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# THAI RELIGION AND THE VIABILITY OF THE CONSTRUCT OF 'CULT'

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## Introduction

There is in anthropology and religious studies continuing debate on the viability and applicability of categories, concepts, and, more formally, constructs created by Western scholars and applied to non-Western cultures. In the field of religious studies, while the debate has settled down, there are still arguments against the use of the construct of 'religion'. As a social scientist I hold that objective definitions, categorization, concepts and constructs can be formed for descriptive and analytical purposes, including cross culturally. Thus, I support this debate over the construct of 'religion', especially given the multiplicity of definitions of religion that have been put forward, with the goal of establishing a scientifically valid and applicable construct of 'religion', as well with other descriptive and analytical concepts. With this in mind, I was intrigued by the Asian Research Institute at the National University of Singapore's workshop held in October 2021 on "Interrogating the Notion of 'Cult' as a Social Formation in Asian Religions". The organizers appear to have noticed an uptick in the usage of 'cult' in works on Asian religions. I was particularly interested because in the study of Thai religion, some scholars use the construct 'cult', while it is completely absent from other works; in my own work I use 'worship'. I had also finished extensive reading on ancient Roman and Greek religion, in a search for descriptions and models of polytheism, where the use of 'cult' as a descriptive and explanatory construct seemed standard.

I participated in this workshop and the original draft of this article was presented and critiqued in the workshop. This version of the article investigating the viability of the construct of ‘cult’ in Thai religion is the result of that workshop.

In the United States, the word cult is generally taken in a negative sense as a type of small sect or group with weird and even degenerate forms of religious practice. A cult in American culture is usually some offshoot of an established religion, most frequently from Christianity or Hinduism. When one thinks of a cult, groups and leaders such as the Peoples Temple (Jim Jones), Branch Davidians (David Koresh), Rajneeshpura (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh), Heaven’s Gate and even Scientology come to mind. Indeed, the Wikipedia entry on Jim Jones calls him “an American cult leader” among several other things. An internet search of ‘cults’ pulls a host of links to such groups as above with adjectives such as “most terrifying cults” and “weird and creepy cults” demonstrating that while a group may be relatively innocuous, applying the term ‘cult’ does carry connotations of strange or odd at best, and crazy and dangerous at worst.

Reviewing dictionary definitions of cult shows that cult has both this meaning of small groups with strange and even dangerous beliefs and practices, as well as the neutral definition of a system of worship or veneration of a deity or object. There is also what can be termed the academic definition that means religious worship more generally or worship of a particular deity or spirit.

But the above negative definition does appear in American academics when researching and discussing the groups noted above. Does this mean that using ‘cult’ for the worship of gods, goddesses, bodhisattvas and spirits is counterproductive because of the negative connotation, especially in the USA? This is compounded by the advent of Donald Trump into politics, where we now have American political reporting and social media using cult for the ‘cult of personality’ of Donald Trump and that the Republican Party is no longer a political party but rather it is a ‘cult’.

I never seriously thought about using or not using cult in my own work, I just recognized it when used in academic writing. It wasn’t until sometime in 2019, when I started formally working on conceptuali-

zing Thai religion as polytheism, that the definition of cult and its use came to my full attention. For comprehensive studies on and models of polytheism I turned to studies on ancient Mediterranean religions, particularly Greek and Roman, but especially Roman religion. I was now in an academic world saturated with the use of 'cult'. Nevertheless, I did not consider using 'cult' and my article on the worship of the Thai King Naresuan and his elephant duel. I used worship of King Naresuan, not cult of King Naresuan, and I did not use cult the article. Not until reading the call for papers for the Asian Research Institute workshop on the "Notion of Cult" did the question of its viability appear front and centre in my mind.

The article presents an overview of the use of the construct of cult in academic works, first in studies of Greek and Roman religion, and then in a more in-depth look at the use and lack thereof of cult in research on Thai religion (worship of Buddha, deified monks, deified kings, revered monks, Rahu, local deities and spirits). This article provides both the concrete application of cult and a general sense of how the construct of cult is used. A discussion is held on whether cult is applicable to the Thai religious context and by extension other religions as well. More broadly, though not a specific topic of the article, the detailed discussion of the viability of 'cult' speaks to the viability of other analytical terms in the social scientific study of religion.

### Methodology

The core methodology is phenomenology of religion and thus qualitative; the phenomenological research on religion is located within the sociology and anthropology of religion. One can also categorize the methodology more broadly as religious studies. Most of the publications examined for this study are from the disciples of history of religion, sociology and anthropology. In terms of phenomenology of religion, for this study the strict holding in mind of Thai concepts of religion and religious practice is necessary because to determine if 'cult' describes and explains Thai religion, then the Thai emic view must be maintained throughout. The second aspect of phenomenology of religion that was emphasized was the comparative method. A review was carried out on

a number of articles, book chapters, and books used in work on Thai religion which consisted of articles and books on Thai religion, Roman and Greek polytheism and several of the articles cited in the Asia Research Institute call for papers. The duration of the research portion was only about six weeks because the material had already been extensively researched.

### Data Collection

Twenty-four articles, book chapters, and books covering topics on Thai religion were reviewed as well as thirteen articles and book chapters covering ancient Roman and Greek polytheism. Each of these had already been read for the research on Thai religion. Three articles listed in the Asia Research Institute workshop call for papers were read for the first time. Every use of the word 'cult', 'cults' and 'cultic' found in an article or book chapter was logged, but for several books only representative usages, and not every usage, were logged. I searched for definitions and, importantly, patterns of usage. Dictionary definitions of cult were sought out as seen above, as well as the identification of the constructs or terms used when cult is not used, paying special attention for the use of 'worship'.

### Data Analysis

The definitions and usage patterns of cult from studies on Roman, Greek, and Thai religion were compared, first internally (cult in Roman and Greek studies compared separately from Thai studies) and then against each other to identify definitions and usage patterns. The findings were then compared to Thai religious expressions of *wai* (pay respect), *būchā* (sacrifice, worship) and *būang sūang* (worship, appease) to assess the applicability of the construct of 'cult' to Thai religion. Finally, a comparison between definitions and patterns of use of cult and worship was made.

## Results

### Definitions of Cult from Works Reviewed

The focus for the Asia Research Institute workshop was “cult as a social formation”, but the call for paper did not define “social formation”. In this instance, it is doubtful we are dealing with the full Marxist definition of social formation as the economic structure, forces and relations of production, and the relation to the superstructure, but we can see cult as a social formation where it “designates a social whole composed of distinct but interrelated instances.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed the main definition for cult presented below is just that.

In the works reviewed, only five (see below) gave some definition of the word cult. The fullest treatment of the concept, term or category ‘cult’ is in Irene Polinskaya’s detailed study of a specific instance of ancient Greek religion where she devotes approximately two pages to investigating and defining the academic term ‘cult’ and its applicability to the study of Greek religion.

Her definition is as follows:

Cult, as well as ritual, is often viewed in opposition to myth, as something that involves ‘doing’ as opposed to ‘talking’. Hence a common use of the phrase ‘cult practice’. Also, in common scholarly usage, ‘cult’ is what humans ‘pay’ to deities and what deities ‘receive’. In my understanding, ‘cult’ is a form of interaction (cf. pay-receive) that encompasses all traditional means of communication with the divine: rituals, myths, prayers, dedication of votive offerings, oracular consultations, incubations for healing, and so on. [...] As a stand-in for ‘worship’, the term ‘cult’ serves a useful purpose: it designates an entirety of all modes of worship directed by a distinct social group to a particular hypostasis of a deity at a particular location...<sup>2</sup>

In footnotes Polinskaya refers to Christensen noting that cult is the “regular worship of gods” and that “Greeks considered ‘cult’ and ‘religi-

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Peet, “Materialism, Social Formation, and Socio-Spatial Relations: An Essay in Marxist Geography,” *Cahiers de Géographie du Québec* 22, no.56 (1978): 150. <https://doi.org/10.7202/021390ar>.

<sup>2</sup> Irene Polinskaya, *A Local History of Greek Polytheism: Gods, People, and the Land of Aigina, 800-400 BCE* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 101.

on' as synonymous" (footnotes 4 & 5 respectively).<sup>3</sup> From Polinskaya's definition two usages for cult were identified, one equated with religion and worship encompassing an entire religious tradition and the other more specific in the worship of a single deity (the specific structure, materials, prayers, etc.); that is, (1) cult = religion/worship, and (2) cult = ritual. From all the works reviewed, this is a definition that all but a few of the scholars who use the term cult would agree with. Indeed, this definition was kept in mind as the works were reviewed and this dual definition fits for nearly all usages of cult.

Two of the articles cited in the Asia Research Institute workshop call for papers also define 'cult'. Jack Meng-Tat Chia in a footnote says "In this study, I adopt Paul R. Katz's definition of 'cult' which refers to 'a body of men and women who worship a deity and give of their time, energy, and wealth in order for the worship of this deity to continue and thrive.'"<sup>4</sup> And while not fully defining 'cult' Nguyen Gia Hung states, again in a footnote, "In this thesis, the word 'cult' is not used with negative connotations: it is used to refer to the worship of *thần*, deities in English in general, or of *thành hoàng làng*, village guardian deities in particular."<sup>5</sup> First, and importantly for my purposes, as with Polinskaya, cult is the "stand-in" for worship. These two definitions place the usage of cult more in the confines of the meaning to worship particular deities-spirits rather than the wider definition of cult as religion or as generalized worship. And as a necessary side note, it must be pointed out that in reference to Paul R. Katz, people do not worship a deity "in order for the worship of this deity to continue and thrive"; rather, people worship a deity in a patron-client manner based on, as Polinskaya says, a reciprocal pay-receive relationship (quoted above) with the intention and desire that a particular human or the human community continues and thrives.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Jack Meng-Tat Chia, "A Recent Quest for Religious Roots: The Revival of the Guangze Zunwang Cult and Its Sino-Southeast Asian Networks, 1978-2009," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 41, no.2 (2013): 91. <https://doi.org/10.1179/0737769X13Z.0000000004>.

<sup>5</sup> Gia Hung Nguyen, "The Cult of the Guardian Deities in Contemporary Vietnam: the Re-invention of a Tradition" [Unpublished doctoral dissertation] (School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong, 2016), 1, <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/4762>.

Although not part of the works reviewed, in order to set up the next two definitions it is necessary to refer to an older definition given by Max Weber: "The relationships of men to supernatural forces which take the forms of prayer, sacrifice and worship may be termed 'cult' and 'religion', as distinguished from 'sorcery' which is magical coercion."<sup>6</sup> We will skip over Weber's distinction between religion and "sorcery" and highlight that once again the equating of cult and religion, and also worship.

Jörg Rüpke, while not disputing the definition of cult per se, questions the use of individual deities.

If the renunciation of a chapter on the gods [in *A Companion to Roman Religion*] prompts an explanation, the lack of systematic treatment of 'cults' should prompt another. 'Cults' as applied to ancient religions is a very convenient term, as it takes ancient polytheism to pieces that are gratifyingly similar to the large religious traditions like Christianity: defined by one god, be it Venus or Mithras... [...] Thus, part V deliberately illustrates the wide spectrum of religious groups or options and does not attempt to map ancient polytheisms as the sum of different "cults".<sup>7</sup>

For this, we think Rüpke holds that using cult creates a distortion and a separation between deities within the polytheistic system that is not there. Within polytheism there is no this god's cult or that goddess's cult in that sense that the deity can be or is worshipped exclusive of other deities. Rüpke seems to rule out using cult for application to the worship of single deities.

Finally, Peter A. Jackson, writing before the above scholars (except for Weber) and writing on Thai religion, expresses the more 'American' definition of cult:

Thai historian Nithi Aeusrivongse "uses the expression *latthi-phiti* ('doctrine-ritual'), which he glosses in English as 'cult', to describe these ritual-symbolic devotional movements. Nithi defines *latthi-phiti* as 'a ritually rich religious doctrine which is not a part of the "principles" (lak-kan) or orthodoxy of the dominant religion adhered to by the majority of people' (Nithi,

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<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 28.

<sup>7</sup> Jörg Rüpke, ed, *A Companion to Roman Religion* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 7.

1993:111n). However, while the movements considered here may have begun as unorthodox minority phenomena, their rapid growth in the 1990s meant that their popularity and influence relocated them from marginal positions into the cultural and religious mainstream. I prefer to call these phenomena ‘movements’ or ‘religions’ rather than ‘cults’ to denote their significance at the height of the [economic] boom.<sup>8</sup>

While the definition contained in this statement is not necessarily negative, it does align with the ‘American’ definition of cult as an “unorthodox minority phenomena”. For Jackson, once the cult is large enough in terms of both adherents and popularity, it becomes orthodox and mainstream and shifts to a “movement” or a religion; and thus, cult is not synonymous with religion and this definition is an outlier in regards to the other definitions presented here.

Within these definitions Polinskaya presents the fullest definition and one that can act as the standard definition of cult and one that encompasses Chia and Nguyen. Rüpke poses a challenge to expanding the definition beyond its original broader definition of beliefs and practices of a pantheon, a community of gods and goddesses. While Jackson presents a more American definition that stands apart from Polinskaya.

### The Patterns of Use of Cult in Works on Greek and Roman Religion

The focus is not on this body of works and thus only a general overview is provided. The reading of Greek and Roman religion was originally done to study conceptual models of polytheism and develop a conceptual model of Thai religion as polytheism. At that time, there was no concern with the concept ‘cult’; however, it was noted that cult is used frequently and in nearly all the articles and book chapters read. Because the reading of the articles and chapters was done in the hope that they would provide information and even models of polytheism that would be useful in an application to Thai religion, reading on specific ‘cults’ of deities was not done. Indeed, perhaps because of

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<sup>8</sup> Peter A. Jackson, “Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods, and Magic Monks: Thailand’s boom-time religions of prosperity,” *South East Asia Research* 7, no. 3 (1999): 248, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23746841>.



the extensive use Rüpke's edited *Companion* (2007) and his individual book on Roman religion *Pantheon* (2018) and because he specifically stated his reticence to apply cult to the individual worship of deities, no extensive use of cult applied to individual deities was found. In the *Companion*, while the use of cult is frequent, it is used primarily in the broader meaning "publicly financed cult", "places of cult", "municipal cults", "provincial cults", "the cult statue", "new cults", "mystery cults", etc. Cases of applying cult to a specific deity do occur "the cult of Dionysus", the cult of the Lares", "Imperial cult", "the cult of Mithrus", but these are outnumbered some five or six to one by the more general definition. In the other works on Greek and Roman religion reviewed the pattern is repeated.

The general impression is that cult is used systematically, and even when not defined, falls into the description and definition of Polinskaya, and while two meanings or usages for 'cult' were identified, in practice, even within a specific context, it is not always clear whether the meaning is religion/worship or ritual – it frequently can be both.

Despite saying that cult can designate "a particular hypostasis of a deity at a particular location", Polinskaya, in reviewing approximately 100 pages of her book, uses cult in the more general sense equated to religion or religious ritual, such as "in the sphere of cults", "local cultic calendars", "various cult sites", cult images", etc. The reason for this may well be because only the first six chapters of her book were read to build a conceptual model for polytheism and the first six chapters cover definitions, methodology, theory, and the like; deeper in the book when treating actual worship, she may use cult applied to a specific deity. However, she does use phrases such as, "figures of cults", objects of cults" and ancient Greek cults", the use of the plural "cults" indicating that there are indeed discrete cults for deities.

### The Patterns of Use of Cult in Works on Thai Religion

In reviewing the material on Thai religion used in my research, specific attention was paid to the use of cult, it was found that several scholars do not use cult at all, several use it sparingly, and several scholars use cult frequently. Except for the distinction between cult and religion

made by Jackson noted above, no scholar provided a definition of the term. During the review of these works a cognate for cult was looked for when cult was not used. That is if cult means or is a replacement for religion, or more specifically for worship, then when a scholar does not use cult, does the scholar use worship or some similar term instead? The review comprised twenty-four articles, book chapters and books on Thai religion. Of these, nine works did not use cult at all, and using subjective estimates, eight had low to moderate use (1–10 uses, subjective estimate because 9 uses in a short article could be considered high rather than moderate), and seven with high usage (10 or more uses). An overview follows.

We start with Peter A Jackson who was quoted above. Because he specifically said why he would not use cult, it should come as no surprise that in that long article<sup>9</sup> and one published a few months earlier,<sup>10</sup> he does not use cult. As he explains, he uses “prosperity religion(s)”, “prosperity movements”, “devotional movements” and then for specific deities or people he uses worship – “worship of King Chulalongkorn”, “worship of Kuan Im”, and “worship of monks”. This usage helps demonstrate the dual definition of cult already expressed, ‘religion’ and ‘movement’ are more global general terms, while ‘worship’ is for application to deities as a whole or individually. And here we see the terms used when ‘cult’ is not used – worship is the go-to term, directly expressing Polinskaya’s statement that cult is the stand in for worship. Writing much later in 2016 and 2020, Jackson has dropped his objection to using cult. In these more recent articles, he refers to the same phenomena above as “prosperity cults”, “cult of King Chulalongkorn”, “cult of Kuan Im”, and to new phenomena called “spirit medium cults”, “cult of amulets”, and “cult of spirits”. No explanation as to why he made this change has been provided.

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<sup>9</sup> Jackson, “Royal Spirits, Chinese Gods, and Magic Monks,” 245–320.

<sup>10</sup> Peter A. Jackson, “The Enchanting Spirit of Thai Capitalism: The cult of Luang Phor Khoon and the post-modernization of Thai Buddhism,” *South East Asia Research* 7, no. 1 (1999): 5–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967828X9900700102>.

John Holt also uses 'cult' quite frequently in his book and book chapter on Lao religion.<sup>11</sup> (2009, 2019 respectively). The main use is in "spirit cults", and then "phi cults" "cultic behavior, "cultic life in Laos", and also applied to heroes of the communist revolutions in Vietnam and Laos: "Ho's [Ho Chi Minh] contemporary cult", "Ho's cultic veneration", "the public cult of Kaysone" [a leading figure in the Lao communist revolution], "Kaysone cult". Holt's use of cult is in alignment with the usage of the works on Greek and Roman religion.

The most ubiquitous use of cult is by Pattana Kitiarsa in both his 2005 article and subsequent book on basically the same subject of describing Thai religion and his theory to conceptualize Thai religion as a hybrid (2012).<sup>12</sup> The usage is very much in line with the later writings of Jackson, we find "spirit-medium cults", "rural cults", "amulet cults", "Indian religious cults", "Guanyin cult", "spirit cults", "popular cults", "urban prosperity cults", "cult of Phumphantang, and my favourite "supernatural cults".

In a hint at a definition of cult, Irene Stengs asks in her book on King Chulalongkorn "But is the King Chulalongkorn cult merely a religious cult, in the sense of the word: King Chulalongkorn is a deity, endorsing a system of rites and beliefs [...]. Or are we confronted with its more 'modern' and 'secular' equivalent, a 'personality cult?'"<sup>13</sup> So she presents both the neutral academic category and a negative, as well as modern and secular, definition of 'cult' and we are apparently supposed to juggle this throughout the book. Stengs does use cult defined as a system of rites and beliefs for deities – though she does not explicitly say so – such as, "the cult of Chao Mae Kaun Im (Kuan Yin)." This deity cult is certainly not a personality cult, as Kuan Im is a Thai deity (as

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<sup>11</sup> John Clifford Holt, *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Lao Religious Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); John Clifford Holt, *Theravada Traditions: Buddhist Ritual Cultures in Contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 461–487, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463405000251>; Pattana Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, & Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Modernizer: King Chulalongkorn, Patron Saint of the Middle Class* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 14.

well as Chinese), but Stengs does not address this. And so, returning to King Chulalongkorn, he is now a deity for Thais and so Stengs' question about a personality cult is clearly answered: the King Chulalongkorn cult is religious worship, not a cult of personality.

We close with Justin T. McDaniel who is in opposition to the use of cult. He states in regard to attempts to understand Thai religion, "We retreat to a series of vague explanations and terms like 'magic', 'cult', 'Indianized', 'localization', and 'folk' when attempting to describe what seems like novel anomalies..."<sup>14</sup> There is no elaboration of the topic as to exactly why these terms are vague and so one can only speculate as to why he considers 'cult' to be so. Not surprisingly, he does not use cult in the book.

## Discussion

### Cult of Amulets and Spirit-medium Cults

We begin this section where we ended the last, with works on Thai religion. The use of cult by Pattana Kitiarsa is so pervasive that it raises questions as to the accuracy of its use, particularly "cult of amulets" or "amulet cults" and "spirit-medium cults". Stanley Tambiah, writing well before Kitiarsa, has a book title using the phrase "spirit cults" (*Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*)<sup>15</sup> and another using "the cult of amulets" (*The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, 1984)<sup>16</sup>. Chapter 14 of the latter is titled "The cult of images and amulets"; in that chapter and chapters 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19<sup>17</sup> (1984, p. 195-289), however, 'cult' is used quite sparingly. Peter A. Jackson in his 2016 article<sup>18</sup> also uses both "cult of amulets" and

<sup>14</sup> Justin Thomas McDaniel, *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magic Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

<sup>16</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the cult of Amulets*, 195-289.

<sup>18</sup> Peter A. Jackson, "The Supernaturalization of Thai Political Culture: Thailand's Magical Stamps of Approval at the Nexus of Media, Market and State," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues*

“spirit medium cults”. We question this use because both the amulets and the spirit mediums are instruments or material and human objects used in the cult/worship of a deity or spirit, rather than the cult being about the amulet or spirit medium. There is a deity, a revered monk, or a spirit that is worshipped first, and the amulets and the spirit mediums are components in that cult of the deity or spirit. We do not say, for example, that there is a cult of ‘incense’ (material component in the cult like amulets) or a cult of Catholic priests (primary human component in the cult like spirit mediums). So, in the cult of King Chulalongkorn there are amulets and spirit mediums, and the same for other deities, but there is no cult of the amulets or cult of the spirit mediums of King Chulalongkorn, although both amulets and spirit mediums may well be revered.

Kitiarsa unintentionally—given how he used the term cult—makes our point when he says concerning amulets, “*Luang Pu To* was reborn in heaven as a *thep* and that his spirit comes down to possess a body to help human beings. Remembered as a highly charismatic and intellectually renowned monk, he is also popular in amulet cults; his amulets are ‘the most sacred of all auspicious materials and his magical spells (*katha*) are the most recited religious verses’.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, there is a cult of *Luang Pu To* and amulets are made representing him. There is not a cult of amulets into which *Luang Pu To* is then chosen as a figure in the amulet cults. And further for spirit mediums, “Through the magical expertise of mediums, *Phra In*’s power as it appears in Hindu cosmology is transformed into specific practices; in the cults, he is a deity who demands proper worship and offerings”<sup>20</sup>. “In the cults” appears to mean the spirit medium cults, but this reverses the process. There is the deity *Phra In* first, and then spirit mediums channel or are possessed by his spirit; there is no cult of spirit mediums who create and conjure up deities. The spirit mediums coalesce around existing deities and spirits.

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*in Southeast Asia* 31, no. 3 (2016): 826–879, <https://doi.org/10.1355/sj31-3d>.

<sup>19</sup> Kitiarsa, “Beyond Syncretism,” 479.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

## Cult Versus Worship: The Applicability of Cult to Thai Religion

Returning to Polinskaya's definition of cult, she says it is a stand-in for worship. This begs the question as to what the difference between 'cult' and 'worship' is that makes cult a better explanatory concept. Looking at definitions of worship, worship is more the general act or action, while cult is more comprehensive, encompassing all aspects of the phenomenon. Cult is self-contained, or closed—the cult of King Chulalongkorn, as opposed to the openness of worship—the worship of King Chulalongkorn.

Thus, reservations are raised about the applicability of cult to Thai religion. First is Rüpke's concern for the separation and/or differentiation, not of the deities, but of the worship of these deities that makes each a distinct cult, and even if there are distinctions, do they matter in any substantive way to the worshipper? The Thai vocabulary equating to worship has slight nuances between terms, but they generally express the same beliefs, sentiments, and ritual actions: *wai* (pay respect), *būchā* (sacrifice, worship), *būang sūang* (worship, appease), etc. These are frequently prefaced by *pitī* (ritual, ceremony), thus, *pitī būang sūang*. There is an informal standardized use for basic worship with materials consisting of garlands, incense and candles; this can be augmented with other items depending on the deity or spirit: drinks (sometimes liquor), meats, sweets, figurines of animals (typically roosters, zebras, water buffalo and elephants) and figurines of women performing Thai classical dance. In Thai religion there is no formal membership in worship and ritual practice (at least none that we know of) and worship is fluid with individual Thais free to worship, or not worship, any deity and spirit they chose. Worship is a simple generalized pattern with minor variations to suit particular deities, deified kings, spirits, etc. There are no separate priests for each deity; in fact, there are no established priests for worshipping deities in Thai religion. One can organize a special event or attend one where ritual specialists (*ajāns*), sometimes but not always called *phrām*, carry out the ritual, and in the worship of deities, Buddhist monks may also participate, but day-to-day worship is an individual or small group affair of family and/or friends.

While one can certainly say the “cult of King Naresuan”, and the title of my article could be changed<sup>21</sup> to *Among the Pantheon: the Cult of King Nareusuan's Victory in Elephant Duel*, the fluidity of Thai religion, the polytheism that is Thai religion, strains the parameters of the notion of the ‘cult’ of an individual deity as a specific social formation in Thailand.

Finally, it is important to note that no one has applied the construct cult to the Buddha or Buddhism: there is no “cult of Buddha”. To me this means that ‘cult’ in Thai studies is inconsistent, perhaps confused. This opens up one of our main criticisms of the use of cult. If cult is used for Thai, Chinese, Roman, or Greek deities, then it should be used for all religions and all deities, and thus we should find academic works on the cult of Buddha, the cult of God, the cult of Jesus (including Protestant Christianity), and the cult of Yahweh, and the cult of Allah. Cult is used in connection with Catholic saints, but this only reinforces my point. Not using cult with these deities also reinforces Rüpke’s criticism of dividing up polytheism into parts denying its unity, but maintaining Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam as wholes. This non-use also appears to grant a superiority to Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam because they are not cults. Given this, how then is ‘cult’ a neutral, generalizable descriptive and analytical construct?

### Conclusion

Given our support of creating academic concepts, categories, and constructs for social sciences and the quality of Polinskaya’s definition and use of cult, it is understood why scholars use cult as a descriptive and explanatory term; yet, we are hesitant to incorporate it in our work. First is the simple matter of the predominance in American circles of the negative connotation of cult. Secondly, and I think more importantly, I am squarely in the camp of Rüpke. I am less concerned when cult

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<sup>21</sup> Kosuta, Matthew, “Among the Thai Pantheon: Worshipping King Naresuan’s Victory in Elephant Duel,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Journal of Graduate School, Pibulsongkram Rajabhat University* 14, no. 2 (July–December 2020): 623–637.

is used in a general sense of religion or worship, but I find it distorting the phenomena to differentiate deities and spirits by ‘cults’.

Finally, we must reinforce the idea that ended the Discussion section which speaks directly to the necessity of a construct being generalizable. In the context of Thai religion, a telling omission in the pattern of use of ‘cult’ is that not one scholar uses cult in relation to the Buddha – there is no “cult of the Buddha” or “Buddha cults”. Why is this? And why is there no cult of Yahweh, cult of Jesus, and cult of Allah in other works of religious studies? It strikes me that the construct of cult has an inherent bias imbedded within it. If cult cannot describe the social formation around the Buddha, if cult cannot break into usage in the monotheistic religions, if it is not useful in describing and explaining them, and if ‘cult’ is not a good stand-in for the worship of these deities, then it is not in my view a construct adequate to apply to Thai deities and spirits. If cult is not generalizable, and thus not applicable to all deities and spirits inclusive of the central or only deity of a religion, then it is not applicable to any deity, or any spirit – in contrast, worship is.

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