**Wat Buddharam Fieldwork Report**

**Introduction**

I will be exploring how the Wat Buddharam, in Headingley, Leeds provides support for the wider Thai diasporic community in, and around, Leeds. In this fieldwork report of my visit to the Thai Theravada Buddhist Temple, I will present the wider context of Thais who reside in the UK and how the Wat Buddharam is involved with these on a local level. As well as seeking to understand it’s role within the context of modern Britain, I will describe what I observed, whilst present at the Wat Buddharam, and attempt to understand this within the wider context of the lives of the Thais who attend this Temple.

I visited the Wat Buddharam, Leeds, on Sunday 19th February 2017. I spent the day there interacting with people and observing what happened; both the chanting session and the additional activities which supported it. I wanted to see how the temple was important for the Thais, those born or raised in Thailand, who attend it; to look at how the sangha work alongside the Thais in Leeds and what kind of role they play in their lives.

**Buddhism in Britain**

Buddhism first came to England in the 1800s primarily through the study and critique of scripture by academics (Bluck, 2006, p4). In the 1960s with immigration from Asia, alongside indigenous sangha taking residence around Britain (Bell, 1991, p3), Buddhist practices that were identifiable as historically Asian became more commonplace.

The Wat Buddharam is a recent development in terms of Thais in England, having been a registered Charity since only 2014 (Companies House, 2017). The temple is one of approximately 189 Buddhist Temples and one of 17 Thai Theravada Temples in the UK (Starkey and Tomalin, 2016, p334). The temple was previously situated at a terraced house in Leeds, until they were able to secure funding through donations from attendees, support from the Golden Mountain, Wat Saket Temple in Bangkok, and from Thai businessmen, and businesswomen. Like many Thai Buddhists in England they follow a pattern of becoming “more financially secure and established” (Starkey and Tomalin, 2016, p334) before moving to more suitable location. They moved into the address approximately 2 years ago. The temple provides activities and celebrations for the diasporic community that has, metaphorically, grown around the temple.

**Approaching the Fieldwork**

I was born and raised in Worthing, West Sussex where I had little exposure to Buddhism or Thai culture. I was raised in a Christian environment, having been a church attendee from a young age and attended Church schools, my background is one steeped in a single Religious tradition.

I have come into contact with what one might term “Western Buddhism” through various means; one means is by reading the “Art of Happiness” by the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler. I understood Buddhism to be about the enhancement of oneself and to have compassion for all. My understanding lacked any nuance, let alone knowledge of traditional doctrines. Having realised the lack of depth in my knowledge I undertook some basic research on doctrinal stances and the role of the temple in Thai communities in Thailand.

I had heard of the Wat Buddharam through the University of Leeds Chaplaincy, about the Thai cooking Lessons. I was unable to find their website. However, after speaking to my lecturer she was able to point me in the right direction, through their main way of promotion, their Facebook account! I contacted them on the phone number and spoke to who I shall describe as their resident secretary. I was invited to attend that Sunday.

I reminded myself that I was coming from a specific background and that I was not an insider. Which is highlighted by Durkheim, who emphasises that I should consider the “very specific social contexts” (Gregg and Scholefield, 2015, p19) in which this group has developed. Reminding myself of John Hinnels’ wording; “seek to go as far as possible in empathy… but we are all products of our own history.” (Hinnells, 2009, p15)

**Description of the day**

I left my University accommodation at 9:30am in Headingley and made the twenty-minute walk through this suburb of North-West Leeds. I arrived at a large manor house “originally the Victorian home of a Local Mill Owner” (Cliff Lawn Hotel, 2007) which was enclosed within a redbrick wall that sat on the perimeter of the land. It is distinguishably Thai and Buddhist, such as the Golden sign written in English and Thai, underneath a Union Jack and a Thai Tricolour Flag. As well as the life-sized statue of the Abbot of the Wat Saket, in the far corner of the veranda. There is a large lawn below the veranda to the front of the house, which is often used for big celebrations. It is hard to ignore the clear links that are still active to Thailand.

I arrived alongside other temple-goers at about 9:50am, predominantly Thai women between the ages of 30 and 60, and their Children, with no Thai men apart from the monks inside. I enter and remove my shoes, plastic sheet covers the carpet at the entrance. The women enter with boxes of food, speaking in Thai and make their way past me towards the kitchen, as they pass a monk they bow with their hands together by their chins. I am greeted by a monk who wears traditional orange robes, he is one of three who currently live in the house. He has been a monk for 10 years, his English is good although he has to ask for help sometimes.

I am greeted by the secretary who adorns fluffy slippers over her socks. She is Thai but fluent in English, and the sister of the aforementioned Monk. I am surprised at the interior of the Wat Buddharam; it has managed to retain the majority of its Hotel furnishings such as stripy carpeting, cream walls and marble arches.

I am shown through the corridor to the kitchen. We pass the reception which still has the hotel name on the main desk in big writing “The Cliff Lawn Hotel”. In the kitchen, there are Thai labels on the cupboards and kitchen equipment. The kitchen has large cookers, with a chrome theme throughout, it wouldn’t look out of place in a restaurant. There are 6 Thai women, speaking Thai and bustling around the microwaves reheating homemade food to offer to the monks, and to eat later on in the day after the chanting ceremony.

There is another Thai woman wearing an apron who will be giving the cooking session, she works in a local Thai restaurant as a cook. There is also a white 50-year-old British man from Rotherham who is going to be giving an English lesson later in the day. The free cooking lesson has been advertised on the Facebook, where the Wat Buddharam is very active.

Before the cooking lesson begins at about 11am I am taken to the prayer room. It is adorned with a large shrine where golden table sits above golden table, with candles, food in front and Buddha statues sitting in different positions (appendix i).

Next to the alter is a human-sized statue of King Rama IX, the recently deceased King. Either side of the shrine are handheld fans of Leicester City Football Club, a reminder of thanks to the the owner of the Club who funded a great deal of their new temple (appendix i).

I sit alongside 9 Thai women and 1 precept Nun facing the alter where the 3 monks sit perpendicular to the alter on a raised ledge. Everyone chants from a sheet; in what I would expect to be Pali, similar to Wendy Cadge’s experience in an American Thai Theravada Temple “we chant in Pali… written out in Thai script” (Cadge, 2005, p117). At 11:10am the monk who I met earlier is taking the dhamma talk, it is all in Thai, which finishes at 11:27 and is followed by 4 minutes of meditation. The chanting continues until 1145am. I watch as the women pay respects to the Buddha. Some women remain and give offerings to the monks, such as a large bulk of toilet paper and water.

After this, at midday, the almsgiving continues. We follow through to the next room as more people are arriving. All lay people, and myself, are kneeling touching the backs of each other and those that are offering the food and other household items are blessed. The three monks fill their alms-bowls and go and eat on the raised platform in the prayer room, much like in Thailand where monks often bless those that make the offering. The precept Nun then follows when they are finishes and fills a plate with food. After she has taken her food, everyone else, including myself, are invited to take some, there’s plenty to go around. There is a wonderful array of foods to eat, everyone takes a fill, there is chatter and laughter amongst the group.

After this, at 1pm there are Thai Language lessons for Children and two Husbands of the women who are of the White British ethnicity. More families have arrived at this point, there are 13 children overall. Following this there is a talk about Amulets for the in the prayer room by an Academic from the University of Leeds. Whilst all of this is going on there is an English lesson for the Thai people, including monks, ran by the man in the cooking lesson.

At the end of the day, people are talking to the monks and are receiving advice. Seeming to discuss problems, people remain, talking to one another and tidying up, everybody has left the Wat Buddharam at approximately 4pm. I took some pictures so that I wasn’t disrupting anyone and I say goodbye to the monk and secretary in the reception and head home.

**Value to the Thai Community**

What struck me in my visit was the high proportion of Thai women attending. There were no Thai men apart from the monks which lead me to look at a report, looking mainly at women’s experiences, “Thai perspectives into Life in Britain”. It identifies that in the 2001 census 76% of Thai-Born people in the UK were Women; and out of this emerged a pattern of “marriage migrants” (Sims, 2008, p4). The report found that there were a number of cases of “isolation and depression” amongst Thai Marriage Migrants in England due to a “lack of existing social networks” (Sims, 2008, p11). This was true of a conversation that I had with one woman at the Temple. As well as language barriers, which caused feelings of being “discriminated against” (Sims, 2008, p7) the free language lessons offered by the temple suddenly become obviously important. The rituals and communality are able to enhance a sense of belonging and identity amongst this diasporic group scattered around Leeds. As Palumbo-Lui recognises, rituals are “regarded as both articulating and consolidating social identity” (2007, p279), so it is with this ability to maintain an identity and a heightened sense of belonging that the Wat Buddharam is able to support those who attend it regularly.

**Concluding Remarks**

My experience has allowed me to appreciate the role of the Wat Buddharam in the lives of the Thai diasporic community in Leeds. Although if given another chance I would have tried to speak more with family members of attendees to hear their views of the Temple’s importance the lives of the attendees. Finally, I would like to see how relevant Crosby’s remarks would be in England, in regards to the problem in Thailand where sangha “imported from outside the community may have little knowledge of… issues [local people] face” (Crosby, 2014, p202). So, in a completely different social landscape to Thailand, how equipped is the Thai sangha, to deal with the demands of the modern British suburban life?

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**Appendix**

Appendix i- The alter after the services.

