

Buddhist conceptual order. In fact, spirits, and specifically guardian spirits, are referred to in the Buddhist canon, a fact that argues against "veneer" theory of Buddhism in Thailand. Secondly, this study suggests that guardian spirits may be the vehicle by which nature and locality spirits and Hindu deities were integrated into a single Buddhist world view. This should in no way obscure the fact that spirits are an integral part of the belief system of Theravada Buddhism today. The study was prompted by recognition of extensive intra-cultural diversity (Pelto and Pelto 1975) in the labelling of and behavior toward spirits, particularly guardian spirits, in a Thai community. I will propose some of the principles which underlie the villager's classification of supernatural beings, showing where the ambiguities exist. But the guardian spirit "problem" also raises of broader theoretical interest regarding the relation between cognition and action and the use of folk taxonomies.

The problem of how to understand the system of categorization of supernatural beings came to my attention while studying the rituals installing guardian spirits.<sup>1</sup> I was unable to discover whether these guardian spirits were *phī* (ghosts) or *thēwadā* (deities).<sup>2</sup> My initial problem, then, was to define the extent and composition of the important domain of spirits. I attempted to define the guardian spirits spatially in a cosmological framework and to determine whether they were "good" or "bad." Clearly, moral attributes and spatial location of these spirits were important characteristics to my informants, but they did not provide the basis for a hierarchical ordering of spirits (cf. Endicott 1970: 98-100 for similar difficulties ordering the Malay spirit pantheon). Eventually, I realized that this category of guardian spirits were *phī* to some people, and *thēwadā* to others, and my attempts to anchor guardian spirits in one category or another world would distort and oversimplify the interpretations given me by the villagers. There was no consensus on the labelling of guardian spirits and conflicting criteria for establishing attributes defining the categories of *phī* and *thēwadā*.

Thus, I faced an immediate problem in the interpretation of guardian spirits. Before looking at how other scholars have resolved this difficulty, I consider briefly the Hindu-Buddhist cosmological structure. The boundaries and levels of the world of sensuous desires (*kāmaloka*) appear very clearly

<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork in Thailand was conducted in a large village in Uthong district, Suphanburi province, from June 1971 to January 1972 under the auspices of the National Research Council of Thailand. Funds were provided by a training grant from the Department of Anthropology, and a fellowship from the Center for Asian Studies, University of Illinois. My husband continued study of village religion in 1973-74, while I was involved in another research project elsewhere. Much of my work has benefitted from his criticism and from the opportunity to revisit the village while he worked there. I wish to thank F. K. Lehman, who stimulated the theoretical approach used here, and also advised me while I was in the village.

<sup>2</sup> Transcription of Thai words is based on the form standardized in Skinner and Kirsch (eds.) 1975. However, I have, at times, followed conventional usage or forms used by authors I am quoting, at the expense of consistency.