a reinforcement to this notion by use of vivid depictions that illustrate the negative outcome of the precepts' violation in ways of *baap* and retribution. Thus, the hell imagery reminds the visitors that keeping the precepts can be used as a formula to prevent the grim fate of birth in the hell realms. The predominance of the precepts resonates throughout the temple visit on many levels. Participants who take part in the different activities that are held at the temple, such as merit making ceremonies, meditation retreats, divination and renting amulets, are instructed to undertake the precepts. These activities are included in a positive list of the *puññakiriyāvattu* which are the ten bases of meritorious actions and include: *dāna* – giving, *sīla* – morality, *bhāvanā* – mental development, *apacāyana* – reverence, *veyyāvacca* – rendering services, *pattidāna* – merit transference, *pattānumodanā* – rejoicing in other's merit, *dhammassavana* – listening to the doctrine, *dhammadesanā* – teaching the doctrine, *diṭṭhujukamma* – forming correct views.¹⁹³

Interim, the importance of keeping the precepts is accentuated now and again in *dhamma* talks and temple publications. Insofar, the predominance of the precepts resonates beyond the parks and onto the temples' grounds, allowing the visitors to first see the outcome of violation of the precepts, and then encourage them to take the precepts upon themselves. This idea of individual salvation also comes about when looking at the Thai term for taking upon the precepts: *raksa sin*, literally meaning taking care of the precepts. This invokes the notion that the precepts are to be taken care of, in order to tend to one's own *kamma*, rather than being obeyed as if it was a rigorous law. Hence, taking upon the precepts is an individual decision, and the opportunity to take the precepts as advised by the park creators is given on the temple grounds, is ultimately a personal commitment which is meant for one own's optimisation of *kamma*.

¹⁹³ Payutto 10, 89-90.

Within the frame work of the individual aspect of the five precepts as avoidance of birth in the hells, this method also touches upon the idea of the hells as not necessarily a physical place but also a state of mind. A well-known Thai proverb brings about the notion of the existence of hell as an on-earth condition, which is an integral part of being a human. The proverb ‘*sawan yoo nai ok narok yoo nai jai*’, meaning: heaven is in the chest, hell is in the heart, alludes to the idea that happiness and suffering exist within the mind, and suffering in this current earthly life equates to dwelling in hell. This proverb has a double layered meaning. First, hell is perceived as a state of mind, which corresponds with the term *jai ron*, literally - hot heart, and refers to recklessness or hot temper, which can amount to the heat of the fiery hells. In this sense, this proverb resonates with Milton who beautifully wrote: “A mind not to be changed by a place or time. The mind is its own place, and in itself can make heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.”¹⁹⁴ Secondly, the proverb describes a sort of pre-experience of what is to come upon birth in the hell realm, that is the actions that lead to suffering in this life, is but a taste of suffering that awaits the sinner once reborn in hell.

To illustrate the prevalence of this proverb, I would like to relate to a song by M.J Wassan, which is named after the proverb, namely *narok yu nai jai* – hell is in the heart. The storyline in the video clip tells of a man and a woman who cheat on their partners, who then catch them in the act, which is connected to the fifth precept of adultery. The lyrics say: “heat of fire burns my heart causing suffering, same as falling to hell, burn in *avīci*... the *baap* burns the heart”. This song illustrates the idea that the proverb conveys, that is that suffering is similar to existence in the hells, but it is still an “on earth” human experience. However, as explained by a *dhamma* teacher named Phra (monk) Maha Som Chai Thanavuddho, this notion, although some tend to interpret it as a state that occurs in this life time, can be seen as a seed, for wrong behaviour that causes suffering, but ultimately leads to birth in the actual hells.¹⁹⁵ In this sense Phra Maha Som Chai points to the second layer of the proverb as noted above, suffering at present, is like a taste of what is to come.

These two distinct interpretations of this proverb, came about while I was conducting interviews, clearly correlating with personal beliefs in the actual existence of the hell realms. I will now present two points of view as expressed by two of my informants.

First is Bird, an army sergeant from Chiang Mai, who considers Buddhism to be his religion, and visits temples quite often, but also asserts a scientific and realistic approach which he relates

¹⁹⁴ Paradise lost 1, 221-270.

¹⁹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peHSyfdA2m0&feature=youtu.be>

to his responsibilities in the army service. This is an approach which is characterised by western educated and orientated adherence to modern day science, which takes religious tales with a grain of salt while considering their legendary properties, and applying a more ‘rational approach’ to the questions posed.

In a conversation we had he maintained a strong belief that hell is an on-earth construct which comes to be in this life and not in another realm, and that the probability of the existence of the actual hells is very low. “Our hell” he said “is when we act wrongly and we then feel unhappy. When seeing hell images at temples the sensation of fear emerges, but it stems from unpleasant thoughts rather than belief in the actual existence of hell. Hell is when we suffer, heaven is when we feel happiness, and it all happens on earth. I have never seen proof that these realms exist, therefore, my belief is that the realms are within us”.¹⁹⁶

An opposing opinion was explained to me by Pern, an art teacher from Lampang who attends Wat Santi Nikhom, and was ordained as a nun in the past. She told me that she first heard this proverb when she was a child, in a religious Sunday school she attended at the local temple in Phayao where she grew up. As the concept of hell in the heart was taught within a religious environment along with imagery of the hells, for her it was always related to the existence of the real hells. It was also the first time she learned how to become aware of her own thoughts. “Hell exists, I believe that it does, but once you are still living on this earth, if you experience pain or sadness, it creates the feeling of descending to hell. This is the results of our own thoughts, if one becomes aware of his thoughts then one can avoid descending to hell in this life and the next.”¹⁹⁷

To this end, Phra Sonetavy Invasaro, a monk who resides in Wat Pa Lad in Chiang Mai, told me that meditation can act as an enhancing tool to experience the state of hell as an on-earth condition. Originally from Laos, he grew up listening to the readings of Phra Malai at his local temple, which along with imagery from temple art formed an idea he had about the hells: “I trust that the hells do exist based on the teachings, but I also assert that it is important to practice meditation and experience them through the mind”.

Returning to the five precepts, Phra Sonetavy also shared with me his view as to cosmological parks and their representations of the *apāya*, saying that whilst his temple is relaxed and, and the focus is on cultivation of mindfulness, the parks can be effective for certain people who need this

¹⁹⁶ Bird, in conversation with the author, July 2016.

¹⁹⁷ Pern, in conversation with the author, June 2020.

shocking effect, as this might be the only way to reach them and encourage them to adhere to the precepts and pay attention to the teachings.¹⁹⁸

While these perceptions of the hells, both as an on-earth phenomenon and as an actual realm, relate to the individual, and the five precepts can act as a personal practice, the parks also demonstrate an expression of the five precepts on a larger scale, that is on a societal level. I will now look at the communal aspect of the five precepts in light of the decline of the *sāsana*, and its association with representations of the hells in the parks.

As demonstrated, various depictions in the park bring about social issues that stem from the grasp of modernity on daily life. These topics are illustrated in the parks via several unorthodox hell punishments, as well as utilisation of well-known Buddhist anecdotes that also point out current issues.

Unorthodox hell punishments are scenes in the parks that are not included in the canonical sources. As mentioned above, both in Wat Pa Lak Roi and in Wat Mae Keat Noi, there is a hell scene in which students are being punished by hanging on hooks from a rod. While in Pa Lak Roi the punishment is said to be due to youngsters' drug use, in Mae Keat Noi there are several reasons noted and which include behavioural issues, and teenage pregnancy. As discussed earlier, the parks are often visited by organised school trips. This kind of representations seem to be addressing young teens, pointing out the negative consequences of unwholesome behaviour. The issues alluded in the parks' representations, reflect current social problems. In this way, teen pregnancies might lead in some cases to illegal abortions. The latter are problematic in terms of their legality in Thailand, as well as from a standpoint of Buddhist ethics. According to the Thai law, Article 305 of Thai Penal Code states that abortion is illegal (excluding necessary cases where the pregnancy might endanger the health of the mother, or if it was caused as a result of sexual offenses such as rape and incest). A defining reason for the issuing of this law is religious, according to the Buddhist teachings, a human life begins at the instant of conception: when the egg, the sperm and the *winyan* emerge. This is illustrated in the *paṭisandhi* - a *kamma* resultant type of consciousness and arises at the moment of conception, i.e with the forming of a new life in the mother womb,¹⁹⁹ discussed earlier. Thus, the fetus being understood as a fully living being, influenced a clear moral stand regarding abortion. Therefore, the first precept of the five precepts 'refrain from killing' applies (Florida,1999:16). Despite this, the number of unwanted pregnancies

¹⁹⁸ Phra Sonetavy Invasaro, in conversation with the author, September 2021.

¹⁹⁹ BD.153.

has risen tremendously, and many clinics have started to perform illegal abortions (Naravage and Sakulbumrungsil, 2008).

Another issue that is directly addressed in the depictions of the punished students, specifically in Wat Pa Lak Roi, is that of drug abuse. While in terms of the precepts this is considered a violation of the fifth precept, drug abuse is indeed a visible problem within Thai society.²⁰⁰ This is manifested especially in the extensive abuse of amphetamine type stimulants, specifically a drug that is called *yabaa*, the “crazy drug”, also depicted in the park.²⁰¹ According to the world rankings on amphetamine use, as published in a drug use survey that was conducted by the United Nations office for the matters of drugs and crime, it is the most prevalent drug in Thailand.²⁰²

The idea of being good students and good children is perpetuated via different educational platforms, incorporating the advocacy of the five precepts. In a Buddhist studies text book aimed at elementary school students, the precepts are listed, and adjoined to them are the benefits deriving from their adherence, as follows (corresponding with the precepts): 1. so that every life is safe 2. to prevent the destruction of ownership of each other’s property 3. to build good relationships 4. to prevent the damage to oneself and others’ interests 5. to prevent the lack of sensibility (2004). The five precepts as a formula to be a ‘good child’ is further enhanced in a nursery rhyme saying that “good children should act this way; it is easy to do... good children should not break the five precepts”.

Also relating to the five precepts, are many representations of the punishments inflicted as a result of alcohol consumption. As noted earlier, the cauldrons have become associated with this sin. This is in addition to the scriptural punishment which is force feeding with boiling copper. Alcohol abuse is an apparent social problem in Thailand. The average amount of pure alcohol consumed in Thailand by each adult is 6.21 litres of alcohol per capita.²⁰³ According to Swartzentruber, in various surveys published online, Thailand is ranked fourth-highest in the world for consumption of alcohol.²⁰⁴ As noted in the Pa Lak Roi booklet, drinking alcohol also affects immediate family members, and as demonstrated by the character of uncle Tao in the film *Narok* it is associated with domestic violence. The latter is discussed by Panitchpakdi, relating to the predominant Thai - Buddhist ideology, according to which a ‘good’ woman should avoid divorce

²⁰⁰ The statistics of alcohol, drugs and HIV seem to indicate that the strategies of shock are not really working and. Perhaps, a more compassionate approach, especially towards youngsters and women might be more fruitful.

²⁰¹ See fig.23.

²⁰² <https://www.unodc.org/>

²⁰³ Who report http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/msb_gsr_2014_2.pdf?ua=1

²⁰⁴ <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/WHO-report-reveals-Thailand-is-reeling-under-a-liq-30236548.html>

at all cost. This in turn keeps many abused women from seeking separation although they suffer from domestic violence (2007).

Another social problem that is associated with breaking the third precepts and is introduced via the thorn tree representation at Wat Pa Lak Roi, is that of HIV-AIDS. Of Thailand's population which currently stand on nearly 70 million, an estimated 470,000 people were living with HIV and 14,000 people died of AIDS related illnesses in 2019. After East and Southern Africa, Asia is the third region with the largest number of people living with HIV, with Thailand home to a large proportion of the region's HIV positive people.²⁰⁵ Pointing to a connection to Buddhism, is a research conducted by Klunklin and Greenwood, who argue that the current spread of HIV/AIDS in Thailand is primarily a function of the inferior status of women, which, in turn, is a function of Buddhism and Thai cultural beliefs (2006). This idea may resonate with the misogynistic air that surrounds the hells which inflict punishment for the breakage of the third precept, aimed at women adulteress and the men who engage with them. Considering the above, the referencing to AIDS in Wat Pa Lak Roi alludes to that keeping the third precept not only will prevent birth in hell, but it can also prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

As mentioned, the parks also employ canonical stories to convey current societal issues. In that way, Devadatta who is the sinner par-excellence, and whose story originates in the Pāli canon, acts as a reflection of a current issue that seems to emerge more and more in Thai society, and that is the issue of 'misbehaved' monks. Amongst many recent stories that reached the headlines and deal with wrong conduct of monks, one story is that of Wirapol Sukphol, formerly known as Lunag Phu Nen Kham, who was disrobed and excommunicated from the *saṅgha* for inappropriate conduct, as he engaged in sexual activities, bragged about having supernatural powers, and indulged in an extravagant lifestyle. In 2018 He was found guilty of fraud, money Laundering and soliciting money for temple renovations which he spent on cars and luxury goods. He was also persecuted for sexually abusing an underage girl which he impregnated.²⁰⁶ The story of Sukphol is one of many cases of corruption amongst Thai monks, an issue which is of a growing concern within Thai society. This issue was addressed by the artist Anupong Chantorn whose painting Rival (2017) depicts two monks who transformed into hell beings with crow beaks while still wearing their monks' robes (see fig.35). To this end it is interesting to note a conversation Johnson describes having with one of the monks in the Thai temple where he created a mural with the

²⁰⁵ <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/asia-pacific/thailand>

²⁰⁶ <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/society/1398490>

depictions of the hells. The monk asked to be included in the mural climbing the thorn tree, and said “they say that if you visit hell, you will definitely see Buddhist monks there. Not everyone is perfect” (2018:89-90).

The representation of Devadatta at Mae Keat Noi, which is known to the spectator from its appearance within Buddhist anecdotes and popular culture, brings about the duty of the *sangha* and the commitment monks and nuns have towards lay followers, as it reminds the visitors that the monks too can be prosecuted if engaging in negative behaviour.

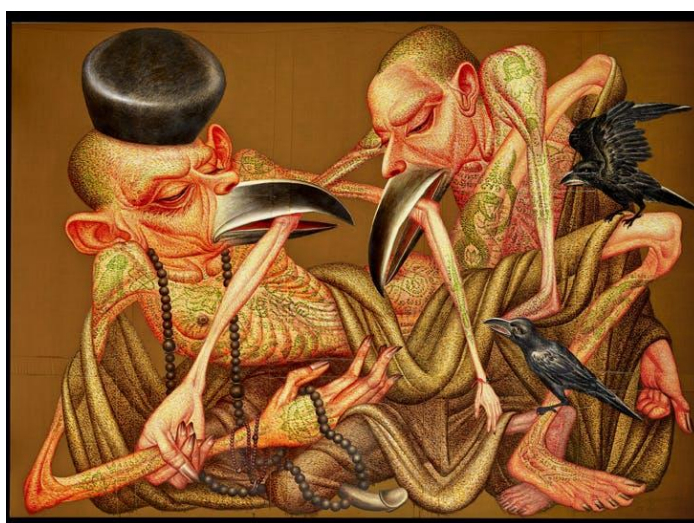


Figure 35. Rival by Anupong Chantorn (2017)²⁰⁷

Another aspect that comes about via Devadatta’s story is a political one. The term *nak phean din*, which became widely used beginning the cold war period when it appeared as an anti-communist propaganda, is derived from Devadatta’s case.²⁰⁸ Literally translating as heavy on the earth, the term was appropriated to refer to alleged ‘enemies of the state’ and took the meaning of ‘scum of the earth’. Explained by Walker in relation to the current political state “*Phra Tewatat* is the stereotypical villain who... ‘betrays parents, nation, religion or king’. It is not hard to see who is being cast as *Phra Tewatat* in the current political climate. And his followers, of course, are the scum of the earth. The public were first worried, then scared off by the polarizing politics and violence. They gradually turned away from both confronting forces. This deprived the left wing of popular support, a vital element for the radical student movement. Meanwhile military

²⁰⁷ <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/art-diary/ghosts-and-hells-the-underworld-in-asian-art/>

²⁰⁸ For more see Harrison 2010.

propaganda had dehumanized the radical students, labelling them ‘scum of the earth’ (*nak phaen din*), the enemy of the Nation, Religion and the Monarchy” (2007).²⁰⁹

Considering the examples above, along with Pa Lak Roi’s wording which says: “making Thai society better”, it is apparent that the five precepts are incorporated as a formula for both individual restoration of *kamma*, as well as guidelines that can be acted upon on a societal level, promoting better conduct with others and ultimately a harmonious community. The parks, in turn, provide a platform for taking the five precepts as I will now demonstrate.

3.6.1 The Incorporation of The Five Precepts into Temple Activities

The invocation for taking the precepts (*aratanasin*) is incorporated into elemental Buddhist rites at the temple. Terwiel maintained that whenever a chapter of monks and a group of laymen assemble for a religious service, the five precepts can be taken, while the order of the events at the commencement of the service seldom varies (1976: 333). In such a way, and as mentioned throughout this chapter, the temples affiliated to the parks provide opportunities for the visitors to take the precepts, that are incorporated into the variety of ceremonies and temple activities. This manifests an occasion for individual commitment.

At the same time, many of the services are performed in a communal setting, thus, taking upon the precepts transforms into a collective pledge. This was illustrated in *Wan Ploy Phi* – the day of release of the ghost celebrations, carried out by Wat Mae Keat Noi. On that day, a communal commitment to take the five precepts was made publicly by the people of Mae Kaet village. Beyond the improvement of the community moral stance, this act was also performed as a mean of generation of merit, an aspect that will be discussed in chapter four.

Taking the five precepts then, is made available in different settings and occasions in the parks, an activity which complement the teachings communicated via the hellish representations.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated the way in which the journey of the visitor in the cosmological park continues, embarking upon the gory hells where horrific punishments are afflicted on wrong doers.

²⁰⁹ Saying that, the association that one might make between the wicked monk and *nak phean din*, is an example for the way in which this imagery in the parks might bring about certain issues, but does not assume the park creators’ political intentions in this case if at all, specifically in light of the anti-corruption statements in Wat Mae Keat Noi that I discussed earlier. and that presumably can be perceived to be situated on the other side of the political coin.

Spatially, all the parks included in this chapter situated the hellish imagery in a chaotic manner, and yet at the same time bestowed a structure to this chaos by applying the five precepts onto the depictions, in way of *baap* and retribution while the *baap*'s are characterised by the type of precept that was to be broken in order to allow their committing.

As a response to the issues that surfaced via Yama's land imagery the reverberation of the five precepts in the parks acts as a solution, a manual that can be applied in one's moral life in order to prevent a birth in these hells.

Whether by a direct application of hells and precepts as was executed in Wat Po Chai Sri, or structural display as in Wat Pa Lak Roi and Wat Santi Nikhom, the premeditated linkage that the park creators emphasise, between the hells and the precepts, is an explicit expression of the emphasis that exists in the Thai Theravādin worldview on the precepts as a core practice, which is designed to allow the practitioner to navigate the intricate world of *kamma* by manifesting good intention through a set of clear etiquette.

While the hellish depictions replicate so called 'classic' hell scenes known to us from varied sources, amongst which the famous thorn trees and boiling cauldrons, the parks also introduce displays of modern-day issues, which are of concern within the social Thai sphere. In this way issues such as drug abuse and teenage pregnancies are linked to the hells, and at the same time included in the list of misdeeds that observation of the five precepts can prevent from materialising.

The five precepts are included in most Thai Buddhist practices, from merit making ceremonies to lay commitment when exiting a meditation retreat, or in *dhamma* talks and Buddhist classes for children. Facilitated by the *sangha* and offered to commit to on temple grounds after the visit to the park, their presence in the parks gives a validation of sort to their fundamental part of Thai Buddhism and the values which it promotes. It also points to the role of the *sangha* which will be further explored in the next chapter, as a facilitating agency.

The hell sections make use of the dramatics of gruesomeness, to create an entertaining escapade which plays on the Thai fascination with horror, a fascination that as discussed in this chapter is linked to Buddhist practices of meditation of death and a thriving horror scene within Thai popular culture.

Echoed in murals, films and altered states of consciousness accounts, the parks depictions of the hells, which are also the most popular amongst visitors, illustrate an interlink conceptions of hells on their features, and demonstrate the fluidity of their existence as it ranges between on earth emotional hell and below the earth physical hell.

As the tortures of the hell denizens as depicted in this chapter via the parks representations, bring about methods of *kamma* optimisation, so do the creatures that the next chapter will explore, another type of *apāya* dwellers, the ghosts.

4. Ghostly Encounters: *Pret* and *Phi* Representations

4.1 The Realm of Ghosts

As we continue to explore the parks' representations of the abodes of suffering, this chapter will consider depictions of the third lowest realm, the *peta loka*, the realm of the hungry ghosts. In this realm, agonized beings who lead futile lives wonder aimlessly, in search for some sort of relief from their unceasing suffering.²¹⁰ The ghostly realm is populated by different types of *peta*, or *pret* in Thai, which differ in physical appearance and characteristics, but share the same grim faith, leading futile lives of constant unattainable craving, which is mainly expressed by ceaseless hunger and thirst. They are usually ghastly beings that take a variety of monstrous forms with distorted features. Some are extremely tall, with giant hands, hollowed eyes and dangling tongues, others have beautiful appearance but revolting odour, and some are hybrid creatures, with human bodies and animal heads. The *pret* feed on disgusting substances such as feces and sediments, and at times even their own flesh and blood. The majority of them cry loudly in anguish, and all are in a state of constant search to end their suffering.

The literal translation of the Pāli term *peta* is gone past, or departed.²¹¹ The notion of *pret* as a departed entity, points to their affiliation to the human realm, an idea which will be discussed in relation to the topography of the ghost realm.

While in the Pāli canon the *peta* are the sole beings that occupy the ghost realm, these beings were assumed localisation in Thailand, in way of assimilation into a wider pantheon of Thai ghosts, the *phi*. This can be noticed etymologically as at times the *pret* are called *phi pret*, categorising them as part of the broader ghosts' milieu. The *Phi* are mostly considered to be evil dark entities, who were born into this condition due to a violent death, bound by attachment²¹². Hence, they appear in the human world in search for revenge. Narratives revolving *phi* were passed down by numerous retellings and via myriad of mediums. Some of the *phi*'s origin stories are rooted in actual historic events, which add gravity to their stronghold in the Thai discourse. While narrative revolving the *phi* are often based on local beliefs and folklore, rather than liturgy, the

²¹⁰ This description was inspired by the varied sources as presented below including the Trp, the Pv as well as interviews and Thai accounts in varied mediums surveyed here.

²¹¹ PTSD, pp.472

²¹² Scholarly attention has been given to specifically female ghosts or feminine evil entities. One study by Creed explores the monstrous feminine, according to which special attention is paid to their gender in the construction of their monstrosity (Creed, 1993: 2).

amalgamation of *phi* and *pret* is apparent, and is also expressed in the parks, as I will now demonstrate.

4.2 Ghostly Representations in The Parks

I will now look at representations of *pret* and *phi* in three parks: Wat Pai Rong Wua, Wat Wang Saen Suk and Wat Mae Keat Noi. I will also explore an additional depiction in Wat Pa Lak Roi that sheds light on the role of ghosts in the parks.

4.2.1 Wat Pai Rong Wua

Wat Pai Rong Wua situates the *pret* under the rubric of the lower realms so that the *pret* imagery is integrated into the hell section of the park. As mentioned earlier, Pai Rong Wua, was the first park ever to be built, and consequently it was the first to present an iconic pair of large sized male and female *pret* (*peta* and *peti*) which became an identifiable feature that is associated with cosmological parks. The pair are portrayed naked with their genitals graphically displayed, they are white and slender and have very basic facial features. They both hold their hands in a *wai* position, which is associated with religious ritual and reverence, thus portraying them as respectful to the *dhamma*, a feature that some of the *pret* indeed share, as suggested by the *Traiphum*.²¹³ Slightly apart from one another, the images are situated at the centre of the hell section in the park and tower above its grounds, so they can be seen from the road when approaching the area.



Figure 36. Male *pret*, Wat Pai Rong Wua, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2013

²¹³ Noting one group of *pret* is said to be “reborn a result of the three causes also knows the dhamma...” (TrpR:96). This idea is also evident when considering that *pret* are said to come to the temple to ask for merit from temple goers, as will be discussed later.

Wat Pai Rong Wua probably holds the largest number of *pret* depictions. The main reason might be that it is the biggest park so there was space for erection of many *pret* depictions. They are scattered all over the hell section of the park, portraying various modes of suffering. The abundance of images which surrounds the visitor creates an uncomfortable feeling of loss and chaos. The claustrophobic field of *pret* embodies a spatial dimension, generating a sense that the ghosts are all around us. While their bodily posture is cast in white cement, which at times is stained with red paint that represents blood, their facial features are plain and their background information is not provided, thus making them anonymous, wondering the realms helplessly in a Beckettian disarray (see fig.37), an effect that was achieved to a large extent by their large number.



Figure 37. Nameless *pret*, Wat Pai Rong Wua, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2016

While many *pret* are anonymous, some images of *pret* in the park are personified, with plaques detailing their names, or the actions that caused birth into the realms of woe introduce them to the visitors. One such *pret* is the lying *pret*, *pret non*. Its description can be found in the *Traiphum*

“This suffering ghosts do not have a bit of strength, so they just lie there on their backs. While they are lying it seems to them that they hear someone calling to them ‘come, eat some rice and drink some water’. They try to get up to go there, but instead they collapse all over the place” (TrpR:97).

Another *pret* is seen gnawed by a large vulture, this *pret* too can be found in the *Traiphum*. It is a unique breed as it spends its day time in the ghost realm, being chased and killed by large

animals. At night, however, it transforms into a *devata*, a heavenly being.²¹⁴ In its human life this *pret* was a hunter who hunted at day but kept the precepts at night (TrpR:101).

The above-described imagery which is inspired by the *Traiphum* correspond with other images in the park, which can also be referenced in the text. Field resources show that one of the residing monks at Wat Pai Rong Wua, was listing all the hells as they are specifically described in the *Traipum*, confirming the source.²¹⁵

The state of some *pret* images in the park is explained by their behaviour in their previous human life, which brought them to be born into this state. It is inscribed on their backs for the visitors to read. These Images act as cautionary examples, that ultimately are meant to stimulate one's reflection on one's conduct. These *pret* include: selfish *pret* - *pret hen katua*, and a *pret* who did not respect his parents- *pret mai khao rop bidamanda*. The latter, disrespect towards one's parents, has been implemented in a myriad of *pret* narratives, and is often considered to be a catalyst for a birth in the realm of ghosts as a *pret*.

As mentioned in chapter one, Benedict Anderson, in his account of Wat Pai Rong Wua, has created along with his colleague Mukhom Wongthes, a comprehensive list of the *pret* that include inscriptions of the behaviour that brought them to be, dividing them into five groups, i.e.: wives and husbands, parents and children, offences against monks, offences against animals and miscellaneous bad behaviour (2012:12-20). This chapter demonstrates the way in which the term *pret* is being used to describe hell denizens as well as ghosts. Since the wide use of the term makes it somewhat fluid, some *pret* are afflicted with punishments by the *yomaban*, but these are indeed hell inhabitants which are referred to as *pret*. In addition, and as will be demonstrated later, a study of the ghost realm's topography points to the variety of types of *pret* which inhabit not only the human realm, but also the hell realm and a *pret* specific area at the edge of the *himmaman* forest. Therefore, the assumption that the *pret* are a part of the human world is not entirely correct, and the inclusion of hell beings who are referred to as *pret* in the list composed by Anderson and Wongthes overlooks the distinction between the depicted characters. Anderson account is valuable but does not relate to the textual background which is indispensable to the contextualisation of the figures of *pret* in the park and the cosmological narratives within the cultural arena.

Let us return to the assimilation between ghosts and human states of existence, that was expressed in the images discussed above I way of actions that led to birth as a *pret*. This idea is

²¹⁴ These types of *pret* who live a double existence are often depicted in the *Petavatthu*, and are said to be the kind of ghosts who are receptive to merit, the *mahithika*, as will discussed in page 157.

²¹⁵ Phra Suchat Thamationo, in conversation with author, September 2016.

further enhanced in the park's memorabilia. The shop located next to the temple complex sells books, digital recordings of *dhamma* talks and Buddhist stories, as well as a variety of souvenirs that convey the Buddhist teachings with an emphasis on cosmology. One such product comes in the form of a poster, or a printed T-shirt, listing six types of ghosts, *phi*, each personifying a type of human state as follows: a ghost that likes to drink alcohol regularly, a ghost that likes to go out and does not care about the family, to be entertained at bars and clubs, a ghost that associates with the wrong crowd, a ghost that likes to gamble, and a ghost that is lazy. All these notions point to human states which are experienced on earth but ultimately lead to a rebirth as a *pret*.²¹⁶

One representation located centrally within the hell section of the park, is that of the *Phra Malai* scene in which he is surrounded by kneeling *pret*, who are asking for his assistance. Here Phra Malai is seen standing (rather than seated, as in other parks that will be discussed shortly). This scene appears in this form or another in all the parks that are discussed in this chapter. The narrative behind this image, perpetuates the importance of merit performed by relatives to their deceased ancestors, as well as the notion that salvation may be dependent on inter-realm relationship operated by those who carry spiritual potency. In addition to the revered *thera* Malai, there is an area which is dedicated to Thai venerated monks, who achieved *arahantship*, or as referred to by Keyes (1981) and Tambiah (1984) a sainthood status, and by Jackson as *Saksit* personalities (1999).²¹⁷ They too are seen amongst kneeling *pret*, though in a seating position. The inclusion of these personalities in the park's hellish imagery legitimises the conception of *arahantship*, according to which those *arahants* cultivate potency which enables them to travel the realms. At the same time, it also employs a process of localisation of cosmological narratives by integrating the lineages of Thai saints to be included in the cosmic scheme. This also coincide with the perception discussed in chapter two, according to which *arahantship* is achievable only by monks, inasmuch as highly vigorous ones. To this end it is important to note that there is no scriptural basis for this perception as nuns, laymen and laywomen too can achieve *arahantship*. The perception as described in chapter two related to a general conception that was gathered throughout my research.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ While the shop is very active, thus product sales must be good, I do not have data as to the sales of these specific ghosts' T-shirts and posters. I can say however, that the T-shirts come in all sizes so that they are aimed at both adults and children.

²¹⁷ As Jackson notes *Saksit* personalities who may become objects of devotional worship are part of Thai popular religiosity, see chapter one.

²¹⁸ See page 82.



Figure 38. Thai *arahants* seated amongst *pret*, Wat Pai Rong Wua, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2013

4.2.2 Wat Saen Suk

In the same way as the other parks, Wat Wang Saen Suk representations of *pret* can be found around the hell area, scattered amongst the hell scenes. The most distinctive images in the park, due to their tall figures, are two large images of *pret*- a male and a female (*peta* and *peti*) which are depicted in accordance with prevalent and perhaps generalised features that are associated with the *pret*.²¹⁹ Wang Saen Suk pair of *pret* rise above the park and came to be its most well-known feature. Located at the entrance to the hell area. The two are lanky and bony with swollen bellis, and tongues dangling from their mouths. Their hands and feet are extremely large with sharp nails that prolong them. Their dimensions are measured to imitate their actual size which, according to the *Traiphum*, is the size of a palm tree (TrpR:99). A sign situated between them suggests that upon encountering a *pret*, one should share merit and *mettā* in order to assist it in its quest for transmigration into a better birth. This sign appears as a suggestion by the parks creators and is linked to the idea that *pret* should be handled with compassion, and that upon meeting one, *mettā* should be shared. It also relates to dedicated merit, transferred via the *sangha* who acts as an agency, as will be discussed shortly. The pair of *pret* are surrounded by images of hell beings which are hybrid creatures with animal heads and human bodies, all with signs telling the visitors what deeds brought them to be. These generally include offences towards animals namely hunting,

²¹⁹ “The *pret* are evil ghosts of many kinds. One of which is very tall, as a sugar palm tree, with long hair, long neck, a mouth as tiny as a needle and hands as large as palm tree leaves. It eats only blood and mire and is likely to cry out loudly at night.” (<https://dictionary.sanook.com/search/dict-th-th-royal-institute/๓๑๕๓>)

fishing or practicing butchery as well as general misdemeanours. The latter are included in the hellish scene and appear in Phra Malai's famous scene, discussed below.



Figure 39. Pair of *pret*, Wat Saen Suk, Ronit Wang, JPEG, 2016

When passing the large pair of ghosts, one enters the hell section of the park, where images of *pret* appear scattered between the hellish scenes, incorporated into the landscape. The scenes are arranged in sections, which the visitor is lead trough by woven paths.

One of the scenes in the park depicts the headless ghost, *pret hua duan*, a *pret* with no head, but instead its abdomen consists of its facial features. It is seen holding a spear, which according to the *Traiphumi Lok Winijochoyokatha* was given to it by Yama, in order to keep the lurking crows that tend to prey on it away (PLW:196). This *pret* can be detected in *Phra Malai* narratives, as will be demonstrated subsequently.

As noted, an additional theme that is well recognised from the story of *Phra Malai* appears in this park too, and can be found at the edge of the hell section. In it, a seated image of the revered *thera* is seen as he is surrounded by hell denizens who kneel before him, asking for his help. This scene too prompts the importance of merit.

An opportunity to dedicate merit is presented to the visitors immediately thereafter. towards the exit from the hell section, the dangling tongues of two grotesque images of *pret*, became a

merit point, where visitors leave coins. Thus, the visit to the *apāya* area begins with a suggestion to share merit with *pret*, and ends with the opportunity of performing an act of merit instantaneously.

4.2.3 Wat Mae Kaet Noi

In a similar fashion to the other parks discussed above, the depictions of ghosts in Wat Mae Keat Noi are too situated amongst the hellish representations in the hell section of the park. The parks display numerous types of *pret*, including a pair of tall male and female *pret*, situated separately at opposite edges of the hell area. This park is an interesting case as the Thai *phi* occupy a significant part in it. Here, I will pay attention specifically to *phi* representations, looking at Thai and northern Thai ghosts, and exploring the way in which the Thai *phi* are instrumental in the localisation of the cosmos as they are integrated into the scenes of the *apāya*.

Two illustrious Thai *phi* that are known nationally, having been the subject of numerous retellings and adaptations are depicted in the park. As their stories are reuttered via myriad mediums, Wat Mae Kaet Noi too acts as an additional platform through which their tales are told. These ghosts are the ghosts of *Phi Krasue and Mae Nak Phra Khanong*.

Phi Krasue is a nocturnal female ghost which is portrayed with exposed viscera dangling below her head. She flies around during the night and can be recognized by the glare of her viscera. During the day a *krasue* appears as an ordinary person, but at night her body changes into the *krasue* form, as the head detaches itself from the body and floats around, going on its nocturnal journey in search of food. *Phi Krasue* likes to feed on excrement, blood, raw flesh and in the best-case scenario fresh placenta or even the fetus. Payu lists features of the *krasue* that can assist in its identification while it is in its human form. These include: avoids looking into people's eyes, looking sleep deprived and stays secluded. Payu further notes, the condition of becoming a *krasue* can be inherited (maternally) or inflicted as a result of consumption of the same food or drink as the *krasue* (2009:61-64). Rajadhon identifies the *krasue* within a group of evil spirits, and likens it, in its human form to “an old ugly woman like the European witches” (1954:158). Albeit, by surveying popular depictions of the *krasue* it appears that while earlier depictions adhere to Rajadhon's description, recent appearances portray the *krasue* as attractive young women. Baumann further asserts this, as he notes (in relation to cinematic appearances) that the *krasue* can appear as an old ugly woman, a beautiful young maiden or an ordinary village girl (2014:184). This is an interesting shift, which comes to convey the deceptiveness of the *Krasue*, as she not

only appears harmless, she is also attractive. This also corresponds with the below analysis of the film *Inhuman Kiss*, where the character of the *Krasue* is good hearted and likable.

In Wat Mae Keat Noi, the *krasue* is depicted as a young woman, but a ghoulish one at that due to its greenish skin hue. Its depiction is situated in a hut, which is located quite centrally within the hell area of the park. In it, an elaborate scene of a child birth is depicted, while next to it *Phi Krasue* is seen lurking, in an attempt to snatch the new born as her prey (see fig.40).



Figure 40. *Phi Krasue*, Wat Mae Kaet Noi, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2016

A significant depiction in Mae Keat Noi is dedicated to yet another well-known female ghost, *Mae Nak*. Nak's image is situated in a small cave like structure, where she is seen cradling a baby.²²⁰ A sign above the cave reads "the everlasting love of Mae Nak". In a different section of the park, there an additional representation of Mae Nak, in the form of a wooden gazebo with a bassinet that is watched over by a female mannequin, depicting Mae Nak and her baby.²²¹ Nak's story originates in 19th century Phra Khanong.²²² Nak is a ghost of a woman who refused to leave her husband after her death, that occurred due to complications at childbirth. Her husband Mak, who was away in the army during her passing and returned home to who he thought was his actual living wife, refused to believe the villagers who tried to warn him that she is actually a ghost. Nak

²²⁰ The baby of Mae Nak can also be linked to the baby spirits associated with Yama, discussed in chapter two, as it is too a ghost baby. In this way, the shrine of Mae Nak in Phra Khanong also has a spirit baby image symbolising the deceased son of Nak, who died at child birth, and who is being revered by the shrine visitors.

²²¹ This is quite a peculiar feature; it is not a built statue but rather an assembly of what seems to be old items that were put together symbolically and represent Mae Nak while accentuate her maternal nature. Another explanation raises the question: could this be absence of Mae Nak after she was transformed by Somdet to?

²²² At present, a district in Bangkok.

in return, attacked the villagers leaving them terrorised and terrified. One night, Mak realised that Nak was indeed a ghost, after seeing her dropping a banana leaf used for cooking through the cracks in the wooden floor, through which she the elongated her arm in a non-human manner and collected the leaf. After Mak's realisation, he called a renowned abbot, Somdet To, who had potent powers and was the only one who has managed to subdue Nak.²²³

The story of Mae Nak tells a tale of attached love, and of the dangers in surrendering to the idea of the self and to its desires. It is also an example of the transformative ability of the *sangha* to communicate with ghosts, thus demonstrating the agency of monks as mediators between ghosts and humans. Mae Nak's representations in the park therefor, contribute to the notion of the monks' role as a link between the realms. Furthermore, it alludes to monks' ability to achieve potency that enables the subduing of powerful ghosts, hence invoking a transformation in the ghosts' fate.

While *Phi Krasue* and *Mae Nak* are recognised throughout Thailand, the park also includes representations of regional ghosts. As mentioned earlier, Wat Mae Kaet Noi is located in the northern province of Chiang Mai. Formerly the Kingdom of Lanna, this area has a unique milieu of cultural heritage which also encompasses local ghosts.²²⁴ One of these northern ghosts is a revolting creature called *phi pong*. The *Phi pong* appears in a human form and searches for food mostly during stormy weather. It is possible to detect that it was in the area, if one finds the remains of dead frogs, as it likes to eat them (Payu, 2009:10). There are two images of *phi pong* in the park, a male and a female, each seen as they are consuming frogs.

The northern tradition is observed at the temple not only by inclusion of northern ghosts in its repertoire, but also by celebrating Lanna's *Wan Ploy Phi*, the first of which I was fortunate to attend.²²⁵ On the 15th September, 2016, Wat Mae Kaet Noi marked what the locals referred to as "Halloween". This was the premier of this event, beginning a tradition that the community expects to carry out annually. In accordance with the Lanna calendar, the 15th day of the 12th lunar month is Wan Ploy Phi – the day of the release of the ghosts.²²⁶ On this day the locals perform meritorious activities for their deceased relatives, as well as other ghosts, with the intention of generating potent merit which may assist all suffering ghosts to be released from their agonising state. The marking of this day at Wat Mae Kaet Noi was done with an elaborate parade, which was proceeded

²²³ For elaborate research on Mae Nak and Somdet To, see McDaniel 2011

²²⁴ For more on the Lanna kingdom, see Freeman, 2006.

²²⁵ Wan Ploy Phi is also considered to be an auspicious day in which the gates of hell open, as discussed chapter one.

²²⁶ Wan Ploy Phi share similarities with the Lao festival of Bun Khau Padad Din, and is celebrated at around the same dates. For an extensive ethnographic account see Ladwig 2012 and the southern tradition of *ching pret* which will be discussed in page 147. In addition, it is also parallel to a ghost festival celebrated in medieval China, see Teiser, 1988.

by a light and sound show. This large-scale event was produced by Phra Kru Wisaljariyakun in cooperation with volunteer members of the local community, as well as students and teachers from the local Maejo University. The event received support from the Thai tourism authority and was covered in both local and national news reports. It began with a parade of large floats depicting the cosmic realms, followed by groups of representatives from local authorities, the university, and participants who assisted with the production. After the parade the crowd gathered in an area that was designated as the performance venue, adjacent to the park. Before the show began, the people of Mae Kaet Noi took the five precepts upon themselves communally, as mentioned earlier. Then the moment all were waiting for arrived, a spectacular of light and sound, with actors who enacted narrated stories of the different realms of suffering. The greater part of the show was dedicated to ghosts, specifically ghosts from the northern milieu which included the above-mentioned *Phi Phong*. The humorous dramatization of the ghosts drew giggles and chuckles from the amused viewers and was definitely the highlight of the show. This ridicule of the ghosts, making them comical is quite common in their depictions. Many Thai TV shows and films are composed of mixed genres, combining comedy, horror, drama etc. Ainslie, in her research about contemporary Thai horror films, discusses one specific film - *Bupha Ratre*, noted that this fusion created tensions in the narrative, pulling the film between different stylistic interpretations, which non-Thai viewers were perplexed by, but that was favourably accepted by Thai audiences (2011:49). This tendency was also discussed earlier when noting Brereton's account of the *kammic* and comic in the Phra Malai chant (1995).²²⁷ In this way, the performance at Wat Mae Keat Noi dealt with moral topics, while at the same time transmitting them through entertaining means. This is yet another expression of the previously discussed reaction to the imagery in the parks which ranged between dread and ridicule.

The example of Wan Ploy Phi celebration at Wat Mae Kaet Noi illustrates a few points. First, the cooperation between the monastic agency and lay practitioners, between the park makers and users, who create traditions together woven into the communal texture, thus encouraging long lasting interdependent relationship. Another important aspect is the regional importance of the event, seeing that this festival specifically draws on northern tradition. Local elements were integrated via the imagery, to use of language - having some terminology drawn from the northern *kham mueang* dialect. This is by a shared communal effort to create a platform for merit dedicated to ghosts, including a communal commitment to the precepts, an act which is akin to the discussion

²²⁷ See foot note 78.

in the last chapter looking at the hells. This practice is similar to the *suvisi pinkam*, a five-night meritorious festival in Ceylonese Buddhism with dance and show described by Gombrich, who noted it had ‘major features in fund raising drives... were the commercial was obvious to all for the spectators of food entertainment and religious merit!’ (1971:150-151).

4.2.4 An additional case - Wat Pa Lak Roi

Wat Pa Lak Roi includes some noteworthy representations of ghosts, which are depicted via use of audio-visual installations, that can be operated with the insertion of a coin. One such installation is located in the midst of the hell section. In it, a depiction of a ghost band, whose members are dancing and singing skeletons, who sway to the sounds of traditional *Isan* (north-eastern) music upon the insertion of a coin.²²⁸ A large sign above the installation states: “The band: Ghost! Ghost! Ghost! Communicates with Mae Nak Phra Khanong and the residents of the backside area of the forest”. This sign relates to the ghost of Mae Nak, discussed above. At the same time, it also notes one of the dwelling places which is most recognized with *phi* and *pret*, the forest (specifically noted in the *petavatthu*, as will be discussed later). Curiously, the insertion of the coins is into boxes which are installed on the images of seated men. These men are portrayed as the vendors who handle the ‘ticketing’ to the show, in this way they act as a buffer between humans and ghosts, alluding to the inter-realm connection that these two life forms maintain, as suggested throughout this chapter.



Fig 41. Visitors enjoying the performance by the ghost band, Wat Pa Lak Roi, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 201

²²⁸ The choice of music is location based, as the park is in Nakhon Ratchasima, otherwise known as Korat and is one of the major cities of Isan; north-eastern Thailand.

An additional ghostly installation in Pa Lak Roi includes two coffins, located next to the hellish thorn tree, and from which, with the insertion of a coin, gory ghosts with zombie like features rise while eerie music is played. This appearance of semi zombie creatures is related to their visibility in popular culture on which the parks creators impinge. Zombies are very popular in modern day cinema and television. Lacking souls, these creatures are set apart from other monsters as they become angered when greedy or evil men degrade and dishonour their cultural conventions (Spratford, Siegel and Hennigh, 2003). Considering this, the use of zombies in Wat Pa Lak Roi might insinuate to the fate of *pret* and *Phi*, many of which were born into this state due to their disrespect towards themselves and the society surrounding them.²²⁹ References to zombie like creatures can also be found in the *vetāla prakaraṇam* or more commonly in Thai, *Nithan Wetan* – which is well known in Thailand (McDaniel, 2012:13).²³⁰ The blurry line between flesh eating creatures and ghosts was further asserted in the recently produced film, *The Medium* (2021) also taking place in *Isan*, where evil ghosts inhabit the characters, who while possessed, attack everyone who appears before them and consume them alive.²³¹

Another ghostly depiction is situated in the middle of a lake, located within the park's grounds. This ghost is a bicycle riding skeleton, who is too animated with the insertion of a coin, as he is seen to paddle his bicycle and can be heard laughing viciously. This skeleton has long hair which somewhat reminds the more traditional *pret* description. This depiction is very amusing and seem to be one of the most popular in the parks, demonstrating yet another instance of the entertaining effect the imagery in the parks conveys.

The use of audio-visual installations in Wat Pa Lal Roi, which is largely assigned to ghostly depictions, extends on the operation of the senses, adding another dimension to the tangibility of ghosts in the park and to their symbolics tangibility in the human realm, a feature which will be explored shortly.

²²⁹ The appearance of zombies, incorporated into the hell scheme, can also be viewed in the film *Narok*, discussed earlier. In the scene, the group arrives to what seems to be a deserted zone - the outskirts of hell, an area where the *yomaban* hold no authority (this could arguably be a representation of the larger hells where there are no *yomaban*), and evil creatures are lurking. The group walks anxiously. Suddenly a young girl appears through the woods crying for help, followed by a dozen of revolting zombies arrive and attack the girl, tearing her flesh. A few of the group's members manage to grab Kim who is captured by the zombies, but fail. The scene ends with Kim's death, as her friends stand helpless while watching her as she is eaten alive in front of their eyes.

²³⁰ Also worth mentioning here is an interesting passage from Skilling's translation of the *Vinayavibhaṅga* concerns a monk who raises a corpse, a *vetāda*, and orders it to kill (skilling, 2007).

²³¹ Interestingly the film is a co-production of Thailand and Korea, the latter being well known for zombie films productions, and might have been an influence in the unexpected plot twist.

4.3 Textual and Visual Sources - Ghosts are All Around Us

4.3.1 Reading ghosts - Textual sources

The *pret* imagery in the parks is inspired to a large extent by Texts that include: the *Petavattu*, The *Traiphum*, and the *Phra Malai*, as well as The *Traiphumilokwinijochoyokatha*, which contains a detailed chapter which lists different types of *pret*.

The *Petavatthu* is indeed a notable text in the Pāli canon which consists of an elaborate account of *pret*, since they are referred to in the text in their Pāli name, I will refer to them whilst I am discussing The *Petavatthu* as *peta*. It is composed of 51 stories that generally share a uniform structure: the story begins with The Buddha, who while dwelling at this location or another, tells an account of a meeting between a *peta* and a human, the latter usually being a monk or a relative of the *peta*. Through their dialogue, the *peta* recalls its behaviour as a human which brought it to be born in this realm.²³² These stories perpetuate what Shirkey refers to as a Buddhist moral economy, by encouraging a support system between laics and *sangha* (2008:4). The notion of the *sangha*'s role as a connecting link between the human realm and the ghostly realms, a vessel through which merit can be transferred, is a notion that is expressed in the parks as well. This relationship with the *sangha*, encouraged by the parks as well, is thus an example for this Buddhist moral economy, as will be discussed in detail subsequently. The parks carry over the didactic tradition of the *petvatthu* by presenting anecdotes that warn the visitors as to the unfortunate results of bad behaviour. Insofar, the imagery of the *pret* in the parks, is visually akin to their depiction in the *Petavatthu* where they are known as *peta*. As noted, the parks communicate the deeds the ghosts performed as humans and which brought them to be born in this state, through written descriptions. In this way their behaviour during their former human existence comes to be known.

While the *petvatthu* conveys an assemblage of verses, the *Traiphum* presents a list of 33 kinds of *pret*. Some of which are described through their attributes only, while others also include details about their former behaviour that brought them to be.²³³ Some generalised features of the *pret* that can be gathered from the *Traiphum*'s descriptions and seem to resonate in the parks as well as in the broader cultural conceptualisation of the *pret* are as follows:

- Big Body, with mouth as small as the eye of a needle.
- Only skin and bones.
- Eyes deep and hollow.

²³²For an in-depth exploration of the stories' literally structure, see Shirkey, 2008

²³³ See appendix 10.

- Hair messy and hangs down so it covers their mouth.
- Cry all the time as they are desperate for food.
- No strength to go where there is food.²³⁴

The *Traiphumi Lok Winijochoyokatha*, provides an extension to the above list, and includes 42 types of *pret*. As demonstrated, specifically in Wat Pai Rong Wua which imagery corresponds with *Traiphum* to a large extent, many of these *pret* have representations in the parks. These texts also provide quite a detailed overview of the topography of the universe which assist in the situation of the *pret* position within it, and which will be discussed later.

All the parks included in this chapter incorporate a Phra Malai depiction into their ghostly repertoire. The specific scene is that in which Phra Malai is seating, or standing, amongst the *pret* (the kind that dwell in the hells) who ask him for meritorious assistance. The *pret* in these scenes are those who dwell in the hells and are thus incorporated into the narrative in the section where the *thera* visit the hells. The description of the scene can be found in the *Phra Malai Phu Bird Pradoo Narok Sawan*:

“The *thera* gave a sermon that assisted in calming the hell beings’ spirits. After hearing his teachings, they all kneeled in front of him and cried ‘revered sir, have pity on us. When you go back to the human realm, please visit our relatives and prompt them to make a merit on our behalf, so we will move beyond our *kamma* quickly’. Phra Malai returned to the human realm and passed the message to the hell beings’ relatives, who immediately performed meritorious activities, following the *arahant*’s instructions. Then, the hell animals passed beyond their *kamma* and were reborn in heaven to live happily as celestial beings.”²³⁵

The narrative that this image conveys, perpetuates the importance of merit performed by relatives for their deceased ancestors, as well as the notion that a ‘transfer of merit’ which will make the stay in *petaloka* less unpleasant, is dependent on inter-realm relationship which is maintained by the *sangha*. Thus, it acts as a literary point of reference for the relation of merit to death and the dead, issues I will be exploring in a subsequent section.

The influence of *Phra Malai* imagery is notably apparent in Wat Saen Suk. In it, as noted earlier, one of the hellish scenes includes the headless ghost, *pret hua duan*. The headless *pret* is

²³⁴ TrpR:95

²³⁵ PMNS, 3-4.

described in the *Kap Phra Malai*, the Poems of *Phra Malai*, in the form of a poem which consists of 11 syllables (*kap yani11*). The poem sheds light on the sinful behaviour that leads to a birth as a headless *pret*, as the faith of a robber or a thief who used violent methods in order to obtain property that belonged to others (Sarathoon, 1993). The depiction in Wat Wang Saen Suk is of a scene in which the headless ghost is seen guarded by a *nirayaban*, while roaming the hell. Around them hellish punishments are afflicted on a hell denizen, where the *nirayaban* are captured brutally sawing into his abdomen. This depiction is identical to one that was created by a well-known artist named Phra Thewapinimmit (1888-1947), who cooperated with the Thammaphakdi religious publication and created a series of iconic *Phra Malai* images, employing aesthetics of realism, favoured by the Fine Arts Department at that time (Hacker cited at Brereton, 2017:115). The image below, is one of Phra Thewapinimmit's depictions, and is taken from a series of postcards that was published by the Thammaphakdi publication (see fig.43). As can be detected, when comparing with the scene from Wat Wang Saen Suk this is an exact replica of the depiction created by Phra Thewapinimmit. Furthermore, upon examining the scene discussed above in which Phra Malai is seated amongst the *pret*, this image too has a clear resemblance to that of Phra Thewapinimmit, which can be identified by the types of *pret* who surround him as well as the style of his attire, the position in which he is seated, and his features.



Figures 42 & 43: Headless ghost Wat Saen Suk, Ronit Wang, JPEG, 2016 & Phra Thewapinimmit²³⁶

²³⁶ This image was taken from a series of postcards published by S.Dhumphakdi&Sons, copyright permission was given orally to the author by the publisher, Mr Suraphan Puangphakdi on the 29th September 2022.

In addition to the Phra Malai which conveys the important of merit, The text of the *Tirokuḍḍapetavatthu*

which is quoted subsequently is considered the origin of the practice of ‘transfer of merit’. Telling the donors about the benefits of engagement in the practice of merit, and is also read in funeral ceremonies during the water pouring ritual, which will be too discussed shortly.

Based on information gathered via interviews, field work as well as popular content, it is suppositious that *pret* are likely to be spotted on temple grounds. This derives from their quest for salvation, as they are aware that meritorious practitioners who are most likely to gather at the temple and will have understanding and potency to assist the *pret*.

4.3.2. Pret on the silver screen

Having been the subject of many films, the above notion is incorporated into these films’ settings as the temples are portrayed as the *pret*’s main dwelling, three of which I will discuss below. These films were chosen due to their popularity as seen in online discussions and social media comments. In addition, these are specific films that deal Solely with the *pret*, as opposed to the more common features that convey the stories of *phi*.

The first film, is the 2006 *Pret Rattankosin 69* (refers to 2,469BE, which is equivalent to 1,926CE). Directed by Topong Tamganheng, the film revolves around a Buddha image that is discovered by the local temple’s abbot, after he is startled by a *pret* and falls to the ground. The image is brought to reside at the temple and the *pret* starts to lurk at its grounds, terrifying those who encounter it. An old man goes to the temple at night and scratches some of the gold from the image, he immediately gets crushed to death by the *pret*. As a few suspecting villagers realise the connection of the *pret* with the Buddha statue, the *pret* continue to terrorise the village and kills the abbot for no specific apparent reason, a death for which the man who found the abbot it blamed. The Buddha image is then taken to Bangkok by a group of men, the leader of which claims to send it for examination and validation but is actually a greedy thief who wants it for himself. The group is then attacked in the woods by the *pret* and the villagers discover the men’s real motive. The new abbot who arrives to the scene chants and the *pret* then disappears to the air. In the last scene he explains to the villagers that the *pret* that arrived with the Buddha’s image was protecting it and making sure it will reach the right hands, and it is essential to still transfer merit for the *pret* as they are leading this existence paying for their sins. Then the film ends showing the thieves as *pret* roaming the temple.

The second film is the 2009 film *Ha Phraeng* (five crossroads), titled *Phobia2* in English. The film is composed of five ghost stories, each written and directed by a different film maker. The first story is that of *Lao Cha om* (this is the name of a tall breed of palm trees that are often used to build alters for the *pret*), and titled *Novice* in English. The story describes a young man named Pae, who ordains as a novice, in search for a hideout. This since he tried to rob a driver of a moving vehicle, by throwing stones at it. The stones hit the driver and injured him to death. As it turned out the driver was actually Pae's own father. Pae is depicted as a troubled young man is already apparent in the scene of his arrival to the temple, as he is being rude and harsh towards his mother before she departs. His disrespectful behaviour continues to surface as he interacts with the monks at the temple. At one point, Pae is seen Walking around the temple grounds and noticing the Lao Cha Om tree, on top of which the *pret* alter is situated. The abbot then tells Pae about a ceremony of dedication of merit to the *pret* - the *Ching Pret*.²³⁷ A southern tradition, this event is celebrated specifically in the district of Nakhon Si Thammarat, alluding to the present of *pret* in the area. As the plot unravels, Pae, is not only disrespectful, he also breaks the precepts by eating at night, food that he took from offerings that were made by the locals for the *pret*. He then experiences several encounters with *pret* scare him and lead him to try and escape the temple. In the last scene, in the forest that surrounds the temple grounds, Pae lethal punishment materialises as he is hit by large stones that lead to his death, the same bitter fate as he himself inflicted on his own father. In the ending scene, a beautiful yet eerie shot marks Pae's transformation into a *pret*, as the camera's perspective transfers to Pae's vision, as his body extends and towers over the forest.



Figure 44. *Ha Phraeng* movie poster, 2009.²³⁸

²³⁷ For information about the southern costume of *Wan Ching Pret* see Phraya Anuman Rahadhon (1965:163-165).

²³⁸ <https://highlight.kapook.com/view/41512>

The third and most recent film, released in 2015 is *Pret Abat* - the term *abat* refers to offences committed by monks.²³⁹ Directed by Kanittha Kwanyu, it tells the story of a young man named Sun who reluctantly ordains as a novice so he can escape his felonious past. At the time of his arrival, A ghost festival is being celebrated, the *Boon khao pradap din*, a north-eastern tradition which similarly to the other festivals discussed above is dedicated for merit making to the deceased. Within the *Boon khao pradap din* the alms which are dedicated to the ghosts are placed in a banana leaf and include sticky rice, meat or fish, fruit, betel leaves and cigarettes, celebrated on the 13th day of the 9th lunar month.²⁴⁰ As the festival is marked in the film, *pret* appear around the temple. Sun displays his dismissal of the existence of the *pret* and the benefit in following the precepts correctly and although wearing monks' robes, engages in mundane pleasures, and develops a romantic relationship with one of the village girls. We also learn that he has a complicated relationship with his father. During his stay at the temple, Sun resided in a remote deserted *khuti* that used to be the dwelling place of one of the temple's monks. During the film a character of a mentally unstable man keeps appearing, as he is seen eating the alms dedicated to the *pret* and interferes with the monks' morning alms round. At one point the viewers witness him seeing a *pret* dressed in monk robes mumbling the word "evil monk". Sun begins having dark encounters with a *pret*, and experiences visions that reveal to him and to the viewers that the *pret* was a woman who committed suicide in the *khuti* Sun resided at after having a forbidden affair with the temple's former abbot, to whom she also bore a child. It is also revealed that this temple abbot also killed one of the monks who knew him and his misdeeds. This former abbot is the disturbed man we encountered earlier.²⁴¹ As the story is resolved Sun choses to stay ordained and to follow a pure righteous path, continue his monkhood duties understanding he was brought there as he is able to see ghosts. The movie ends with the saying from the Anguttara Nikaya: "I am the owner of my deeds, whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir."²⁴²

²³⁹ The term *abat* stems from the Pāli *āpatti*, meaning an ecclesiastical offence (PTS, 102). As Moitra notes any member of the *Sangha* acting against the precepts laid down by the Buddha is considered *āpatti*. In the Cullavagga, *āpatti* appears in various compounds to mean various types of offenses. For instance, offenses are classified into two groups: *Garukāpatti* (also known as *Adesanāgāminiāpatti* or *Duṭṭullāpatti*) which means a major offense, and the remaining are said to be grouped under *Lahukāpatti* (also known as *Desanāgāminiāpatti* or *aduṭṭulāpatti*) which are minor offenses (139,2021).

²⁴⁰ For more on the *Boon khao pradap din* see Jesada, Boonsong, Somdet and Varayan, 2017.

²⁴¹ The film that was submitted by the Thai film association for the Oscars nomination, was censored and then re-edited and resubmitted due to its explicit scenes that portray misbehaviour of *sangha*.

<https://sahamongkolfilm.com/saha-movie/arat-karma-directors-cut-movie-2560/>

²⁴² AN 5.57.

The films described above bring about a few relevant points that shed light on the parks: First, and as noted earlier, all these films are set in and around the temple grounds. This accentuates the notion according to which the *pret* dwell at the vicinities of temples. Secondly, these films demonstrate the way in which the punishments for the offences towards Buddhist agencies, as well as parental authorities, are inevitable and might even begin requitement in this life time. Moreover, offences that are committed by individuals who were ordained as monks (i.e *abat*), increase their severity and its respective punishment, which may be a birth as a *pret*.

To this end, the *Petavatthu* includes one such story, in which a monk who committed offences while wearing robes, was reborn as a *pret*. However, this transmigration to a *pret* form only occurred after he served time in the *Avīci* hell, where he was sent first due to committing one of the *anan triya kaam*.²⁴³ As the story goes, this monk has arrived at a comfortable dwelling place, located in adjacency to a village of devotees, but discovered that this space was already inhabited by elderly monks. Selfishly, the monk wanted to enjoy the alms given by the locals, and the comforts that the dwelling place had to offer all to himself. So, in order to drive away the other monks, he maliciously slandered them. Upon his death, the wicked monk was born in the *Avīci* hell. After serving his designated life span there, he was reborn as a *peta* who is beautiful in appearance, but has worms devouring its mouth which reeks of a putrid odour.²⁴⁴ While the *Petavatthu* story demonstrates the gravity of offences performed by *sangha* it also refers to the *anan triya kaam*, which result in birth in the *Avīci* hell, and the way the *kamma* produced as a result comes to fruition in the immediate next existence.

The workings of *kamma* are also demonstrated in the films by way of the characters experiencing the taste of their own medicine. In such a way, in *Lao Cha om*, the character of Pae was scolded to death by stones, the same death he inflicted on his own father. He was then reborn as a *pret*, thus becoming the same type of creature he obstructed while he was staying at the temple. Similarly, the thugs who had impure intentions and mishandled the Buddha's image in *Pret Rattankosin 69* were specifically haunted by a *pret*, to the point of physical injury and even death, thus experiencing terror as an immediate effect. In *Pret Abat*, Sun also encounters horrific situations but in his case these experiences lead him to the understanding that *kamma* is in constant operation and drive him to change his ways and commit to his clerical role.

²⁴³ *Anan triya kaam* see page 104.

²⁴⁴ PV1.3

Lastly, a point that is addressed specifically in *Lao Cha om*, and that is filial impiety which might result in a birth as a *pret*. As noted, filial piety is one of the rules upon breakage of which might result in a birth in the hell realms. In *Lao Cha om*, this behaviour accounts possible reason for Pae's transformation into a *pret*. Xing traces filial piety back to early Buddhist sources, noting that its practice has been the chief good *kamma* in the Buddhist moral teaching since its inception, and has been one of its most important aspects (2016). In this way a type of *pret* that is called *nichamaka* is said to be born due to their disrespecting their parents in their human life.²⁴⁵

4.3.3 Haunted tales – *phi* in films

Whilst the above examples of *pret*'s appearances in the cinematic medium, demonstrate their visibility in the Thai popular culture arena, a considerably preponderant representation of the Thai *phi*, the likes of which exhibited in Wat Mae Keat Noi and Wat Pa Lak Roi, is clearly discernible, and perhaps even more so than the *pret* due to their variety and myriad origin stories, as will be discussed below.

The nocturnal *Phi Krasue*, with its human head and dangling viscera, is probably one of the most well-known breeds of ghost, having numerous adaptations of its story, amongst which songs, TV shows, books, cartoons and films, revolve around it. One song dedicated to the *Krasue* and bearing its name, debuted in 1977. Written by Manat Pitisan and performed by Nipa Sanguanrak for a Channel 7 TV drama by the same title. The song lists the features of the *Krasue*, as follows:

Krasue, during the day is a woman
Everything about her seems normal
*She smiles, is talkative, graceful and dignified.*²⁴⁶
At night (she) has a head and intestine
She leaves her body to go out
To eat excrement and rot
(she) finds and collect only dirty things as food
Which house is dirty?
She will go to that house and snatch it (the dirt)
And eat it for a while

²⁴⁵ <http://watyangkhom.blogspot.com/2012/09/blog-post.html>

²⁴⁶ Talkative is an interesting adjective to describe the *Krasue* considering the account mentioned above by Payu. It thus can be speculated that the *Krasue*'s features in the song resemble those of the *Krasue* on which the drama is based.

*The Krasue will come through the house pole.*²⁴⁷

Krasue scares people

Be careful at night it might come to visit

If you see flickering light, it is the krasue.

While the song reinforces Payu's description of the *Krasue* as seemingly a regular woman during the day who takes a monstrous form during the night, it also accentuates the association of the ghost with dirt, suggesting that maintaining a clean home can prevent it from lurking around. Thus, promoting the importance of cleanliness.

As observed by Baumann, *Phi Krasue* is one of the most iconic uncanny creatures of Thai horror cinema (2014:183). To this end, I will now introduce two films that tell version of the *Phi Krasue* story here:

Thamnaon Krasue (literally meaning the legend of *krasue*, while the English name of this film is *Demonic Beauty*), is a 2002 film by Bin Bunlurit. This film brings about the origin story of the *Krasue*, a 13th century Khmer princess named Tarawati who is abducted, and forced to marry a Thai king²⁴⁸. He then finds that she is cheating on him and sentences both her and her lover to death. Just before her execution a witch with whom she is imprisoned, transfers her spirit into the body of a young woman named Dao living in a small Thai village, and who is identical to her in appearance. Tarawati then possess Dao who turns into a *Krasue*, and terrorises the villagers. Later in the film Dao is subdued by a local monk. The final scene of the film shows another girl into whom the spirit of the *krasue* then move in order to inhabit her body, noting the endless cycle of *krasue* revivification.²⁴⁹ In the film Dao character's is described as a kind hearted young woman who in the words of her father is a "good and thoughtful person". Dao also has a lover named Rung who is concerned for her throughout the events as they unfold in the film. Both the father

²⁴⁷ Base of the house as used in Thai elevated wooden houses.

²⁴⁸ Baumann refers to Wyatt's 2001 account of the Siamese revolt against the Khmer (Wyatt at Baumann, 2014: 186).

²⁴⁹ The film's final scene and its significance is described well by Baumann "although the *phi* seems destroyed, the film's final scene reveals that *phi krasue* is the Khmer witch's immortal soul by showing how it possesses the next village girl and turns her into *phi krasue*. The film ends with the words, 'from this moment *phi krasue* is known in Thailand' (2014:186) in his account, Baumann discusses the way in which this film turns the narrative of the *Krasue* from a ghost which is associated with dirt and filth to a manifestation of a Khmer witch. This situates her within the Angkorian Khmer culture, and is a feature which appears entirely original to its cinematic incarnation in this film, which he links to social cultural categorization of Khmer and black magic, and a reconstruction of Thai identity as superior to Khmer culture while simultaneously recognising it as its own source of origin (ibid).

and Rung demonstrate their affection to Dao perceiving her as the lovely woman they know and not the evil ghost that the villagers are threatened by.

A later film is *Saeng Krasue* (literally the gleam of *krasue*, titled in English *Inhuman Kiss*), debuted in 2019, and directed by Sittisiri Mongkolsiri. The film tells the story of a young nurse named Sai. In the opening scene, Sai is seen as a little girl who plays hide and seek with a group of friends in a deserted cabin in the woods, where she encounters a *krasue* who possesses her. The *krasue* symptoms only start to manifest when Sai is working at the village clinic and develops a romantic relationship with one of her childhood friends, Noi, while also being courted by another friend in the group named Jerd.²⁵⁰ As the plot progresses, Noi finds out that Sai is a *krasue* and he helps her by feeding her raw meat so she will not have to search for food in the village. Later in the film Sai and Noi also find a unique herb that reduces the ghost like symptoms. Sai is also loved by her father who protects her when confronting the villagers. However, a group of *Krasue* hunters arrive to the village and in the final scene of the film Sai is captured and shot to death.

Both films introduced above are examples of the evolution of the *krasue* story. Both introduce the condition of the *krasue* to be contracted in the same manner as an unwelcomed disease, a matter of misfortune which is inflicted innocent, good hearted young women who are loved by their families and friends. Furthermore, they are the subject of a great love of a human man, who overlook the monstrous aspect of the *krasue* and strive to resolve the conflict of this unattainable love. Thus, both films situate the character of the *krasue* as amiable, so that the viewers are sympathetic towards her. Considering these films, the narrative of the *krasue* is an exception in terms of its *kammatic* revenue, as the women who are inflicted with the condition are supposedly innocent. It is probable to assume that since this story has no origin in the Buddhist scriptures, and it cannot be topographically situated in the cosmological scheme, that as a local tale there is no visible retribution of *kamma*, which enables the construction of the character's likability. In this sense, the story takes on elements of a classic *kammic* retribution tale, where *kamma* is unknown to the protagonist and to the viewer until the resolution. However, this ghost is still included in the park amongst the *pret* and other types of ghosts, situated under the same umbrella. The

²⁵⁰ Jerd's character and the *Krause* hunter which later appears in the film as he tried to capture Sai, bring about a sub plot story of the *krasue* male counterpart, the *krahang*. According to the story in the film, the *krasue* was the wife of the *krahang* but fell in love with a human, with whom she ran away. The *krahang* found them, killed the man and ripped the *krasue*'s heart out. Since then, each *krahang* is set to rip the heart out of the *krasue*. As the plot reveals, the *krause* hunter is a *krahang*, hence his motive for chasing *krasue*. When Jerd protects Sai, the hunter possesses him and turning him into a *krahang*, in aim of destroying Sai.

humanification of the *krasue* further supports the suggested *mettā* sharing practice with ghosts as prompted in the parks, as the ghosts are perceived to be treated as subjects of compassion.

In a similar manner to *Phi Krasue*, the ghost of Mae Nak who is represented in Wat Mae Keat Noi and is also mentioned in Wat Pal Lak Roi, is a subject of numerous adaptations, including books, films, TV shows, audio adaptations, theatrical plays, operas and cartoons. Furthermore, Nak's spirit is considered to be potent. A shrine dedicated for her was erected at Wat Mahabut in Phra Khanong, where her *winyan* is believed to remain active. Followers come to see her for winning lottery numbers, and childbearing wishes (McDaniel, 2011:176-177).

One film which conveys Mae Nak's story is the 1999 *Nonzee Nimibutr Nang Nak*, received large scholarly attention (Ingawanij 2007, Fuhrman, 2009, McDaniel, 2011, Knee 2014). This is probably due to what Ingawanij refers to as “a pure image atmospheric pulse” (2007: 182). *Nang Nak* is an impressive and elaborate production, a historically realistic period piece, which as noted by Fuhrmann encompasses Buddhist and nationalistic nuances (2009). McDaniel discusses the way in which Somdet To, the reverend abbot who subdues Mak has a significant role in the film (2011). This is specifically relevant for the parks' representations of Mae Nak, as it fortifies the role of *sangha* in the relationship between human and ghosts, not only as merit vessels, but also as the efficacious subduers of disorderly ghosts, a notion that resonates throughout.²⁵¹ Furthermore, Somdet To was called after the local village monks were no able to subdue Nak, this there is also certain criticism towards them and an elevation of those monks who hold the ability to become these vessels.

Mae Nak is so popular that her name was used to title a Halloween festival in the Central Plaza shopping mall in the northern city of Lampang– the “Mae Nak Phra Kanong Festival”. The festival took place during the last week of October 2021 leading to its highlight on the 31st October, the internationally observed Halloween. During the festival a large area in the mall was transformed into Phra Kanong village as it would look like during Mae Nak's time. Actors dressed as different Thai ghosts, including the *Krasue* male counterpart, *Krahang*, and walked around the vicinity taking pictures with the shoppers. On the 31st activities were held, which included arts and crafts for children and a vibrant food market. Not only that this festival emphasises Mae Nak's popularity, it also demonstrates the amalgamation of Thai and foreign elements by incorporating a Thai narrative the celebration of Halloween, which alludes to McDaniel and Anderson's

²⁵¹ An interesting counterpart to the elevation of ghosts into revered figures in Japanese Sōtō Zen is expressed through spirit ordination, for more see Bodiford, 1993.

discussion as to the ecumenical nature of cosmological narratives in Thailand.²⁵² The celebration of Halloween also hints at the use of the holiday in the celebrations of *Wan Ploy Phi* in Wat Mae Kaet Noi.

The sources surveyed above, all situate the ghosts, whether *pret* or *phi*, in the human realm – roaming the earth, thus alluding to the proximity of ghost and human encounters. This brings to question the cosmography of the ghostly realm. Being depicted as a realm of its own, how do the ghosts appear on earth? Also, how is it then that they appear in the parks, in temple murals and in *Phra Malai* as roaming the hells? In order to answer this, I will now look at the fluid cosmic position of the ghosts, and the way the parks embolden its complexity.



Figure 45. An actress depicting Mae Nak, Central Lampang's Halloween Festival, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2021

4.4 Cosmic fluidity of ghosts

As gathered by dint of the ghostly representations in the parks, it can be detected that the use of the term *pret* is quite wide. While it is used to describe ghosts, it is also occasionally used in reference to some inhabitants of the hells. Thus, the affiliation of the *pret* and *phi* to their perspective realm, is obscured, and thus impinges on their liminality.

²⁵² Also see Halloween event described in page 73.

As noted earlier, the literal meaning of the Pāli term *peta* is departed. The notion of departure is further enhanced in the *petavatthu* through the *pret*'s memories of their past lives, and the misdeeds that caused their current birth. Shirkey addressed this recollection by linking the *pret* remembrance of its past life to Brahminic practices of ancestor worship (2008). While Shirkey's perspective alludes to the historical context of the stories, I suggest a reading which is embedded in the earlier mentioned Thai context and calls the pair of terms *winyan* and *khwan*, the first being consciousness and the latter life essence. To this end, the term *winyan* is often used in the Thai language to refer to the dead. This connection which is conveyed in the *petavatthu*, between the *pret* and the human realm, via their affiliation to their past lives as humans and to their living relatives through recollections, is further enhanced by their ability to access the human realm and establish contact with humans, whom they rely on for assistance in reaching salvation. These encounters usually occur at city gates or in less inhabited areas such as forests or rivers.

In Thai narratives, the tangibility of ghosts is an essential construct in their narrative. As the movies explored above pointed, encounters with ghosts often take place in temples, where they know they can find virtuous practicing disciples who will be able to provide them with meritorious relief. Another common place that ghosts are said to be drawn to are latrines and bathrooms, as is commonly accepted in Thai ghostly narratives that I have collected in interviews and ghost encounter stories, where they look for bodily fluids, such as blood and feces, which many tend to feed on.

At the same time that some *pret* dwell in the human realm, the *pret* are also perceived as hellish beings and are affiliated to the hell realms, making the borders between the realm seem somewhat blurred, though all are positioned within the rubric of the *apāya*. This is specifically expressed in *Phra Malai* narratives. Hell denizens and *pret* alike, all are included in the texts under the umbrella of *sat narok*, literally meaning hell animals.²⁵³ This is also expressed in varied temple murals that assimilate the *pret* into the hellish landscape. One example to the latter, is the mural of the *Nimi Jātaka* that is painted on the wall of Wat Yai Intararam in Chonburi. The *pret* that are included in the hellish scene are: a *pret* with swollen belly caused by hunger, a *pret* which is constantly aflame, and a *pret* holding a baby, representing the kind that consumes its own children.

²⁵³ The use of the term animals also acts as a philological distinction between these beings and humans.



Figure 46. A segment of the hell mural at Wat Yai Intararam, JPEG, Ronit Wang, 2013.

The ghostly representations in the park relate to both cosmographical allocations, as they situate the ghosts within the hellish area, but at the same time draw on their connection to the human realm. This fluctuation of the *pret* is further expressed in yet another cosmographical vicinity, which is described in the TLW (175), the LKP (84), and the PMNS (57). As discussed earlier, within the *Sumero* mountain cosmological scheme, the immediate world in which we humans live is the *Jambudvīpa* Continent. This continent is the size of 10,000 yojana, out of which 3,000 yojana is inhabited by humans, 3,000 by the *Himavanta* (*Himmapan*) forest (which inhabits the *kinaris* and other mythical creatures), while the rest is composed of mountain ranges, rivers and oceans (Sadakata, 1997). Located at the edge of the *Himmapan* forest, and positioned directly above the hells is a city whose sole inhabitants are one kind of *pret* named *mahithika* (Pāli *mahiddhikā*), and is called Wichat (TLW), also referred to as Yonnakhorn (LKP).²⁵⁴ According to the LKP these *pret*, which has extremely large physique, lead somewhat finer existence as they manage an independent life in their domain. The PTSD notes that they may be raised in this existence by means of the *dakḥiṇā* (sacrificial gift) to a higher category of *mahiddhikā petā* or after their period of expiation shift their situation within their form of existence will ease (472). While the city of Wichat does not have direct representation or mentioning in the parks, they include extremely large *pret* types in their imagery, thus could be representing the *mahithika*, yet this is just an assumption.

A soap opera that was aired on Channel Seven named *Ngao bun* (literally meaning shadow merit), which was aired in 2020, and introduced a variety of *pret*, also included the *mahithika*, as

²⁵⁴ See appendix 11.

a ghost of a monk who used to steal goods from the temple.²⁵⁵ In this sense, seeing the *mahithika* having the ability to move in and around the realms, reinforces the idea of the ghosts' liminal position.

Ladwig in his research of the Lao ghost festival, *Bun Khau Padad Din*, suggests that the ghosts' liminality derives from their being stuck between rebirths (2012). Referring to popular belief rather than the Theravāda doctrine, Ladwig does not discuss then the cosmographically specific *pret* realm, into which these beings are born, and from which it can be concluded that they are not stuck between rebirths but rather take a life form in which may subsist in three possible environments.²⁵⁶ In this way, the *pret* are indeed liminal, nonetheless, their liminality is expressed via the cosmic fluidity of the ghost realm having subdivisions. This liminality is expressed in the parks, as they associate the *pret* with the hells, while at the same time also employing the visitors' familiarity with *pret* that revolves around their dwelling in the vicinity the human world. To this end, the ghostly liminality is akin to that of the *phi*, as in accordance the narratives that portray them, they too inhabit the human realm.

This connection with humans, both of the *phi* and the *pret* is also expressed tangibly. In an earlier study of the ontological understanding of spirits, Ladwig explains a connection that ghosts maintain with the human realm, while focusing on objects that are used to connect human and non-human entities. He claims that ghosts and spirits leave material traces in this world. Traces might indicate the places where they appear, the materiality of the ritual items to deal with them or with the offerings they receive. The trace is in a sense a track, a footprint, or an imprint – a sign left in the material domain of something that by its nature is not graspable for those people not endowed with the special capacities to do so (2011:24). Ladwig's argument stresses the relationship between

²⁵⁵ <https://www.watchlakorn.in>

²⁵⁶ Ladwig description corresponds with a kind of beings that are referred to in Thai as *samphawesi*, these are those who died but were not born into a new life form and therefore are stuck in an intermediate state. This state is termed in Pāli *antarābhava* (Kritzer, 2000). Gombrich mentions that he was told by a Sinhalese monk of a belief that *peta* live only seven days. According to Gombrich the monk plausibly connected this with the belief in the *antarābhava* lasting seven days. Gombrich stresses that this is not a Theravāda belief and therefore it is historical rather than doctrinal (1971:210). On this matter Holt in his comparative study of after death notions looking at Brahmanism and Buddhism notes that while the status of the (Brahmanical) *pitr* was abandoned, the status of *preta* was transformed. No Longer considered as a liminal phase, it represented a suffering existence awaiting those who acted immorally while among the living (1981:10). However, Keys, whose approach is anthropological, claims that during this period between death and cremation, the deceased is in a state of limbo, having not yet totally departed this world or fully entered the world beyond. having not yet totally departed (2000:125). Considering all these views there seem to be an ongoing discussion on the topic in which the arguments are mainly based on doctrinal vs. folkloristic themes.

humans and ghosts as it involves palpable objects and terrestrial locations, and refers also to ritual related items. Considering this, and taking into account reports of sightings of ghosts, and incidents in which ghosts were believed to be the cause of certain events, it is inferential that the experience of ghosts is, at times, also tangible. Numerous stories that are circulated through different mediums in Thailand, report ghostly encounters experienced by individuals or groups. Ghosts are a prevalent conversation topic, this is enhanced by the attention given to them in popular mediums, with newscasts and leitmotif shows such as: “The Ghosts Radio” - a radio show which provides a platform for listeners with ghostly affairs to share, “The Real Ghosts” - a broadcast which reports and investigates sightings of ghosts, as well as many more.

One such story, was reported on channel 7 news. A *pret* appeared at the *vihāra*'s doorway at Wat Chantaram temple in Phatum Thani, during an ordination ceremony that was held on July 2014, and was captured on camera.



Figure 47. *pret* sighted at Wat Chantram, Channel 7 news, July 2014

Another prospect of tangibility is that certain events are explained by the idea of physical presence of ghosts. Situations such as inexplicable damage to property, or injury to livestock or even humans, were understood in many of these cases to be caused by ghosts. In this way, devoured animals such as cattle and farm fowl are said to be attacked by the ghost *phi pop*, who likes to feed on animal entrails. In one such case, a news cast aired in February 2016 reported a case that occurred in Surin, where the villagers woke up to find a buffalo calf devoured with his entrails eaten, an incident which was believed to be caused by a *phi pop*. In another instance, in the village of Bann Naa Sakae, in north-east Thailand, a large number of men died mysteriously in their sleep.

The deaths were said to be caused by *Phi Mae Maai* – a widow ghost, who attacks man in their dreams and drain their lives.²⁵⁷

Beyond these tangible marks that the *phi* and *pret* are believed to inflict, some physical spaces in Thailand are considered to be haunted, while others came to be known as marginal locations which have a link between this world and others. The latter are characterised by other worldly natural elements. For example, Rang temple in Prachinburi that is surrounded by a unique type of trees that have thorns on their trunks, similarly to the hellish Kapok trees.²⁵⁸

The narratives above contribute to the notion that ghosts lead a liminal existence, living on a threshold between the realms, belonging to one dimension but able to intercede with another.²⁵⁹ Considering Turner's time honoured definition of liminality in relation to the *pret*, an undeniable correlation can be found between his analogy of the liminal entity and death, and the state of ghostly existence: "liminal entities are neither here nor there...thus liminality is frequently likened to death...liminal entities may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in kinship system - in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes..." (1969:170).

Insofar, representations of the *apāya*, and specifically those of ghosts, enhance the idea of the ghosts' liminality. This is further perpetuated by the parks' affiliation to the temples, since as noted earlier, *pret* are aware that the temple is a meritorious site and there is a common conception that they tend to lurk around the temple area, mainly around the latrines and bathrooms of the compound. In such a way, this presence of *pret* in temples is noticeable beyond the parks. In an interview with an actress named Mayurin Pongpudpunth, who ordained as a nun in Burma in 2018 after which she began appearing in the media as an advocate of Buddhism, propagating the benefits of *dhamma* practice, she mentioned experiencing the presence of a *pret*. While practicing at a retreat in Lampang, she heard a strange crying sound at night, which did not sound human and seemed to be of someone who was suffering tremendously. She then asked the abbot about the sound, he told her this was a *pret*, whose sound only friends or relatives can hear, and advised that

²⁵⁷ For an extensive account of this case, see Mills, 1995.

²⁵⁸ To this end Wat Kham Chanot in Udon Thani is noteworthy, as it is believed to be the earthly point which connects to the realm of the *nāga*, marked in a scared pond called Bo Kham Chanot. The temple is surrounded by ancient trees that are unique to the area and called chanot trees. Also, in this temple, an incident took place with Mo Plai, the medium I have introduced in chapter two, where she was channelling Yama and had a heated dispute about the place of a cup that belonged to the temple with a lay visitor and a monk who resides in the temple, a scene that quickly became viral.

²⁵⁹ To this end, some *pret* illustrate an additional aspect of liminality, as their existence is shared between their ghostly body and that of a deva, between the *pret loka* and the *vimāna* – celestial mansions. However, since these kind of *pret* have no representation in the parks I will not consider them further.

she should share *mettā* with it. Later on, in Burma, while ordained as a nun, she heard the sound again, at around 4am in the morning, and at that time she was not scared as she already knew that it was a *pret*, and that she needs to share *mettā*.²⁶⁰ This narrative, of *pret* on temple grounds, is also embedded in one famous historical account that was made into a soap opera in 2003, named *Pret Wat Suthat*. The story line is inspired by actual accounts of sightings of *pret* at the Suthat temple in Bangkok. I will return to this temple later on when looking at the position of *sangha*.

While I was staying at Wat santi Nikhom, a conversation of the arrival of *pret* and other non-human beings to the temple came about. I was then told by the residing nun, Mae Chi Chanida, that the temple dogs, many of which have a skin condition that causes wounds and bold patches, were actually bitten by *pret*. Considering this, it can be said that while the liminality of ghosts is expressed by their presence in the parks in way of depiction, it expands beyond man-made retellings to extrasensory encounters.

The liminality of ghosts is expressed in the parks via imagery as well as tangible experience. It denotes the ghosts' connection to the human world and is also significant in merit making rituals where they act as the main receptors of merit. To this end, the parks and the temples they are affiliated to facilitate these rituals.

4.5 Ghosts as Receptors of Merit

Merit is an essential element on the road to individual salvation, and in this way, it is promoted in the parks as an additional method to optimise one's *kamma*, which can add value to the five precepts, discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, the doctrine of merit includes a practice of its transference which is embedded in the Thai Buddhist world view. As explained by Tambiah, from a doctrinal point of view the quest for salvation is a strictly individualistic pursuit, but the social unit engaging in merit-making needs not be the individual, it can also be the family, kin group or even an entire village. Individuals may act as representatives on behalf of other persons, including the deceased. Thus, transfer of merit is not only thought possible, but is also highly institutionalized (1970: 54). Gombrich notes that the practice of transferring merit (good *kamma*), accumulates so that one's good actions build up a kind of spiritual bank account from which you can make payments to others (1971:205). In this account, the spirits are not getting mere merit but more tangible benefits-food and clothes. However, they get the food and clothes as a result of getting merit-plainly an ambiguous situation. The question whether the *pret* could actually eat the

²⁶⁰ <https://www.newtv.co.th/news/31157> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_2g_mwT0dA

food was controversial in ancient times, even though that they could do so is the natural interpretation of the *Tirokuḍḍasutta*. Furthermore, sensible Theravadin monks decided that food being visibly consumed by a monk could not possibly be eaten by someone else, so that, if people persisted in their habit of feeding dead relatives, the custom required reinterpretation. What the relatives were really getting was something else-merit (Ibid:211) On the behavioural level, since the idea that one can give away merit contradicts a fundamental doctrine, this clear implication has to be explained away, which is done, most ingeniously, by changing the meaning of *anumodati* (*anumothana* in Thai) doctrine. We have tried, rather, to show that merit has always been thought of in personal terms, as belonging to an agent, and indeed has finally been reified to a remarkable extent, affectively becoming a transferable commodity (ibid: 218). To this end, Langer emphasised the filial duty that merit entails, as the dead parents are said to be watching from the other world. They can still exert a positive influence over their children and grandchildren. But if the children neglect their duties, they may turn into troublesome spirits (2007:126-127).²⁶¹

Considering the above, it can be said that some of the main beneficiaries of this merit transfer are those inhabitants of the ghostly realm. Merit is often dedicated to the deceased, and while the deceased are not necessarily ghosts, the latter are included in this group.

Holt discusses the way in which merit transference is significant in the *petavatthu*, as in the stories the *peta* makes a request: the living should offer a gift to the *saṅgha* and transfer the merit derived from that virtuous action to the suffering *peta* (1081:12). An example for this formula can be found in the second story in the third book of the *petavatthu*, The story of *Sānuvāsīn*. In this story one *arahant* was dwelling on mount *Sānuvāsīn*. When entering the nearby village for alms, his deceased brother arrived to inform him that his kinsmen were born as *peta*. The brother then asked ‘be merciful and compassionate; give a gift and ascribe to us the credit. By your gift which is bestowed the ruthless ones will maintain themselves’ the monk then dedicated food, drinks, and goods that he presented to the *saṅgha*. Once this was transferred to his *peta* relatives, they came to him and confirmed ‘your reverence, out of compassion we were furnished with food and clothes, with a house and with both drinking water and a vehicle as gifts’ (PV:69-72).

This story asserts Holt’s claim as to the way in which a gift to the *saṅgha* translates into the ghostly realm. the *peta* do not enjoy the actual goods offered to the monks, but the ghostly

²⁶¹ Saying that, Langer notes that giving merit is only part of the filial duty. The other part is leading a religious life. The giving of merit ceremony follows (2007:127).

equivalent which manifests in the *peta* realm. Alas, this so-called tangible transfer is a rather ambiguous concept, as maintained earlier when discussing Gombrich who asserted that although the *peta*'s mind can be favourably influenced, material food cannot be enjoyed by the *peta* (1971). In this sense the monks insert themselves as mediators between the dead and the living.

If we situate this discourse within the Thai context, merit transference in form of tangible gifts is an essential element of any ritual that is dedicated to the dead. This transfer is done in way of merit making ceremonies in which food and goods are given to the monks. These types of offerings can be very detailed at times. For example, Luang Pho Sa'aad, the of abbot Wat Santi Nikhom gives specific instructions to participants of the amount of food that is to be dedicated to the *winyaan* in accordance with each person's reading.

In addition, the transfer can be done directly with no meditation of the *sangha*. Food is being offered on a daily basis at shrines dedicated to spirits located in houses and businesses alike. The suffering ghosts benefit from this practice is well illustrated in the cartoon *pipop yomaraj*, where a devotee is shown placing some food at the temple's compound spirit shrine, dedicates it to all spirits, naming the *pret* and the *sampawesi*,²⁶² and immediately after, four distorted looking ghosts arrive to collect the offering, and thank the man.



Figure 48. Ghosts thanking the offerings, *pipop yomaraj* ep.1²⁶³

²⁶² See footnote 256.

²⁶³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WU2npc2F2I&t=737s>

To this end I would like to mention the experience of my informant Pern as detailed in chapter one where when she was in a coma, she enjoyed all the food that she previously offered in alms rounds and merit making ceremony, however the food was not tangible, rather she saw the item of food in her mind's eyes which gave her a satisfactory feeling.²⁶⁴ This could be assumed as to ghosts as well, an assumption which I found to be supported by the world view of my informants, some of which asserted that this is the way in which the offerings given to the spirits translate in the ghostly realm, as the *petavatthu* and *pipop yomaraj* maintain.

Returning to specifically designated merit making ceremonies. These types of rituals receive further authority in a text that can be found in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (The Short Collection) in a section called *Tirokuḍḍa Kaṇḍa* (Hungry Ghosts) Outside the Walls:

Outside the walls they stand, and at crossroads.
 At doorposts they stand, returning to their old homes.
 But when a meal with plentiful food & drink is served,
 no one remembers them: Such is the kamma of living beings.
 So those who feel sympathy for their dead relatives
 give timely donations of proper food & drink exquisite, clean.
 “May this be for our relatives. May our relatives be happy!”
 And those who have gathered there, the assembled shades of the relatives,
 with appreciation, give their blessing for the plentiful food & drink:
 “May our relatives live long because of whom we have gained (this gift).
 We have been honoured, and the donors are not without reward!”
 For there (in their realm) there's no farming, no herding of cattle,
 no commerce, no trading with money.
 They live on what is given here, hungry ghosts whose time here is done.
 As water raining on a hill, flows down to the valley,
 even so does what is given here benefit the dead.
 As rivers full of water, fill the ocean full,
 even so does what is given here benefit the dead.
 “He gave to me, she acted on my behalf,
 they were my relatives, companions, friends”:
 Offerings should be given for the dead, when one reflects thus
 on things done in the past.
 For no weeping, no sorrowing
 no other lamentation benefits the dead whose relatives persist in that way.

²⁶⁴ See page 78.

But when this offering is given, well-placed in the Saṅgha,
it works for their long-term benefit and they profit immediately.
In this way the proper duty to relatives has been shown,
great honour has been done to the dead, and monks have been given strength:
The merit you've acquired isn't small.²⁶⁵

This text further asserts the importance of merit making both for the living and for the dead. It also brings about the *pret* who are 'standing outside of the walls' already in its title. We can detect here a direct association of these *pret* who receive merit, as the ones who dwell in the human realm. As per the cosmographical situation I provided above it is thus alluding to that merit is then collected by certain ghosts only, namely those who wonder the human realm.

To this end, a certain breed of *pret* which is called *pratatapachiwi pret* (in Pāli *paradattūpajīvika*). Literally meaning 'He who lives on what has been given by others'. These *pret* must rely on blessings from the merit that relatives and friends dedicate to them. They are said to be the only *pret* who are able to obtain the offers given to them directly.²⁶⁶ Gomvrinch discusses this type of *peta* saying only the top class of *peta* those who live on merit given by others (*paradattopajīvin*) are able to sympathize with the merit of others (1971:270-271).

Additional element in Merit making ceremonies, which is intended to benefit the deceased, is a practice which is called *kruat nam*, the pouring of the water. While this ritual is integrated into the merit making ceremony, it can also be done individually at home. The ritual is performed by pouring water from one container to the other (designated jugs and bowls are provided for this purpose). This is done while the monks are chanting a specific formula, the *anumotana piti*. The Pāli formula that is read by the leading monk is identical to its Sri Lankan counterpart as described in Langer (2007), and includes the *Tirokuḍḍa Kaṇḍa*, as noted above. It thus acts as sympathetic magic as maintained in Langer who quotes Kariyawasam as he comments that the context shows that the pouring of water in this manner is a ritualistic act belonging to the field of sympathetic magic, symbolizing the beneficial inheritance of the merit transferred by the living to the dead, as a kind of *dakkhiṇā* or offering (Kariyawasam at langer, 2007:158).

Once the ceremony is completed, the practitioner pours the water bowl onto the ground, usually in the vicinity of a tree or a plant. During the pouring of the water, in both instances (during

²⁶⁵ *Khp* 7. Translated and noted by Thanissaro Bikkhu, who also notes in reference to the sixteenth sentence which begins with "as water", which is the first to be chanted by monks in modern-day Theravāda merit-making ceremonies. <https://www.dhammadata.org/suttas/KN/Khp/khp7.html>. Also noted in Langer 2007.

²⁶⁶ <https://dhamtara.com/?p=5526>

the ritual and onto the ground), the practitioner is instructed to rejoice in the memory of the deceased and intentionally share the merit performed by this ritual with the deceased. The pouring of the water onto the ground is associated with the goddess of the earth, *mae thorani*, which could too be accounted as sympathetic magic calling the goddess protection. In addition, I find that the pouring of water to the ground acts as an other-realm channel. Furthermore, Phra Sonetavy Invasaro of Wat Pa Lad in Chiang Mai, maintained that the *kruat nam* ritual operates on a practical level as well. Beyond its symbolic associations, the actual act of water pouring, with water being one of the natural elements, the focus on the water propagates concentration - *sati*. In this way, the monks facilitate an opportunity to engage in meditation, and this in itself generates merit that can be transferred to the deceased.²⁶⁷ Specific events such as Wan Ploy Phi that was held at Wat Mea Keat Noi, provide the opportunity for a communal yielding of merit making on a large scale.²⁶⁸



Figure 49. *kruat nam* by B.O.Y²⁶⁹

Beyond a myriad of merit making opportunities that are facilitated in the parks, the teachings as to the importance of merit, resonate within their imagery. As demonstrated above, specifically predominant, is the well-known scene in which *Phra Malai* is seated amongst

²⁶⁷ Phra Sonetawy Invasaro in conversation with the author, September 2021.

²⁶⁸ As well as other types of ghosts' festivals which are held in different areas of Thailand, such as the *Phi Ta Kon* in Loei (see Kaengjampa, 2019), and the *Po Tor* in Phuket (see Krueaphat and de Jong, 2018) and *Wan Ching Pret* (Phraya Anuman Rajadon, 1965).

²⁶⁹ <https://picpost.postjung.com/353442.html#pic1>

the *pret*, who ask the *arahant* to visit their relatives and prompt them to make a merit on their behalf.²⁷⁰

In this way, similarly to the dissemination of the five precepts, the visitors absorb the teachings through the imagery, and then have the opportunity for immediate application of these ideas. What is more, is the positioning of the *sangha* as an agency, acting as a vessel, a link between the earthly realm to the ghostly realm, formulating ‘fields of merit’, an idea which will be explored in detail in the subsequent section.

1.6 *Sangha* as an agency

As discussed above merit making is facilitated by the *sangha*, who channels its transference. In addition to the monastics’ position as ‘fields of merit’ (*naa bun*), the parks also introduce several revered monks who are considered to have superhuman abilities, which they cultivated through the practice and subsequently utilised to connect with ghosts. These include Phra Malai, who was able to travel the realms, as well as the Thai *arahants* who are represented at Wat Pi Rong Wua and Wat Santhi Nikhom. As noted, the representation of Thai saints also creates a localisation effect where they are integrated into the cosmic scheme. Pattana notes the way in which many spirits of dead Buddhist saints from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have appeared or reappeared in contemporary spirit-medium cults. Most are well-known forest monks who attained spiritual perfection and acquired supernatural charisma through years of training; some were even believed to have achieved *arahantship*. When they were still alive, these monks’ magic and amulets were very much sought after by lay believers, especially those from urban areas (2007:478). In light of this, the parks utilise these saints’ popularity, and employ the visitors’ familiarity with them to create this effect of localisation. Furthermore, they act as an extension to the expressions of Thai popular religions as noted by Jackson (1999) and Pattana (2005, 2012).

This also extends to the *sangha* in the parks, some of whom visited the realms through meditative practice and incorporate their other realm expertise in the temples’ imagery design, teachings and activities.²⁷¹ Thus, the monks’ status as fields of merit extends betwixt worlds, and draw ghosts as potential agents of assistance in their quest to escape the ghostly pathos. This also supports the above discussed notion that temples are likely places for *pret* to arrive.

²⁷⁰ This actually raises a conundrum; the scene takes place in Yama’s enclave at the edge of the hells, which leads to believe that the *pret* who ask Malai for assistance are hellish dwellers, and not the *pratapachiwi pret*. Hence, they do not have the capacity to benefit from merit made by the relatives. I can only speculate that this points towards the fluidity of the *pret*, while accepting that there are varied versions and interpretations for the its conditions.

²⁷¹ Not to mention amulets and religious artifacts which are distributed by many of the parks, See chapter 1.

An interesting example for this relationship between monks and *pret*, is the case of Wat Suthat in Bangkok. The temple holds a famous mural dating back to 1,820CE. The mural portrays a row of monks who are seen holding bowls of water, quenching the thirst of a helpless *pret* who is seen lying on the ground (see fig.50).²⁷² This mural describes the *sangha*'s fulfilment of their moral obligation to assist these suffering beings. It also further enhances the nurturing element assumed to their position as noted in chapter two.



Figure 50. *Pret* mural, Wat Suthat²⁷³

This conception of *sangha* as channels, is also manifested in the idea that revered monks with potent powers, are the only humans powerful enough to subdue malevolent ghosts.²⁷⁴ We encountered these monks earlier, looking at Smodet To who subdued the ghost of Mae Nak Phra Khanong, as well as the monks in the films *Thamnaan Krasue*, *Pret Rattankosin 69*, and *Pret Abat*. These revered monks' abilities resonate in the parks in way of imagery which revolves around these ghosts, whose stories and the story of their subduing is familiar to the visitors.

²⁷² In addition to the mural, there are myriad accounts of sightings of *pret* in the area during that period. There are many speculations as to the possibilities of actual sightings, as the temple handled bodies of people who died during a lethal plague, and these were piled up on its grounds. The temple is also located next to the giant swing (*Sao Chingcha*), which could be mistaken for a tall *pret* in the dark.

²⁷³ www.tnews.co.th/religion/322241

²⁷⁴ Parallel narrative can be detected in Japanese Sōtō temple histories which describe powerful monks who subdues demons and ordain local spirits (Bodiford, 1993).

4.7 Conclusion

This final chapter examined some of the most prominent creatures in the world of Thai Buddhism, another breed of *apāya* dwellers, the ghosts. As demonstrated, the representations of the ghostly realm in the parks include both the Buddhist *pret* and the Thai *phi* by this insinuating their cosmic fluidity as their realm includes a variety of dwellings ranging between our world, the *himapan* forest and the hells.

This imagery brings about the inseparable presence of ghosts in Thai Buddhist perception, as it alludes to their popularity as topic of countless contents that tells their stories.

Perceived as the primary receivers of merit, their appearance in the parks is linked to the merit making platform that the temples the parks are adjoined to offer. The prevalent practice of merit for the dead, which is perpetuated in the parks and facilitated by *sangha*, gets further affirmation once the ghosts' stories are unravelled in the parks.

In the scheme of merit making, the *sangha* acts as an agency of communication, fields of merit, which reaffirms their position as spiritual leaders who provide service to temple goers, and in our case the park visitors. This service in turn is reciprocated with donations that sustain the *sangha* but also perceived to be translated into merit that is transferred to the ghostly creatures.

In this way, the ghostly realm in the parks brings about their ecumenical function within the Thai Buddhist arena and situate the parks within the current movement in Thailand, where religious spaces incorporate visually stimulating and attractive spectacles created for didactic purposes, thus the preservation and dissemination of Buddhism and encourage the reciprocal relationship between laity and *sangha* that ultimately supports the temple system.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this dissertation has been to examine the way in which the representations of the *apāya* and their spatial arrangements in Thai cosmological parks assert and propagate Buddhist teachings, and contribute to the maintenance of *sangha*-laity relationship within the Thai-Theravādin frame work. This has been achieved first and foremost by constructing a comprehensive analysis which juxtaposed different methodological approaches to highlight the complexity of the parks, and the prolific context within the representations of the *apāya* in them operate.

The analysis carried out in this thesis resonates with recent scholarship that advocate a holistic approach to Thai Buddhism. Thus, it has accounted for the heterogeneity of Thai Buddhism, the practitioners' own definition of Buddhism, and Buddhism's negotiation with global modernity in demonstrating how the parks operate within the Thai Buddhist arena.

This study illustrates how the use of visual aids in educational spaces is an expression of this negotiation of Buddhism with the modern world. It is an example of Buddhist adaptability to the ever-changing needs of Buddhist practitioners. The entertaining and visually attractive aspects of the parks have didactic properties, expressed via the dissemination of the teachings. But their effect is much broader, as the operation of the parks contributes to the temple's maintenance, thus taking part in a wider movement in Thailand which adapts technological and commercial tactics to keep the temple system relevant and organic. The parks bring in revenue to the temples that operate them.

The findings in this thesis have been organised into three parts, reflecting the ramification of the representations of the *apāya* and arranged according to each of the *apāya* adobe respectively: Yama's land, the hells, and the realm of ghosts. This study demonstrated the way in which the representations in each of these sections in the parks ultimately correspond, incorporating a comprehensive set of teachings that nests in a wider cultural context.

In Chapter Two, I have demonstrated how all the depictions of Yama's land representations in the parks exhibit the moment of judgment, when the deceased accumulated *kamma* is assessed by Yama and his secretaries. This narrative reaffirms the position of Yama as the *kamma* regulator and brings about the discussion as to *kamma* and its effects. This alludes to the individual's responsibility towards its accumulation. In addition, the cases that are brought to Yama point towards a general societal deterioration that humanity is facing in light of the decline of the *sāsana*.

In Chapter Three I have unveiled the way in which the parks address the concerns discussed in Chapter Two. By interconnecting the hells and the five precepts, the hellish scenes in the parks emphasise the importance of adherence to the precepts, which not only benefits the individual's wellbeing but also acts as a tool for the optimisation of *kamma*. Furthermore, I have shown that the temples in which the parks are situated offer myriad opportunities for the visitors to take the precepts upon themselves in a formal setting. An additional issue addressed in the hellish depictions is that of societal decline, expressed via imagery that alludes to modern day issues such as drug abuse, political corruption and misbehaved *sangha*.

In Chapter Four I have delved further into the hell section of the parks, looking at the realm of ghosts. By pointing out how these are included in the hellish representations, I have highlighted the *pret*'s fluid status: they live in a realm which materializes in three different environments, namely, the hells, *wichat*, i.e. the city of the *pret*, and the human realm. I have demonstrated that this fluidity is expressed in the parks not only by way of the assimilation of ghosts into the hellish representations, but also by accounts reporting their presence in temple vicinities. This chapter has also unveiled how a process of localisation of the cosmological scheme is taking place, in the way in which both the *pret* and the Thai *phi* are grouped together in the parks, merging canonical and colloquial narratives. As maintained in the chapter, this localisation is also apparent via the imagery of Thai saints, who join Phra Malai in his cosmos crossing journeys and assumed the abilities to travel between realms.

Returning to the individual optimisation of *kamma* that I discussed in Chapter One, one of the findings of this thesis is that the representations of the ghostly abode bring about one potent method for improving *kamma*: merit. Well embedded in the Thai Buddhist value system, as scholars such as Tambiah and Keyes have discussed, the performance of merit is an effective tool in the accumulation of positive *kamma*. To this end, the ghosts are considered to be primary receptors of merit. Drawing on this understanding, I have demonstrated that, similarly to how they accommodate the undertaking of the five precepts, the temples within which the parks operate also make merit making available to the visitors, as a practice that is integral to the parks' visit. Since merit making ceremonies are facilitated by the *sangha*, the latter act as agency of inter realm connection, a link between the practitioners and the deceased.

Another layer of my investigation has been the exploration, in each chapter, of the context in which *apāya* narratives are transmitted. I have surveyed different mediums in which these narratives appear. A close reading of these materials has allowed me to point out that these ideas

correspond, thus creating a familiarity with the imagery, that echoes throughout the parks' visit. The materials I introduced included canonical texts, scriptures and murals, which as I asserted in Chapter One, are an expression of the 'primordial form' of cosmological ideas. I then also considered varied contemporary sources, as well accounts of altered states of consciousness. This survey was complemented by notes from field work I have conducted and interviews with informants, in the aim of providing a well-rounded account.

This contextualisation has been successful in unfolding the parks' complexity, and in addressing the negotiation of Buddhism with modernity as it is expressed in contemporary Thailand. In this sense, this study has operated in a Thai – Theravādin framework.

In light of these conclusions, I have also observed some themes that emerge in the parks, and that are worthy of further investigation. First, whilst the lower realms of existence are undoubtedly the most popular in the parks, leading to my choice to focus on them for this study, the parks also introduce depictions of other abodes, such as the different heavens. In addition, local scenes, historical figures and events, as well as anecdotes from the Buddha's life story also come to life via three-dimensional imagery, themes that were only discussed briefly when relevant to the topics this thesis explored. As the parks formulate a miniature model of main Buddhist themes, that extends beyond the *apāya*, an exploration of these themes can be invaluable for a deeper understating of Buddhism in contemporary Thailand.

Another issue that I touched on briefly is the seemingly ever-growing veneration of Yama and the significance of specific dates in terms of cosmic receptiveness. First, as I noted in Chapter Two on the basis of the evidence I have gathered throughout my fieldwork, the veneration of Yama as a deity seems to be a developing phenomenon within the Thai Buddhist landscape. Not only do Yama's representations in the parks receive offerings on a regular basis; his worship extends beyond the parks and is apparent in temples that house his image, amulet manufacturing and devotional practices are accommodated by mediums and teachers. Secondly, as discussed in Chapter One, there are certain calendrical points in time that are attributed to cosmic mobility, for instance, times when the gates of hells open and/or times that are considered as efficacious for practice as the energetic reception is greater. This is expressed via temple communications and teachings, adding weight to the importance of the *wan phra* – the Buddhist observance days. A further study of these two issues has the potential to expand the scope of our knowledge of the interweaving of cosmology in the system of belief in Thailand.

Finally, this study has stressed that the parks are an exemplary case of a current trend in Thai Buddhism, in which temples incorporate visually stimulating extravaganzas which are created for didactic purposes, but ultimately are designed to attract visitors and to appeal to the younger generations. It has also pointed out the digitised platforms which at present are widely used in Thailand for the dissemination of the teachings. It is beyond doubt that these two aspects are vital to explore further in order to forge a cohesive account on current developments of Thai Buddhism.

To conclude, my journey into the lower realms of existence as they are expressed in Thai cosmological parks has been fascinating, intricate and astonishing. As Dante famously said “my course was set for an unchartered sea”, and setting sail this journey opened the door to a wide world of cosmological intrigues nested in wondrous Thai viewpoints. Personally, it constantly floated existential thoughts about death, *kamma*, humanity and my own conduct in the labyrinth that is life. Thus, these parks and the people I have met along the way whilst exploring them have become a formative part of my development, as a scholar and as a human being. I hope that I have managed to convey this meaningfulness in this thesis.

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Appendix 1. Section 67 of the Thai Constitution, 20th Edition

มาตรา ๖๗ รัฐพึงอุปถัมภ์และคุ้มครองพระพุทธศาสนาและศาสนาอื่นในการอุปถัมภ์และคุ้มครองพระพุทธศาสนาอันเป็นศาสนาที่ประชาชนชาวไทยส่วนใหญ่นับถือ มาช้านาน รัฐพึงส่งเสริมและสนับสนุนการศึกษาและการเผยแผ่หลักธรรมของพระพุทธศาสนาเถรวาท เพื่อให้เกิดการพัฒนาจิตใจและปัญญา และต้องมีมาตรการและกลไกในการป้องกันมิให้มีการบ่อนทำลาย พระพุทธศาสนาไม่ว่าในรูปแบบใด และพึงส่งเสริมให้พุทธศาสนิกชนมีส่วนร่วมในการดำเนินมาตรการหรือกลไกดังกล่าวด้วย

(<http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2560/A/040/1.PDF>)

Section 67 The State ought to (act as) a patron and protector of Buddhism as well as other religions. As a patron and protector of Buddhism which is adhered to by the majority of Thais, for a long time, the state should promote and support the education and the propagation of the doctrine of Theravāda Buddhism, for the development of mind and wisdom. There should be a mechanism and measures to prevent it (Theravada Buddhism) from damage. Buddhism in any form, should encourage Buddhist to participate in the implementation of these measures.

Appendix 2. Fieldwork summary

*A note on my fieldwork:

During the time of my research which started in my MA studies in 2013 and continued until the submission of my thesis in 2022, I was based in London where I studied and worked. Getting funding and time off work for my fieldwork was intricate and so I have managed three trips during this period, one of which in 2016 was for the longest period of three months. During these trips, I did not only go to the parks but also spent time in libraries, research centres, and museums and interviewing Thai Buddhists outside the parks. I also travelled to Nan, Lamphun, Chon Buri, Phayao, Chiang Mai and several locations in Bangkok in order to study and record temples that had relevant imagery, whether its murals or statues that were of interest, or knowledgeable monks. My last trip, three weeks at the beginning of 2020 just as the COVID pandemic emerged, was dedicated to Wat Santi Nikhom in Lampang and to material collections in Bangkok libraries and temples. Returning from this trip I had a plan to quit my full-time job in London and move to Thailand where I could conduct further fieldwork to complete the needed information for my thesis submission. As luck would have it, lockdown began and traveling was completely impossible for some time. In June 2021 I have managed to move to Thailand and relocate to Lampang. However, the situation was still problematic and I was not able to travel around the country, thus I had to stay in the vicinity of Lampang with some restricted trips to Chiang Mai and Phayao. Though my time in the parks was cut short due to the situation (specifically in Wat Muang which I did not have much time to explore), I made use of all the information I did manage to collect, and using multi-disciplinary methods I believe I have managed to get a rounded account of the parks for this research.

Park	Data collection
Wat Pai Rong Wua	Recurring visits in October 2013 and August-September 2016 were done via day trips from Bangkok due to the proximity and having accommodation arranged there for affordable fees. My trips to the temple included participant observation - daily temple activities within different parts of the parks while the large part in the <i>apāya</i> sections. Interviews with a residing monk Phra Suchat Thamationo, visitors, regular temple goers, and vendors on the grounds. In addition, I have collected materials such as the temple booklet and drew diagrams of the hellish section, took pictures and recordings. While away I kept updated via the temple web pages.

Wat Po Chai Sri	I Began my work there visiting daily while staying in Nong Kai for a week in July of 2016. I then returned in August and stayed with the nuns for a period of ten days during which I took on myself a meditation practice (I was staying with the nuns as the temple did not have an active retreat program excluding <i>wan phra</i> when some of the village ladies would come to stay overnight in a separate hall). I have participated in events such as a gold pouring ceremony for the Buddha image, several merit-making ceremonies, both with the villagers and visitors, and daily activities at the temple such as morning alms and dhamma talks. I spent a lot of time in the park sketching, recording, and taking pictures. I have conducted long interviews with Phra Pawana Vimom, the temple abbot as well as the residing nuns, temple goers both locals and visitors from other provinces and students who volunteered at the temple. While away I kept updated via the temple web pages and temple publications.
Wat Santi Nikhom	I first visited Wat Santi Nikom in February 2021 and stayed there participating in a meditation retreat for a week. I then moved to Lampang, the province where the temple is located and even though during a significant amount of this time traveling was restricted, I have managed to visit for a day, numerous times, but not to stay as the retreat was closed. During my stay and visits to the temple, I have participated in activities such as: <i>Makha Buccha</i> and <i>Khao pansa</i> , school visit and retreat of the Kho Kha school, meditations retreat, daily activities, dhamma talks and merit making ceremonies. I interviewed Luang Pho Sa'aad the temple abbot, and Mae chi Chanida who is responsible for the temple's mediation retreat, temple volunteer who works alongside the abbot, the artist who created the cosmological exhibits, temple visitors, temple vendors, students who visited and the practitioners with whom I have participated in the retreat. I spent a lot of time in the park sketching, recording, and taking pictures. While away kept updated via the temple web pages and I was also in touch with Mae Chi Chanida and the temple Line Group.
Wat Pa Lak Roi	Visited for a week during July 2016, rented nearby accommodation and travelled to the temple each morning. My trips to the temple included participant observation - daily temple activities within different parts of the parks while the large part in the <i>apāya</i> sections. Interviews with volunteers at the temple and the temple founder who was staying at another temple at the time Phra Kru Siriphatarakon, visitors, regular temple goers and vendors on the grounds. In addition, I have collected materials such as the temple booklet and drew diagrams of the hellish section, took pictures and recorded. While away kept updated via the temple web pages. Plans to return in 2020 were averted due to COVID.

Wat Saen Suk	I first visited Wat Saen Suk, on daily visits over in week in October of 2013. I then returned in 2016. Staying at a rented accommodation at the nearby Bang Sean beach I made my daily trips to the parks where I spent time sketching diagrams of the hellish section, taking pictures and recording Interviews with visitors, vendors on temple grounds, and in 2013 I had two young brothers who live in the temple area (<i>moo baan</i>) joining me on a daily basis, besides interviewing them I was benefiting from a detailed tour they gave me on temple grounds and hearing their experiences having hell as their playground. For some reason both periods I visited in the temple there were no available <i>sangha</i> on the temple grounds as having an additional <i>vihara</i> built at a different area of the village, they were supervising construction there. I to return in 2020 and set meeting for interviews, however my Plans were averted due to COVID. While away kept updated via the temple web pages.
Wat Mae Kaet Noi	I first visited Wat Mae Kaet Noi in October a 2013 for three days, and returned for about a week on and off in August- September of 2016, my last visit was in 2021. During those visits (excluding the last one) I was staying with a friend who had a house in Chiang Mai from which I travelled to the temple. During my time at the park, I have conducted participant observation - daily temple activities within in the <i>apāya</i> sections. Two interviews with the abbot Phra Kru Wisaanjariyakun. visitors, and regular temple goers including local students that came to the park daily being adjacent to their school. In addition, I have collected materials such as the temple booklet and drew diagrams of the hellish section, taking pictures and recordings. I was also very lucky to participate in the first celebration of <i>wan ploy phi</i> , on the 14 - 15 September 2016, which is unique to the temple. I joined the preparations that began the day before the event, which included a consecration ceremony and the construction of the stage and seating area, the day of the event I have watched the parade, joined the students from Mae Jo university who were responsible for different operations, watched the light and sound show and interviewed visitors who participated in the event.
Wat Muang	I first heard about Wat Muang from a friend just towards the end of my visit in 2016. I then went there on a day trip from Bangkok to explore its grounds. I found the park to be extremely interesting and during my visit there I've managed to sketch diagrams of the park, taking pictures and interview some visitors and vendors who owned shops on temple grounds, I have also had a friend from Bangkok joining me and I took the opportunity to experience the park with her and learning about her perspective as a Thai Buddhist, I got the temple map and booklet and planned to return. Unfortunately, due to COVID my plans were cancelled. Luckily McDaniel published his work on the temple shortly after my visit there so I managed to benefit from his research and while away kept updated via the temple web pages.

Appendix 3. Parks Overview

Park's name	Date established	Abbot's name	Location&area	Reason established
Wat Pai Rong Wua	1957 Apāya section 1971	Founder: Luang Pho Khom Current abbot: Phra Khru Suwanchinawat	Song Phi Nong District, Suphan Buri	Creation of awareness amongst temple goers
Wat Wang Sean Suk Wisuthiwararam	1986	Founder: Luang Pho Nennai Pothisato Current: Phrakhru Samuwinay Chatawiro	Saen Suk, Bang Saen, Chonburi	Learning centre
Wat Mae Kaet Noi	Main <i>ubosot</i> built 1932 Educational Park: construction began 90s officially inaugurated 2009 and continues to present day	Park founder and current abbot: Phra Khru Wisaanjariyakun	San Sai, Chiang Mai	Educational Park
Wat Po Chai Sri	1994 - 1996	Phra Pawana Wimon	Ban Pue, Udon Thani	Didactic tool
Wat Muang	temple 1984 Park - the 90's Large Buddha image 1992	Founder: Luang Pho Kasem Achansuphoo Current: Phra Kru Supaturakhet	Hua Taphan, Ang Thong	Buddhist teachings learning centre
Wat Pa Lak Roi	Temple 1977/1984 Park 1991	Phra Khru Siriphatarakon	Non Thai, Nakohn Ratchasima	Educational Park
Wat Santi Nikhom	2012	Luang Pho Sa'aad	Kho Kha, Lampang	Educational centre

Appendix 4. Astrology and Divination

Astrology as a divination technique is based on signs read from the position of celestial bodies.²⁷⁵ In Siam, the royal court imported the Indian system of astrology known as *Jyotisha*, meaning “light, heavenly body,” probably via Sri Lanka (Baker and Pong pai chit, 2013: 221). As noted in the *Traiphum*, the alignment of stars can be an indication of occurrences:

“The space in the middle between the region of the *cakkavala* mountain range and the *Yugandhara* Mountain range is the area where there are paths for the sun, the moon, the planets and the multitude of stars, and where they travel back and forth in an orderly fashion in paths that enables us to know the years and the months, the days and the nights, and to know the events both good and bad” (TrpR, 277).

Already rooted in the *Traiphum*, the conjunction between astrology and Buddhism, specifically Buddhist cosmology, is evident in Thailand by way of astrological practices and representations that take place in many Thai temples, as well as in the parks.

Astrology and divination play an essential part in the parks on several levels. First, some of the parks include depictions of the Thai zodiac signs, as well as other astrological elements. Amongst the parks studied here, Wat Saen Suk, Wat Pa Lak Roi and Wat Santi Nikhom boast depictions of the twelve Thai zodiac signs, the *Pi Naksat*,²⁷⁶ and images for Buddhas according to days of the week that are available for the visitors for worship.²⁷⁷ Wat Wang Saen Suk includes an interactive astrological prediction wheel (*chakra sipson rasi*). This is a circular structure that represents the twelve zodiac signs. The visitors are instructed to walk around the installation a number of times, according to their gender and age, and collect the prophecy on which they “land” at a nearby stall.²⁷⁸

Second, some of the abbots in the affiliated temples to the parks that are presented in this research, namely Luang Pho Sa’ad of Wat Santi Nikhom and Phra Pawana Vimom of Wat Po Chai

²⁷⁵ Thai Astrology is divided to 10 types: 1. Astrology 2. Physiognomy 3. Chiromancy 4. Graphology 5. Cartomancy 6. Oneiromancy 7. Psychometry 8. Clairvoyance 9. Presage 10. Prophecy (Phrakru Prachotkitkoson, 2020:227).

²⁷⁶ Represented by different animals in a similar fashion to Chinese astrology.

²⁷⁷ To this end it is also interesting to note a tradition according to which Particular pagodas/temples that house an important Buddhist relic, are assigned as unique and potent for certain birth years, so that those who were born in this year are advised to visit their birth year prospective pagoda at least once in their life time. Examples for these birth year temples include: Wat Prathat Chae Haeng in Nan which is assigned to the birth year of the rabbit and Wat Phra Borommathat in Tak, assigned to the year of the pig. A visual representation of the assigned pagodas and their respective locations on Thailand map, along with a detailed explanation as to each’ properties can be found in Chiang Mai Lanna Folklife Centre. For more see <https://www.mcot.net/view/XB6B4T2l>

²⁷⁸ To this end there are also specific liturgical pieces that are assigned for the astrological years. For example, the northern folding books (*samut khoi*) that are used at Wat Santi Nikhom include the Nemiraj, the Nimi Jātaka and it is ascribed to the year of the rabbit as noted on the cover.

Sri, practice divination and use astrological calculations while attending to their followers. These practices, for which the abbots are well known, attract visitors who ultimately support the parks and also act as a spiritual cachet for the abbots' cosmological expertise. Astrology's strong hold in Thai tradition and its application by monks is illustrated in the Thai epic *Khun Chang Khun Paen*:

“The abbot had nothing left to tell him. He patted Kaeo on the back and the head and said, ‘That’s the end of my gut, my dear Novice Kaeo. There’s only the big treatise with the heart formulas and mantras. I’ve been collecting them since I was a youth. Until now in my old age, I haven’t shared them with anyone. This is the extent of my knowledge. Because I’m fond of you, Kaeo, I’ll pass it on to you. There’s everything—invulnerability, robbery, raising spirits—something for every occasion’.”

(Trans. Baker and Phongpaichit, 2013: 221)

For example, the revered Somdet To whose status as a ‘magic monk’ will be discussed in length in Chapter Four, was well known for his divination skills. Astrological knowledge is employed by the abbots At Wat Santi Nikhom and Wat Po Chai Sri, who are well known for their divination and vigour, and attract followers who arrive in search of readings and blessings. Their practices include observation and prognosis that can be general, or as a response to specific questions. At Wat Santi Nikhom, once the abbot has given his words of advice, a note is given to the follower. In it, detailed instructions as to number of incense sticks to be used for veneration of the Buddha of the day image, the amount of food to give in alms, and the number of fish or other sea animals to release, all determined in accordance to the practitioner age and day of birth.

A third significant element of Thai Buddhist astrology is that of designated dates and time when cosmological movements are said to occur. That is, times in which the gates of hells open or when cosmological boundaries are more lenient so that movement between realms and tuning to outwardly powers is more plausible. To this end, a warning notifying of the opening of the gate of hells that was circulated in the Wat Santi Nikom’s Line group will be detailed in chapter two. Not only that, I found that the discussion in regards to cosmological mobility was very present in this specific temple. This was expressed via conversations I had with practitioners and *sangha* where they told stories of encounters with other worldly beings. In this way for example, on the night of Macha Bucha celebration in February of 2020, at the end of a nightly service a shape that was formed by the candles in a blessed water basin was identified by the abbot as the shape of a *devata*. The presence of other worldly beings that night was also asserted by a practitioner who told me that she saw several spirits standing outside of the *vihara* while the chanting was conducted (due

to their low state of existence these beings are not able to enter a holy place such as the *vihara*), in search for merit to be shared.²⁷⁹

Indeed, Macha Bucha day is an example for a propitious time, a time in which the cosmic fluidity mentioned above takes place. Buddhist observance days, *wan phra* are considered to be auspicious²⁸⁰. As I was told by Mae Chi Chanida of Wat Santi Nikhom, the night before *wan phra*, which is referred to as *wan khon*, acts as a preliminary point in time when the lines between worlds get blurred. The actual day of *wan phra* is a specifically receptive period in time, all the more during Buddhist festivals, such as Macha Bucha.²⁸¹ The Dhammakaya movement webpage published a detailed article explaining the importance of *wan phra*.²⁸² According to their teachings all the *wan phra* in the month are auspicious, as they build up to the 15th day of the waning moon (*sip haa kham*), which is considered to be a “big *wan phra*” (*wan phra yai*).²⁸³ This is the day in which the *devata* meet in the second heaven of Tāvātīṃsa to discuss matters to do with their realm, as well as the reports brought to them by the *Cāturmahārājikakāyika*, the four kings,²⁸⁴ which include detailing of events from the human world. Merit during these days is perceived to be even more beneficial as the gods rejoice in it. It is said that on this day the *yomaban* in the hells will stop the torturing of denizens for a day and the judgment by Yama will be suspended for this day as well.²⁸⁵ This is a day in which dedication to the beings in the lower realms will be transferred and good opportunity to make a merit for the hell dwellers,²⁸⁶ specifically for deceased relatives, arises.²⁸⁷

Another interesting aspect of astrology is that *devatas* are assigned to planets. Yama is associated with Uranus, *Dao marutayo*, literally meaning the death planet (Chamnong, 2016). From an astrological perspective, Yama’s planet, Uranus, comes to orbit in a world that is believed

²⁷⁹ Pern in conversation with the author, July 2021.

²⁸⁰ Months commence with the waxing phase from new moon until full moon (anurak pasadopon, p.143-150)

²⁸¹ *Wan khon* literary meaning shaving day, as it is the day when ascetics shave their heads and eyebrows as part of their renunciation.

²⁸² มหัสจรรย์วันพระ วันพระเกิดเหตุการณ์ไต่บังทั้งในนรกและสวรรค์ https://www.dmc.tv/pages/buddha_biography

²⁸³ While the full moon days are considered especially potent for cosmological movements from a Thai Buddhist perspective the Chinese ghost festival, also celebrated on the 15th night but is annual and held on the 15th night of the seventh month, is celebrated in Thailand amongst Chinese descent communities as well as Thai practitioners. During the year 2021 when the covid pandemic situation was extremely severe in Thailand there was an extensive coverage of the festival and a discussion emerged as to the opening of the gates of hell <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GD3BOR-4Gx0>

²⁸⁴ The four kinds of the four continents respectively, see page 30.

²⁸⁵ I could not find any support to this narrative in the sources I have surveyed.

²⁸⁶ This corresponds with *Wan Ploy Phi* - the day of release of the ghosts that also occurs on the 15th night as detailed in chapter 4.

²⁸⁷ https://www.dmc.tv/pages/buddha_biography/

to be dangerous, and the fear of death arises amongst human (ibid:106).²⁸⁸ This idea of death, its emanation and *kammatic* effluence is parallel to the ideas that come to life via Yama land's imagery in the parks that is detailed in Chapter Two.

As the idea of *kamma* plays an essential part in the discussion of the lower realms of existence and rebirth, there arises the question of how divination and astrological determinations address the faith that was designed by one's *kammatic* accumulation. Phrakru Prachotkitkoson discusses the role of astrology within the constellation of *kamma*. He explains that results of *kamma* always materialise, but astrology helps to determine when and where, thus astrology is a tool that points towards positive conduct. Still, astrology has its limits and *kamma* that was only generated in the past cannot be changed, only present *kamma* can be altered (2020). Sinai, who studied diviners (*mo du*) in Bangkok discusses the way in which Thai Buddhists routinely "make cosmologies". He recounts how one of the diviners told him that "if practiced 'properly', divination amounts to an act of merit-making (*tham bun*), because it helps people. No diviner should aim to reduce a client's negative *kamma*, as this is non-negotiable. However, some forms of merit-making may counter the effect of one's bad karma. Among these was meditation" (2018: 418).

As this section maintains, astrology and divination bring about an additional layer that is added to the parks' complexity. Not only since the representations in the park include astrological elements, but as the interrelation between astrology and cosmology is essential to the understanding of the reorientations of the *apāya* in the parks. In addition, practices of divination on the temple grounds attract visitors whose donations ultimately support the parks.

²⁸⁸ To this end as this thesis is written we are said to be in the midst of the Uranus orbit, which correlates with the covid pandemic, as this time brings about death and disease. It is said that the situation will clear around the end of July 2022 once this period ends.

Appendix 5. The Hells in accordance with the Nimi Jātaka no.541²⁸⁹

1. **Vetaraṇī River Hell** - The wretched river Vetaraṇī river which is steaming, mixed with caustic soda, glowing like the flames of the fire. Reason for birth in this hell: Those who are powerful in their life in the world, but corrupt, and harass the weak: vicious practices and cruel deeds bring forth evil, and these people fall into Vetaraṇī.
2. **Dog Hell** - The place where they are eaten by dogs and suchlike. Brown dogs and many coloured vultures, terrible flocks of crows that prey! Reason for birth in this hell: there are those who are envious, mean-spirited, speaking contemptuously to ascetics and *brahmins*, who harm and harass.
3. **Copper Hell** - Those who travel the wrath with their bodies ablaze, and are beaten with hot lumps. Reason for birth in this hell: Those who are in the world of life really sinful to men and women who are innocent those who harm and harass.
4. **Charcoal Flame Hell** - These people lie pelted with lumps, others sift in pit of embers, men grieving with their bodies burnt all over. Reason for birth in this hell: whoever bears witness for the sake of a guild, and makes the money disappear. They deceive people.
5. **Copper Pot Hell** -With their bodies blazing, set on fire; a great copper caldron is seen. Reason for birth in this hell: whoever harms and harass a virtuous man, an ascetic, or a *brahmin*.
6. **Copper Chain Hell** -They pluck them and then wring them by the neck and fling them into boiling water. Reason for birth in this hell: those who in the world of life are vicious, seizing birds and tormenting them, having harmed living beings.
7. **Chaff River Hell** -There flows a river, with deep water and shallow banks that is easily approachable. Overpowered by thirst, men drink there, but as they drink, the water turns to chaff. Reason for birth in this hell: They are those who mixed with good grain chaff. These malpractitioners sold it to the buyer.
8. **Sharp spears Hell** -With spikes and spears and arrows, they pierce weeping beings on both sides. Reason for birth in this hell: malpractitioners, taking what is not given as they ply their livelihood: grain, bread, money, coins, goats, cattle and buffalos.
9. **Smash and Hit Hell** -There are some beings tied by the neck. Others cut and others torn. Reason for birth in this hell: butchers, pig merchants, and fishermen who kill cattle, buffalos, and goats.
10. **Dirt Hell** -There is a lake filled with urine and faeces, with a terrible stench, impure, emitting a putrid odour. Overcome by hunger men imbibe there. Reason for birth in this hell: whoever, whilst

²⁸⁹ Trans. Appleton and Shaw, 2015.

discharging responsibilities are continually devoted to harming others. Foolish they that injure friends, drink urine.

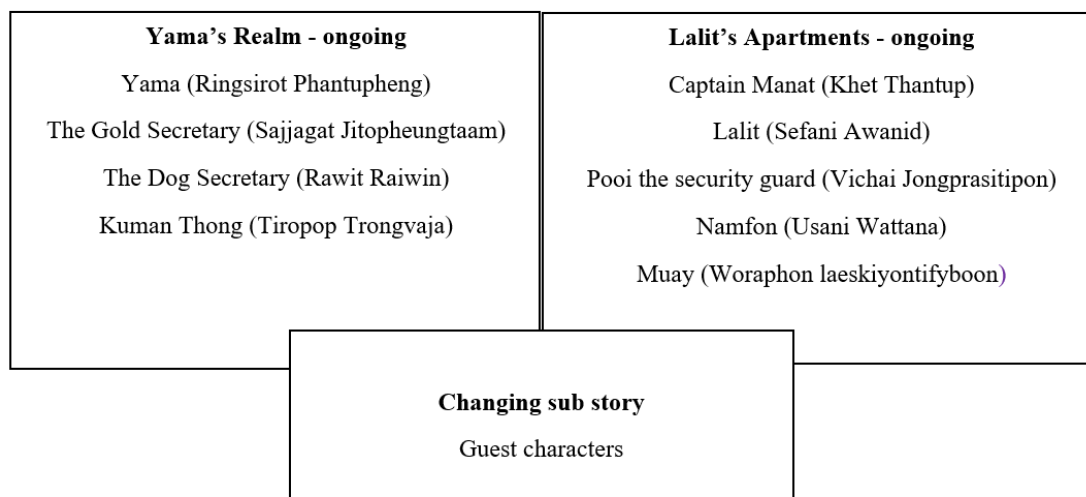
11. **Pus and Blood Hell** - There is a lake filled with blood and pus foul smelling, impure and with a putrid smell; overpowered with heat men drink there. Reason for birth in this hell: whoever in the world kills mother, father or in profound offence, an *arahant*.
12. **Hooks Hell** - A tongue pierced by a hook, like a shield hit by a hundred spikes, like fish wriggling when thrown on the ground. They lie having swallowed a hook. Reason for birth in this hell: those men who in the market place lower the price, bit by bit and from greed for wealth, through crooked practice, keep their crooked practice hidden, as for the killing of a fish.
13. **Red iron Mountain Hell** - These women are the beings who lie having swallowed the hook. These women have limbs which are broken, stretching out (their arms) and weeping, smeared and stained with blood and pus, like cattle cut in slaughterhouse. They are dug all the time into a portion of the ground, their bodies ablaze while massy weights pass over them. Reason for birth in this hell: those who in the world of life were of good family and did evil impure actions, they who in the world of life were arrogant and proud and abandoned their husband. For the sake of lust and play giving pleasure to another.
14. **Fire Pond Hell** - Grabbing them and dragging them by the feet, they make them go head first into the *niraya*. Reason for birth in this hell: whoever in the world of life acts badly and seduces a wife of another, his most precious possession.
15. **Repulsive Animals Hell** - Various and many methods of torture. With much wailing, are shown in the hells. Reason for birth in this hell: whoever in the world of life has an extreme wrong view, bring forth evil.

Appendix 6. Yama's land representations overview

Yama's land location in the park	Yama	Yama's secretaries	Yama's emissaries (yomatoot) and Yama's guards (yomaban)	Arrival scene
Wat Po Chai Sri the edge of the hell area next to a cave	Yama's image is seen seated, orange in colour, adorned with regalia	The merit secretary is positioned to Yama's right On Yama's left-hand side, the <i>baap</i> secretary	The yomatoot and the yomaban are brown in colour wearing red loin cloth.	One of Yama's hands points towards the cave and the other is placed on an open book. The book is depicted open so that two pages are seen: wrongdoers/meritorious Accordingly: the wrongdoers, a naked man and women, who are kneeling on the floor in front of him while detained with chains by the <i>yomatoot</i> . The meritorious: two elderly people seated on an elevated platform, dressed in white temple clothes, the kind used in temple retreats.
Wat Muang entrance to the hell section of the park. The representation is adjacent to a depiction of a Thai funeral	Yama is red in colour and dressed in Thai style regalia, and is seen holding a sceptre adorned with a skull. He is seated in the centre between his two secretaries	on the left the <i>baap</i> secretary, dark in colour with a black book laid in front of him, and on his right the merit secretary, coloured in white and before him a golden book. both secretaries are dressed in traditional Thai attire.	The <i>yomatoot</i> and the <i>yomaban</i> are dark brown in colour wearing red loin cloth.	Only wrongdoers: Facing Yama and his secretaries are a <i>yomatoot</i> with a man and a woman, their genitals merely covered in tiny cloth as they are detained in chains and kneeling in a <i>wai</i> position. Misdeeds written on a book in front of Yama.
Wat Mae Keat Noi A pathway created by images of deceased who are brought to be judged by Yama, and are depicted while cuffed and adjoined one another in chains. The detainees are arranged in two lines, one on each side, in between which the visitor is invited to walk	Yama can be seen seated, situated centrally, red in colour with Thai royal dress and crown. In his hands, he is holding a pen adorned with a skull with which he is depicted writing onto a folding book (<i>samut khoi</i>).	The <i>baap</i> secretary red in colour, bearded, and has horns on his head. He is dressed in a cloth knotted with a skull shaped buckle. Holding a pen adorned with a demonic looking cap, and with the other hand he points towards a lower point, the merit secretary. red, bearded and has horns on this head. He is wearing Thai style attire which is adorned with gold, and has a golden necklace and bracelets. He is holding a pen with a golden cap.	The <i>yomaban</i> are dark brown in colour wearing red loin cloth.	Misdeeds are written on a plate which is pinned to an image of a black dog, While good deeds golden plate. The scene is located centrally while a group of chained wrong doers in waiting to be judged.

Appendix 7. *Yomaban Jao Ka*: premise and two episodes

Three story lines in *Yomaban Jao Ka*



The first episode I will discuss is named *adit ny jai* – the past is in the heart, and discusses attachment to the past. It was aired in sections between 24th - 31th March 2014. In this episode we meet a family who resides at the same *soi* (a side street branching of a main street) as Lalit's building.

A happy family with a father, a mother and a baby drive on a highway on a beautiful day. Suddenly a horrible accident occurs. We then see the mum, Pran, a little while later checking out of a mental institute into which she was sent after not being able to cope with the loss of her husband and child in that terrible accident. Pran arrives to work as a nanny for a family that lives next to Lalit's apartments. Pran proves to be very diligent and she is well liked by the kids. However, when no one is around Pran treats the kids as if they were hers. She even breastfeeds the baby while mumbling with an insane look in her eyes "my family, my home, my baby". There are moments in which Pran recalls the horrible accident and then she is determined to turn this family into her own. Yama and his entourage watch her and discuss between themselves the way in which Pran is attached, and how her actions are controlled by her emotions. At a different scene Yama speaks about the suffering that beings on earth must go through which is part of the human condition. Pran continues with her plot and takes advantage of the mother Nat's absence, who works long hours. She gets closer and closer to the father, Phan, who is unhappy with his wife who is never home. Lalit feels suspicious about Pran "something is not right with her". Eventually, the family realises that Pran is not what she proclaims to be. The family decides to let her go, but in

an outburst of rage she attacks them with a knife. They manage to calm her down and then she declares she is going to the temple to make a merit (tamboon) and she leaves. Yama and his entourage then appear and Yama says that one should be careful with his attachment as his acts will eventually be reattributed accordingly.

In this episode a few issues are raised. The first is attachment and the way in which it leads one to commit wrongdoings. Pran misfortunate loss took over her and drove her to act immorally, trying to own what is not hers and break a family. Craving is understood as ‘attachment’ (*upādāna*). The things one likes evoke desires that turn into craving and lead that person to take, or try to take possession of things (Gethin, 1998:71). Pran’s attachment to the family that she lost and her lack of ability to ‘let go’ leads her to try and take possession of what is not hers.

Another issue that arises is the desired behavior of a mother and a wife, which is being challenged by the mother of the family, Nat. Pran manages to proceed with her plans to take over the family successfully at first, due to Nat’s absence. Always at work until late night, not taking care of the house and the kids, Nat’s failure as a ‘good’ mother and wife is emphasized by the presence of Pran. Women are often portrayed in Thailand as subordinated subjects that are dependent on men and limited within the domestic sphere. Panitchpakdi’s study suggests that women and gender representations in Thai soap operas and the ideologies surrounding their production provide rich sites for the analysis of conflicts and contestations of dominant gender ideologies and cultural identities in contemporary Thailand (Panitchpakdi, 2007:14). In the same way that the mother character in *Tom*, the soap that Panitchpakdi examined, depicts ‘imperfect motherhood’, revealing an unresolved tension between two sets of ideologies: feminism and Buddhism (ibid, 14), so does Nat whose neglect of the family risks the family’s well-being.

At the end of the episode Pran says she will go to make a merit at the temple which resonates with the notions of merit I have discussed earlier. This resolution of the story accompanied by Yama’s warning to the viewers from the risk in attachment is resolved on earth. The next of episode I will present has a different ending, one that takes place in Yama’s realm.

The discussed episode is named *sai lab* – undercover agent, and deals with criminal activities. It was aired in sections between 29th April - 5th May 2014. In this episode we meet an undercover agent who participated in an operation which cooperated with Captain Manat’s police headquarters. It is important to mention that this episode is the last one in the show and therefore is extremely packed with events including the long-awaited engagement of Lalit and Manat.

The episode starts with a big arrest during which Captain Manat meets Pupaa who operates as an undercover agent within a drug dealing gang. Manat then meets another police officer, named Muat who, as we find out later, operates as an informant for the drug dealers. Thonchai, the senior officer at Manat's station, plans for this to be his last job before he retires. He is eager to participate in the capturing of this drug dealer after which he plans to leave the police force and "lead a normal life". Around Lalit's apartment, Kuman Thong hears Manat's conversation with his friends in which he tells them he is planning to propose to Lalit. Excited, Kuman Thong goes back to Yama's realm to tell Yama and the two secretaries. Yama then tells him not to be too enthusiastic because the future does not matter, it is more important to think about the present- no need to feel happiness or sorrow about something that has yet to happen. Kuman Thong gets upset saying that Manat and Lalit deserve to be happy as they never done any wrong. Yama then tells him "Yes, they are good in this life, but you never know what they did in their former lives". Kuman Thong mutter and Yama and the secretaries laugh. After that we see drug dealers preparing for a drug transaction. Yama and his entourage appear and Yama says "in this game there is no winner, karma will assure retribution". Thonchai overhears Muat's phone call with Plat, who is the head of the drug gang. Muat kills Thonchai as he does not want the police force to realize he works for the drug gang. Later on, in an action-packed scene, Manat arrives to a warehouse in which the drug dealers operate. The gang members see Manat and capture him. They send Pupaa to kill him but he gives Manat a bullet proof vest so it will look like he killed him, while Manat is actually not harmed. Later that day, Manat arrives with his fellow officers and they then trick Plat to sell them drugs. When they reveal their true identity, a struggle starts in the end of which Pupaa stabs Plat as self-defence. Plat eventually dies from his wounds. Pupaa, in search of revenge of Thonchai's death, goes to find Muat. He then runs his car into Muat's car and they both immediately arrive to Yama's realm where Plat is present as well. The dog secretary points towards Plat and Muat and say that these two killed and sold drugs. Yama then says they will be sent to lokanta narok He then points at them with his sceptre and they disappear to hell. After that, he turns to Pupaa and says to him that his job as a police men benefits humanity on earth, he lets him go back to earth to continue his duty until the next time they meet. In the end of the episode, Manat returns safely to Lalit and all the friends join together. It is the grand ending of the show - Yama and his entourage stand on a rock and Yama says addressing the viewers: "everyone has to die; you might not know how and when but it's inevitable – when you must die you will die. The world is destroyed by lack of morality. You should be good and act virtuously, do not think that if

you do wrong in small doses it is not registered. We watch you all the time... When the time will come, we will meet!”

This episode discusses the issue of crime, drug dealing and wrong conduct by criminals who operate outside of the Law. As mentioned earlier drug abuse is an apparent problem in Thai society and the portrayal of the vicious, heartless and threatening drug dealers situate them as an evil force. As part of their illegal trading, they also kill which is a sever sin, breaking the first of the five precepts discussed earlier. When arriving to be judged by Yama, Plat and Muat are immediately sent to one of the most dreadful hells – illustrating the way in which *kamma* caught up with them.

Another dimension in this episode, is the positive representation of the police. Yama releases Pupaa from hell and lets him return to life in order to continue his duty as a police officer. The dichotomy of good and evil is apparent here in the form of criminals vs. law enforcements agents. A positive view of the police resonates in Thai media, the multifaceted history of the royal Thai police (*samnakngan tamruat haeng chat*) reveals that contemporary Thai policing and its premodern precedents is intricately connected to Thai political and cultural life (Haanstad, 2013: 447). However, this should be taken with a grain of salt. Ratanapinsiri discussed the need of police reform due to the fact that they are widely seen as the one of the most corrupt government agencies in Thailand. (Ratanapinsri, 499:2013). The episode also talks about the hard life of police officers, working in such a dangerous and stressful line of work. Tonchai tragic death during his last operation after stating that he wants ‘lead a normal life’ emphasized both the job risk and the continuous stress that police officers face.

Appendix 8. The hells – a Synopsis

Mahā Narok

In these eight large hells there are no *yomaban*. The structure of the *Mahā Narok* is described in the *Bālapaṇḍitasutta*.²⁹⁰

Four-cornered and with four gates

It is divided into equal portions

Encircled by an iron wall, with a roof of iron above

Its incandescent floor is made of glowing iron

All round it stands a hundred yojana square.

The *Mahā Narok* are as follows:

1. ***Sañjīva*** – in this hell, the hell denizens are slashed with spheres and axes. After their flesh is removed to the bone, a wind blows and resurrects them. In this way, they are killed and revived continually. This hell is the result of killing animals, order others to kill animals, or carrying out a robbery using weapons (Lkp 69-70, TrpR 66, NS 51).
2. ***kālasutta*** – in this hell, the hell denizens are tied with black rope to a flaming floor. Their bodies are then slashed so that their skin is ripped apart completely. This is the result of abusing animals (Lkp 70-71, TrpR 67, NS 53).
3. ***Sañghāta*** – here, the hell denizens' bodies are half human half animal. They dwell between two large still mountains that roll over them and crush them, while intense fire is blazing. This is the result of killing or burning animals (Lkp 73-74, TrpR 66-67, NS 55).
4. ***Roruva*** – in this hell the hell denizens are trapped in steel lotuses while a blazing fire erupts and burns them, causing them to scream in anguish. This is the result of beheading animals, and assaulting people (Lkp 75, TrpR 66-67, NS 57).
5. ***Mahā Roruva*** – similar to *Roruva* hell, however to a greater extent as the fire in this hell is acidic (Lkp 75-76, TrpR 66-67, NS 59).
6. ***Tāpana*** – in this hell the hell denizens are skewered on steel spires, while fierce fire surrounds them. This is the result of hunting (Lkp 76-77, TrpR 66-67, NS 61).

²⁹⁰ SN 12.19

7. *Mahā Tāpana* – in this hell the denizens are forced to climb a fiery steel mountain. They are then blown off it by strong wind and fall onto large steel spikes. This is the result of hunting (Lkp 77, TrpR 66-67, NS 63).

8. *Avīci* – in this hell the extent of the fire is greater than all other hells so that the hell denizens are severely burned. At times they see the hell gates open and they run towards them in an attempt to escape,²⁹¹ but they are burned to ashes before reaching the gates. This is the result of killing one's parents, monks or ascetics, or causing schism within the *Saṅgha* (Lkp 77-78, TrpR 66-67, NS 65).²⁹²

Usot Narok

The 16 *Usot Narok* that surround the *Sañjīva* hell are as follows (TrpW 35):

1. *Vetarāṇi* – in this hell there are large flames shooting upwards. The *yomaban* chase the hell denizens and beat them with weapons such as large knives, swords and spears. The hell denizens try to escape by going into a river called *Vetarāṇi*. This river is filled with tangled rattans that have huge thorns made out of fiery red iron and are in constant flame. Underneath the rattans there are lotus leaves that cut the hell denizens as they descend further into the river. In addition, the salty water of the river stings their wounds, and then turn into flames. This is the result of harming others and taking property by force (TrpW 28-29, TrpR 71-73, NJ 57-58).

2. *Sunakha* – in this hell there are dogs of four colors: white, black, red and yellow. These dogs are as big as elephants and their barks are as loud as thunders. They attack the hell denizens and tear their bodies apart. In this hell there are also vultures that have blazing beaks and bodies as large as wagons. The vultures pick the flesh and the eyes of the hell denizens. This is the result of disrespecting monks, parents, elders or teachers (TrpW 29, TrpR 73, NJ 58).

3. *Sorajati* – in this hell the floor is made of fiery red iron which is constantly ablaze, and on which the hell denizens must walk. The *yomaban* chase them with clubs as large as the trunk of a tree. Between the beating and the flames, the denizens' flesh disintegrates into powder and they die, but then they revive again. This is the result of abusing or shaming people who adhere to the precepts (TrpW 30, TrpR 73, NJ 58).

²⁹¹ The glimpse of hope which is endowed on the hell denizens for a fragment and then taken away, seem to be exceptionally cruel. This has many philosophical implications that might form an interesting discussion as to the notions of hell and suffering.

²⁹² These offences are grouped as the *ānantarika-kamma*, which will be discussed below when looking at the story of the delinquent monk, Devadatta.

4. **Angārakāsuma** – here the *yomaban* chase the hell denizens with swords and red iron clubs into a pit of fiery coals, where the denizens roar loudly while their bodies are charred. This is the result of tricking people into making a merit but using the alms for one’s own benefit (TrpW 30, TrpR 74, NJ 58).

5. **Lohakumbhī**– in this hell the hell denizens are held by their feet and casted into huge flaming iron cauldrons that are as large as mountains. This is the result of hurting monks or ascetics (TrpW 30-31, TrpR 74-75, NJ 59).

6. **Lohakumbha** - here the *yomaban* chase the hell denizens with flaming iron ropes, which they twist around the hell denizens’ necks until their heads fall. They then insert the heads into boiling cauldrons. Then, a new head appears on the hell denizen’s body and this repeats again and again. This is the result of killing living beings by slushing their throats (TrpW 31, TrpR 75, NJ 59).

7. **Thūsapalāca** – this hell is covered by red fiery iron plates which blaze up and burn the hell denizens. The hell denizens then jump into a river which appears clear to seek for relief, but then the water turns into atrophied rice and chaff. The denizens try to eat the chaff but when it reaches their stomach it fires up and shut out from their anuses. This is the result of mixing atrophied rice and straw with good grain for sale (TrpW 31-32, TrpR 75-76, NJ 59).

8. **Lagātīhasala**– In this hell the *yomaban* throw lances and harpoons at the hell denizens, causing injuries all over their bodies. This is the result of stealing property and being deceitful (TrpW 32, TrpR 76, NJ 59).

9. **Śīlakatta**– in this hell the *yomaban* have fiery red iron ropes which they use to lasso the hell denizens and drag them onto fiery plates. After being slashed, the denizens’ bodies reassemble and this reoccurs again and again. This is the result of hunting, fishing or butchering (TrpW 32, TrpR 76, NJ 59-60).

10. **Morāpamilaha** – in this hell the hell denizens live in a river full of feces which has a strong stench. The denizens are forced to drink the river contents. This is the result of embezzling, harming or killing one’s own friends (TrpW 32-33, TrpR 77, NJ 60).

11. **Lohitapubba** – here the hell denizens live in a large river full of blood and pus which they are forced to eat. When the composite reaches their stomach, it turns into fire which burns them and shuts out from their anuses. This is the result of harming one’s parents, monks, or others who keep the precepts (TrpW 33, TrpR 77, NJ 60).

12. **Lohabaḷisa**– in this hell the *yomaban* have pairs of tongs which they use to grasp the tongues of the denizens, and pull them out. They then hook the denizens’ tongues with fish hooks, which are made of red iron which is constantly aflame, and are as large as the trunks of a palm tree. The hell denizens are then being forced to lie flat on their backs on plates which shoot fire, and they are skinned and stretched in the same way as a cowhide, until they shudder, drop feces and vomit blood. This is the result of deceitfulness which causes others damages and loss (TrpW 33, TrpR 77-78, NJ 60).

13. **Sañghāta** – here, the *yomaban* stab the hell denizens and cut them into small pieces until pus and blood is extracted from their bodies. Their bodies then sink into fiery red iron plates so they cannot move. Then, a large fiery red iron mountain rolls towards them and crushes them. The denizens return to form but immediately another mountain rolls over and crushes them. At times these two mountains crush the denizens from both sides like a sugar cane being squeezed. This is the result for adultery that is committed with another’s wife or by a woman betraying her husband (TrpW 33-34, TrpR 78, NJ 60).²⁹³

14. **Vasira** – in this hell the *yomaban* grab the hell denizens by their feet, hang their heads into a pit, and then beat their bodies with fiery clubs until they are shredded into pieces. This is the result of adultery committed with another’s wife (TrpW 34, TrpR 78, NJ 61).

15. **Lohasimbālī** - in this hell there is kapok forest with countless trees, each Yojana tall with extended long flaming thorns.²⁹⁴ The hell denizens, both male and female, are forced to climb up the trees by the *yomaban* who use spheres to push them up. The women are sent to reach to their lovers but never reach them. In this way the denizens climb up and down while they are being slashed by the tree thorns. This is the result adultery that is committed with another’s wife or by a woman betraying her husband (TrpW 34-35, TrpR78-79, NJ 61).

16. **Micchādīṭṭhi** – in this hell very large *yomaban* use flaming swords, spears and clubs to poke, stab and cut the denizens. This is the result for having wrong view and not knowing evil deeds (TrpW 35, TrpR 79-80, NJ 61).

The *Usot Narok* described above (referred to as the protruding hells), detailed in the *Traiphum* and the *Nimi Jataka*, are the hells that surround the *Sañjīva* hell. In addition, the *Lokapaññatti* (78-81)

²⁹³ This punishment can be interpreted as misogynistic, since while women are not allowed to cheat on their spouses, men are not forbidden of doing that, rather they must stay away from other men’s partners. On the status of women in Thai society as a function of Buddhism see Klunkin and Greenwood, 2005.

²⁹⁴ A *yojana* equals 11.2 kilometer.

as well as Thai study books, provide a description of four general types of *Usot Narok* which are located in the front, the back, and the sides of the large hells and adjacent to the ten small hells, the *yomalok*, as follows:

5 *Khūt* - this hell is full with rotten boiling feces and sharp mouthed worms that eat the flesh and bones of the hell denizens, while smaller worms enter their bodies and eat them from the inside. The reason for birth in this hell is throwing helpless animals into a pond to be bitten by snakes, scorpions or centipedes (Lkp 78, NS 78-79).

6 *Kukuḷa* – this hell is full of hot coals onto which the hell denizens are thrown to burn. They then revive and this is repeated again and again. Reason for birth in this hell is throwing animals into a fire or to sizzling pots (Lkp 78, NS 79).

7 *Asipatuan* – in this hell there is a mango grove. When the hell denizens approach to eat the fruits, the leaves which are made of spheres shut out and stab them. They then attempt to escape, but they are attacked by large dogs with metal teeth, who bite them to their deaths. Reason for birth in this hell is fighting in wars, and forcing people to attack enemies with spears and axes (Lkp 79, NS 79).

8 *Vetarāṇi* – see *usot Narok* hell number 1. However, the reason for birth as described in the *Lokapaññatti* is causing death to others by poisoning (Lkp 80, NS 79,80).

3.1.2.3 *Yomalok*

Lastly, the ten small hells, the *Yomalok*, include the following:²⁹⁵

1. *Lohakumbhī* – here the hell denizens are being thrown into a cauldron with boiling ore. Birth in this hell is the result of killing (NS 77-80).

2. *Simbalī* – in this hell, the hell denizens are forced by the *nirayaban* to climb thorny kapok trees, which cut their bodies. As they climb up, they are poked by vultures on the top. The reason for birth in this hell is adultery (NS 80-81).

3. *Asinakha* – in this hell, the hell denizens have sharp nails which they use to scratch their own flesh and eat it as food. The reason for birth in this hell is stealing (NS 81).

4. *Thamaphkata* – here, the hell denizens are forced to lie on hot iron plates. The *yomaban* then force feed them with boiling copper. The reason for birth in this hell is drinking intoxicants (NS 81).

²⁹⁵ The *Yomalok* are also the hells which Yama's land surround, and the judgment before Yama and his secretaries is executed, as described in detail in chapter two.

5. *Ayukhola* – in this hell, the hell denizens are starved, so that they are forced to eat flaming iron which burns them from the inside. This is the result of embezzlement (NS 81).

6. *Pisakapaphata* – here, fiery mountains crush the hell denizens from all four directions. Reason for birth in this hell is ruling unjustly (NS 82).

7. *Thusa* – in this hell, the hell denizens are thirsty, and drink seemingly clean water from a river, however once they drink the water it turns into fire and burns them from the inside. Birth in this hell is a result of dishonesty while trading (NS 82).

8. *Sittilosita* – here the hell denizens are thrown into icy water until they freeze to death, they then revive and are thrown back into the water, and this goes on repeatedly. Birth in this hell is a result of drowning animals (NS 82).

9. *Sunakha* – this hell is full of dogs as large as elephants, in five colours: black, white, yellow, red, and stripy.²⁹⁶ These dogs consume the hell denizens' flesh. Birth in this hell is the result of insulting parents, ascetics or those who adhere to the precepts (NS 82, 83).

10. *Yintapasa*- In this hell there are two fiery mountains. These mountains operate like compressors and crush the hell beings. Birth in this hell is the result of mistreating one's spouse (NS 82,83).

Lokanta hell

Beyond the hells described above, there is an additional hell which is very unique. This hell occupies the 'empty' space between the three *cakkavāḷa* (world systems).²⁹⁷ This hell is completely dark and cold, as it is located beyond the extent of the sun, the moon and the stars. The denizens of this hell have extremely tall bodies and long sharp nails. They clutch onto the *cakkavāḷa* wall, hanging their bodies in the same manner as bats. When hungry, they fly in search for food, and when they touch other denizens, they think they are food and then eat one another. They then fall into a freezing cold sea, where they die and then reborn. This is the result of harming parents or ascetics (TrpR 80-82, NS 83-83).²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ In some colloquial versions the fifth kind is described as spotty.

²⁹⁷ One *cakkavāḷa* is composed of the three worlds as described in chapter one.

²⁹⁸ For an elaborate account of the *Lokanta* hell cosmography see Padamalanguḷa, 2008.

Appendix 9. Hell representations' summary – in accordance with the five precepts

Park and location of the hell section	<i>Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī</i> , abstain from killing	<i>Adinnādānā</i> , abstain from stealing	<i>kāmesumicchācārā</i> , abstain from sexual misconduct	<i>Musāvādā</i> , abstain from false speech	<i>Surāmerayamajjapamādatthānā</i> , abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness
<p>Wat Po Chai Sri</p> <p>The edge of the park</p>	<p><i>Narok Pantipata</i> – the hell denizens have human bodies and animal heads. cuttings the hell beings' heads off with an axe, and stabbing them with double headed spears and pitchforks.</p>	<p><i>Narok Atinatana</i> –Here, the denizens are confined in a cage made of hot iron, their bodies dissected by the <i>yomaban</i> with large saws while they are lying on hot iron plates and large dogs pray on their entrails. Others are seen buried underneath a large pile of hot grain while vultures poke them.</p>	<p><i>Narok Simbali</i> –This hell consists of a large tree with 16-inch-long thorns, on which the hell denizens are forced to climb by the hell wardens, as well as vicious dogs that lurk at the bottom of the trees, waiting for their prey. At the top of the trees, vultures await, forcing the hells denizens to climb back down, so on and so forth.</p>	<p><i>Narok Musa</i> –In this hell the hell denizens' hands are tied to their backs while their tongues are being pulled by the <i>yomaban</i> with large tongs. At the same time, they are also being stabbed and injured.</p>	<p><i>Narok Mo Tong Deang</i>- In this hell, its denizens are cast into a huge burning and flaming cauldron and are force fed fiery melted copper.</p>
<p>Wat Pa Lak Roi</p> <p>The first section to which the visitor is led to, a starting point to the visit in the park. Caves at the edge of the park.</p>	<p>Simulation cave <i>Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī</i>, abstain from killing</p>	<p>Simulation cave <i>adinnādānā</i>, abstain from stealing</p>	<p>Simulation cave <i>kāmesumicchācārā</i>, abstain from sexual misconduct</p> <p>A number of adjoined thorny branches, represent the hellish kapok trees. Hell denizens are seen climbing on the trees, while large vultures are lurking on the tree tops. Some of the beings are arranged in couples, a reference to the <i>simbalī narok</i>.</p>	<p>Simulation Cave <i>Musāvādā</i>, abstain from false speech</p> <p>A <i>yomaban</i> pulling out the tongue of the hell denizen with a hook.</p>	<p>Simulation Cave <i>Surāmerayamajjapamādatthānā</i>, abstain from intoxicants causing heedlessness</p> <p>A <i>yomaban</i> force feeding a naked female hell denizen with burning copper.</p> <p>Two cauldrons are situated, into which the <i>yomaban</i> are seen forcing the hell denizens to plunge. notable is an image of a female that is about to be pushed into the cauldron, and is seen force fed by a <i>yomaban</i> some sort of an alcoholic drink from what looks like a beer bottle. The second cauldron has writing inscribed on it which says “lost one’s way in liquor”.</p> <p>Two <i>yomaban</i> carrying a rod from which characters who are depicted wearing student uniforms, are hanged by their necks. According to the description adjoined to the scene, these are students that are addicted to drugs.</p>
<p>Wat Santi Nikhom</p> <p>Entrance to the hell area by descending the staircase to the building’s basement.</p>	<p>Hell denizens with human bodies and animal heads.</p>	<p>hell denizens are seen beaten, stabbed and decapitated, and beheaded by the <i>yomaban</i>.</p>	<p>Nine thorn trees on which naked denizens are of both males and females climb. At the bottom of the thorn trees, dogs are lurking, barks can be heard through the speakers. while at the three tops large crows await the denizens.</p>	<p>Amongst the trees, other hell denizens appear, their tongues clutched by the <i>yomaban</i>.</p>	<p>Between the scenes, there are six cauldrons that seem to be boiling using a fountain mechanism in them hell denizens scorch.</p>

Appendix 10. *Pret* in the *Traiphum*²⁹⁹

Pret features	Reason for birth in the <i>peta</i> realm
<i>Pret</i> that dwell outside the city of Rājagaha. ³⁰⁰	n/a
<i>Pret</i> that are reborn as a result of the three causes ³⁰¹ and know the Dhamma.	n/a
<i>Pret</i> that have gem castles, surrounded by moats.	n/a
<i>Pret</i> that have elephants, horses, slaves and men and have gold vehicles with which they can travel by air.	n/a
A group of <i>pret</i> that remain in this condition during the waxing moon, but at the rest of the time they become <i>devata</i> .	n/a
<i>Pret</i> that live hidden in trees.	n/a
<i>Pret</i> that have celestial castles and eat food like <i>devata</i> .	n/a
<i>Pret</i> that live in trees and eat rice.	n/a
<i>Pret</i> that live in the land, hide themselves behind vegetation so people cannot see them.	n/a
<i>Pret</i> that have huge bodies but mouths small as a needle.	n/a
<i>Pret</i> that are Very thin, only bones, eyes deep and hollow, hair messy that covers their mouth, generally naked, always cry and moan and do not have any	Were envious as humans, wanted others' property, never gave alms and interrupted those who did, took the monks' property.

²⁹⁹ TrpR

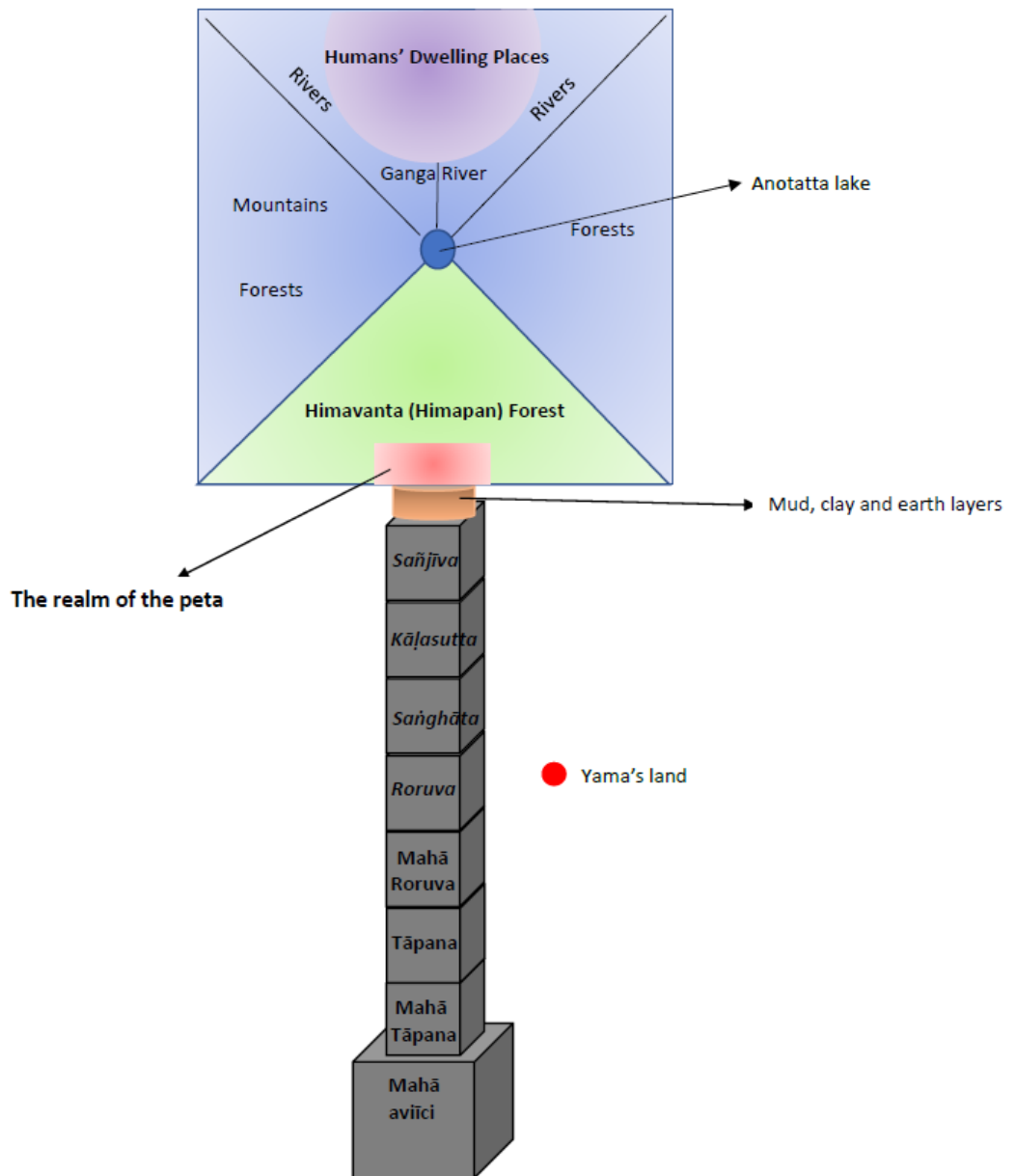
³⁰⁰ Capital of Magadha

³⁰¹ Greed, anger and delusion

strength so they constantly and can't get up.	
<i>Pret</i> with a Body like those of the great <i>brahma</i> but a mouth like a pig.	Formerly were ordained as nuns, but spoke ill of teachers and monks.
<i>Pret</i> with Body pretty as gold but mouth with hideous odour that is eaten by worms.	People who kept the precepts but at the same time criticized monks and incited quarrels.
Female <i>pret</i> , naked with strong revolting odour. Flies swarm around them and eat their flesh. They are starved, and give birth to seven babies each time, to then eat the babies flesh but are still starved.	Those who gave medicine to pregnant women to end their pregnancy.
Female <i>pret</i> , Naked and ugly, try to eat rice but it turns into feces, blood or pus, when they see a cloth to cover themselves, it turns into fiery red iron that burns their body.	Was angry at her husband for giving alms.
<i>Pret</i> with a body large and tall as the trunk of a palm tree, with rough hair and revolting odour.	Those who never made merit and stopped others from doing so.
<i>Pret</i> that continuously uses both hands to scoop flaming atrophied rice which they throw on their heads.	Merchants who mixed atrophied rice with good rice.
<i>Pret</i> that hit their own head constantly with fiery red iron clubs.	Assaulted their parents.
<i>Pret</i> that are Terribly starved but when trying to eat food it turns into smelly feces full of worms.	When someone begged for rice, they lied and said they don't have any.
<i>Pret</i> with long sharp fingernails with which they scrape their own flesh to eat it.	Those who stole portions of meat that belonged to others and ate them.

<i>Pret</i> that are shot at, scolded, chased by large animals and killed during day time, while at night they it becomes a <i>devata</i> .	Hunters who hunted at day time but kept the precepts at night time.
<i>Pret</i> born as <i>devata</i> but have nothing to eat so it eats their own flesh.	Governors who took bribes that affected their judgment.
<i>Pret</i> that eat phlegm, vomit, saliva and similar substances.	Offered left over food to monks
<i>Pret</i> that have flames shoot out from their chest, tongue and mouth.	Scolded and insulted monks and also lied to them
<i>Pret</i> that Cannot drink, when trying to drink water it turns into fire and burns them.	Suppressed the poor without having sympathy.
<i>Pret</i> with Putrefying body that keeps burning in flames.	Formerly burned a forest with animals in it.
<i>Pret</i> with a body as large as a mountain, hair and fingernails made out of very sharp narrow strands. When the hair and nails touch, they cause a flame that burns and cuts them.	Governors who did not handle their affairs in alignment with the dhamma.

Appendix 11. Map of the Jambudvīpa continent³⁰²



³⁰² Constructed by the author.