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Introduction

In the early 2000s, a new religious opportunity for women was made possible in Thailand with the first ordination of a Theravada Buddhist nun. Since then, other women have followed the path to full ordination in the country (Waters 2003). The historical event set the path for viewing gender in a process of constant change, challenging a conservative Thai Buddhist clergy (Lindberg Falk 2008). This paper seeks to locate and contextualize the ordination in a broader setting, by studying how the demands of a specific religious group are connected with a broader globalized process. The development of religious gender awareness in Thailand is associated with the institutionalization of gender equality worldwide, through international organizations such as the United Nations. The objective is to argue against the idea that gender equality in the religious sphere is the result of economic development (Inglehart & Norris 2003). This paper address how cultural legacies and religious traditions are confronted by world secular norms, which are in turn transferred to religious practices in Thailand. In this research, religious gender activism will first be compared with the democratization and liberalization of the public space in the country, followed by the impact of the feminist movement in Thailand and finally, by the role of women's rights promoted by international institutions. The impact of transnational networks and support to the Thai nuns' movement will be considered in overall relation to the capacity of these women to change state policies and have an impact on reframing the model of state and religious relations.

Establishing a parallel between the bhikkhunis and women's movements

It is difficult to dissociate the emergence of the Thai *bhikkhunis* communities (fully ordained nuns) with the Thai political and social contexts. There is indeed a parallel between political events, movements of Thai women and the ordination of Buddhist women.¹ The *bhikkhunis* communities in Thailand fits into an international

¹ In Thailand, there is a difference between the *mae-jis* (nuns) and the *bhikkhunis* (fully ordained nuns). This difference is not only in the general appearance of these nuns, but the difference has roots in the

movement of Buddhist feminists who campaign to restore the *bhikkhunis* order in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism. Although there are several hundreds of Mahayana *bhikkhunis* in the kingdom not recognized by the Thai Buddhist clergy, Thailand had not yet experienced the presence of the Theravada *bhikkhunis*. This changed in 2001, when a former Thammasat University teacher, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, obtained her novice ordination in Sri Lanka. She then became *Bhikkhuni* Dhammananda, the first woman to receive ordination in the Theravada tradition.² The ordination of Chatsumarn was made possible via the support of transnational and national movements for the emancipation of Theravada *bhikkhunis*.

Dealing with the movement of *bhikkhunis* in the Kingdom is not an easy matter because the subject rests on three key areas of studies. They are: the status of women in society, the status of Buddhism in the kingdom and finally the status of women in Buddhism in Thailand. This paper highlights the links between Buddhist Thai women's struggle for gender equality and its connection within a global context. It also emphasizes the religious claims of women to the orthodox Buddhist Thai clergy (*sangha*). The goal is to emphasize that the existence of the *bhikkhunis* is in itself politically and religiously controversial. It is a reality that may seem strange as Thailand is sometimes defined as possessing not only a matrilineal society but also a semi-matriarchal culture (Pongsapich, 1987, 11; Pongsapich, 1997).³ Thai women do have prominent roles in labour markets and household finance (Atkinson and Errington 1990). Additionally, land ownership and kinship structures are more equitable than in other countries in Asia (Lindberg Falk 2010, 111). However, beside these optimistic views, Thai society is still highly andocentric.

In order to understand the development of religious gender awareness in Thailand, the institutionalization of gender equality worldwide must be taken into account. The need to draw a parallel between women's movements and the movement of *bhikkhunis* is essential. At first, the description of key historical moments for the development of *bhikkhunis* will be analyzed. Next, I will discuss the important dates for women's rights in the kingdom. Thus, the movement of *bhikkhunis* is divided into three waves: 1928 to 1932, 1971 to 2001 and 2001 to current initiatives. The first wave comes down to two names, those of Sara and Jongdi (at the Nariwong temple). The second is related to

Buddhist canon. To avoid any confusion between these two categories, each of them will be specified accordingly. As well, the *mae-jis* respect 5 to 10 precepts, comparing to 311 for the *bhikkhunis* or 227 for the monks (Kabilsingh, 1998, 13; Lindberg-Falk, 2007, 3). This is why *bhikkhunis* are believed to be proper field of merits and provide a mean to empower women in Thailand. Since *bhikkhunis* takes more precepts than monks, the *fully* ordain nuns are believe to hold equivalent or even more moral prestige than the monks.

² The tradition imposes that an ordained person must change its lay name for his new ordained name. The practice underlines a rite of passage. For Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, after her ordination in Sri Lanka in 2001, she adopts her ordained name: *Bhikkhuni* Dhammananda. She previously received her BA in philosophy from Visvada Bharati University in India (1966), her M.A. in religion from McMaster University in Canada (1971) and her Ph.D. in Buddhist studies in India's Magadha University in 1980. It underlines her international education as well as transnational connections potential (Roces 2010, 12).

³ Women religious practices and Thai women are generally perceived as second-class citizen, although this is slowly changing. The new election of a female Prime minister is an example of this progress.

Voramai Kabilsingh⁴ (at the temple Songdhammakalyani). She is also one of the sources of inspiration for the third wave, since she is the mother of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (*Bhikkhuni* Dhammananda) a key figure in the nuns' movement of the third wave. The interests of the last two waves are their transnational nature, which will also be discussed in this paper.⁵

Similarly to the *bhikkhunis* movement, even if the literature has not established a connection between the two movements, the women's movements in Thailand fall into three distinct periods, the first one being that of 1855 to 1935, the second one of 1935 to 1970 and finally 1970 until today (Pongsapich, 1987; Kabilsingh 1991, 45-54).⁶ The first period is described as the time when the authorities tolerated some form of political freedom. The kingdom then moved from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. At that same time, the first wave of *bhikkhunis* (1928-1932) also took place. In 1932, the change of political system led to substantial reform in the political culture of the country: Thai women were given the right to vote (Iwanaga 2008a, 1). This was earlier than many other Asian countries (Burma, Philippines, Indonesia, Japan); and in some case Western countries, such as Italy (1960), Belgium (1948) or Switzerland (1971). Nevertheless, the first woman to be elected in the Thai parliament was only in 1949, illustrating that the gain for women in the political arena was not spectacular and progress remained slow (Iwanaga 2008b, 175). For example, in 1979, only nine women had been elected in parliament and in 1981, the number had risen to fifty-four seats (Kabilsingh 1991, 17).

The progress of women's right and political demands in the early 1900s were connected to the rising level of education of women in Thailand. Numbers of women receiving formal education increased to approximately one thousand in 1910. Later, in 1914 there were more than five thousand (Barmé 2002, 21-23). In contrast, more than 114,000 boys were attending school at the same time. As a result, Thai women became more assertive and more informed. Most of these women belonged to the elite and well-to-do Bangkok families. Additionally, in the mid-1920s, education was mainly in the hand of priests where women were excluded because of monastic rule. The earliest initiatives to educate women came with the protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century. Also, King Mongkut hired missionary women to teach ladies at the palace (Barmé 2002, 22). But the positive correlation between education and women's rights has deeper historical roots.

⁴ In 1956, Voramai first shaved her head and took the 8 precepts from the vice Abbot of Wat Bovornnives, a senior monk sitting at the Council of Elders, an important organ of the Buddhist clergy (Kabilsingh, 1991, 49). This is why the second wave of *Bhikkhuni* is related to this event and the date is in parentheses in our Figure 1.

⁵ The term transnationalization is taken from Sidney Tarrow's definition in *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. The definition is: "sustained contentious interactions with opponents – national or nonnational – by connected networks of challengers organized across national boundaries" (Tarrow, 1998, 184).

⁶ The three periods are taken from Amara Pongsapich's article "Women's Social Protest in Thailand". Nowhere does she mention the *bhikkhuni* issues or the *bhikkhuni* movements.

<i>Dates for Thailand</i>	<i>Women's movement</i>	<i>Bhikkhunis movements</i>
Wave no 1	1855 - 1935	1928 - 1932
Wave no 2	1935 - 1970	(1956) 1971 - 2001
Wave no 3	1970 - current	2001 - current

Figure 1: Buddhism and gender progress in Thailand

Historical roots of gender activism

In 1851-1868 (the reign of king Rama IV) a Thai woman claimed the right to divorce and filed a petition to that effect to the sovereign. This initiative ultimately extended legal rights to women, since following the petition the king issued a decree allowing Thai women in the kingdom to have the right to freely choose their husband. In a country where polygamy was a common feature, the political and cultural impact of this initiative progressed in favor of big ideas, such as the recognition of difference and legitimacy by the elite. Rama IV pursued this suggestion by stressing that it was now illegal for a man to beat or to sell his wife without facing Royal punishment (Pongsapich, 1987, 4). Later, in 1927 Thai women first entered university. Overall, this first period (1855-1935) was marked by two requests from the women of the middle class, that of the right to education and the rejection of polygamy. Yet despite this period of progress and openness to democratic values, the Thai Buddhist clergy and the government did harshly repress the first attempt to establish the community of *bhikkhunis* in 1932. The political and religious authorities were then able to eliminate what they perceived as a threat to the country's cultural and political orthodoxy. Reviving the *bhikkhunis* community was thought as having the potential to create a dangerous new religious movement and ultimately destabilize social normative constructs. The decision against the emancipation of women is not the only example, since in the same year, the authorities forced the publication of *Ying Thai*, a leading newspaper for women, to stop. These repressive measures occurred from 1935 until 1970 when the political system was gradually being dominated by the military. The reign of the military in Thai politics indicated the end of the radicalization of women's movements that characterized their first distinct historical period.

As for the second period of women's movements in Thailand, it comes down to the radicalization of politics by military governments. Women's movements were then defined by their moderate claims. Nevertheless, moderate demands and actions did not produce less efficient results. Rather, the new orientation in these claims on the rights of women were enhanced by international organizations such as the United Nations.⁷ The transnational network of women and international organization initiatives renewed the pressure on the Thai authorities. Thus, in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The proclamation called for the equality of all men and all women. In 1949, Thailand followed this trend and the kingdom saw the election of a woman to Parliament for the first time. In 1952, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Political Rights of Women and in 1957 it was the

⁷ For a study between human rights and Theravada Buddhism see the work done by Saneh Chamarik: *Buddhism and Human Rights*.

Convention on the Nationality of Married Women.⁸ Meanwhile, Voramai Kablilsingh began her religious practice in 1956. She had yet not been ordained as a *bhikkhuni*, but intended to distinguish herself from the mainstream local white-robe nuns (*mae-jis*) by wearing a yellow robe (Kabilsingh 1991, 48). Her religious commitment sought to avoid a confrontation with the Buddhist clergy, as fully ordained monks wear the saffron color robe. The choice of color located her directly outside the Buddhist clergy. Overall, Voramai by adopting moderate means of resistance she followed the trends of the second historical period of the women's movement, which is characterized by moderate actions.

The second period was marked by numerous initiatives for women, which all reflected moderate behavior. An illustration of this “entente” between the authorities and women's groups is the first National Development Plan (NESDP). The NESDP was developed in 1961 and encouraged women to come together to participate in the development of the nation.⁹ At the time, the authorities also allowed women to participate in the development of family law. Internationally in 1967, United Nations continued its efforts to improve the lot of women with the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. In short, this phase is marked on the one side, with the intention of the international community to improve the lives of women and, on the other by the Thai government’s initiatives to follow the recommendations of the international agency. However, despite this theoretical opening by the political authorities, in practice gender equality in Thai society remained low. The military regime imposed that all women's groups should respect the established social and political order. The authorities recommended that women should avoid being associated with pressure groups or face repression (Pongsapich, 1987, 7). The role of civil society in Thailand was then underdeveloped in comparison to other Southeast Asian countries (Alagappa 2004).

The 60s and the 70s: democratization and liberalization of the public space

The 60s saw a moment in Southeast Asia where deep structures were submitted to increased pressures, such as a growing new middle class, massive urbanization and urban subculture. These mounting forces were engaged with globalizing discourses, especially in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Burma (Pelatz 2009, 180). Pelatz describes this social phenomenon as a “loosening of the hegemonic deep structure”, a terminology which he draw’s from Judith Butler’s (Butler 1993). The emergence of new identities and subjectivities related to female and male did reveal the scope and limits of social changes occurring in the kingdom at that time (Pelatz 2009, 181). Rooted in this sociopolitical context is the advent of the second wave of the *Bhikkhunis* (1971-2001).

The second wave of *bhikkhunis* officially begins with the ordination of Voramai Kabilsingh in Taiwan in 1971. The rejection of women’s full ordination by Thai religious and political authorities compelled the nun to obtain official female ordination overseas.

⁸ The 1952 Convention is the first international legal document giving equal political rights, including the right to participate in elections. The Second Convention aimed at giving women the right to change or keep their nationality without the permission of their husband.

⁹ Monks were also asked to join and contribute to the implementation of the country’s 8th National Economic and social Development Plan.

The community of Voramai espoused a conciliatory ideology and a less confrontational attitude than the third wave of *bhikkhunis* (2001-today). This moderation is due to the fact that Voramai began her religious practice in 1956, during the period of moderate women's movement (1935-1970). It then adopted the attitudes and ideas prevailing at the time by the Thai feminists. The nun was trying to avoid retaliation that the first wave of *bhikkhunis* suffered. Within this environment, Voramai became the first woman in Thailand to receive dual ordination, which gave her the right to use the title of *bhikkhunis* according to the Chinese Buddhist tradition, contrary to the nuns of the first wave.

In the 50's, Voramai tried to push for the recognition of women in Buddhism in the kingdom, while adopting a strategy of accommodation with the orthodox Buddhist clergy. This behavior differs from other religious movements, some of which were later founded in 1975 and whose objectives were precisely to confront the authorities. Moreover, the movement of *bhikkhunis* contrasts from other religious communities. Indeed, monks mostly run new religious movements and Voramai was a female "abbot". Political activism and religious radicals marked the 70's which represented a major difference between women and men religious movements. As a result, the radicalization of the *bhikkhunis* movement did not occur before its third wave (2001-current), a radicalization also assigned to the third wave of women's movements in Thailand.

As in the case of the third wave of the *bhikkhunis* movement, the third phase of the women's movement (1970-present) is illustrated by its radicalism. For the kingdom, the events and protests of October 1973 announced a moment when Thais became more politically active. However, in 1976 the return of the military in Thai politics announced a more difficult period for women's activism in the second half of the 70s. It was not until the 80s that general conditions for women's movements were more favorable (Pongsapich, 1987, 7). At that time, students were back in politics via the creation of associations that advocated, among other ideas, for women's rights. Other social groups then followed their example, including: the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, the Association for Civil Liberty, the Child Rights Protection Center, the Women Information Centre, EMPOYER, Foundation for Women, the Friends of Women Group, the Gender and Development Research Institute, etc. Some of these were progressive NGOs created in the 80s. They offered numerous services from vocational training, shelter for prostitutes, emergency home to legal assistance to women in needs (Lindberg Falk, 2010, 114).

Embracing transnational networks for gender's rights

The third period of women's movements is marked by a number of commitments from the international community to women's rights. As for the *bhikkhunis*, they decided to be ordained overseas, confirming their transnational networks, and waited for the right time to claim their right to existence. One can only hypothesize that the recent election of Yingluck Shinawatra as the first female Prime Minister of Thailand might change the political environment and sympathy to recognize women's religious right to exist within the conservative clergy. Historically, the Thai State followed the decision of international bodies in regards to women's rights issues. The initiative to restore the community of

bhikkhunis is the result of a series of national and international events conducive to the support of women. The importance is not to enumerate all this progress for women's rights domestically and internationally, but to mention a few that illustrate our general argument. Here being, that the development of religious gender awareness in Thailand is associated with the institutionalization of gender equality worldwide, through international organizations such as the United Nations.

The year 1975 was declared to be the International Year of Women by the United Nations (UN).¹⁰ For the occasion, the Thai government no longer limited the number of women lawyers in court. The authorities also lifted the prohibition for women to travel without the permission of their husbands. Moreover, the kingdom legally accepted the notion of gender equality a year before the International Year of Women, in 1974. Then in 1979, the United Nations signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).¹¹ Later, the 80s were marked by the Declaration on the Participation of Women in Promoting Peace and International Cooperation by the United Nations. In Thailand, the well-known Supatra Masdit created the Women MPs' Group for women to work on a common agenda in the kingdom (Masdit, 2008, 273). This group still aims to coordinate the decision of women MPs in Parliament to advance the cause of women in the country. In 1982, the Ministry of Interior also abolished the regulation that prohibited women from being at the head of a subdivision, district, or to occupy the position of village head (Vichitranonda & Bhongsvej, 2008, 64). In 1985, the Thai authorities abolished the legal concept of "head" which referred to the husband as administrator of the common goods in the family. Additionally in 1989, the National Commission of Women's Affairs (NCWA) received its corporate status in the kingdom. It is now known as the Office for the Promotion of Gender Equality and is led by the Prime Minister's Office.¹²

The 90s and 2000s are also very rich decades in mobilization and awareness for women's rights advocates. In the 1990s, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) founded the Gender and Development Research Institute (GDRI) in Thailand.¹³ In 1993, the UN implemented the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The pact aimed to ensure women's equality, security, freedom, integrity and dignity. Later in 1999, the UN prepared the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In the 2000s, the UN remained committed and adopted the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. It was then understood as establishing a rule against human trafficking; here children and women are usually the main victims of these transactions.

Therefore, in 2001 it is within a favorable environment for the promotion of women's rights, that the Thailand witnessed its third wave of *bhikkhunis*. Thanks to an

¹⁰ See the United Nations Internet Site for further information: <http://www.un.org>.

¹¹ In 2006, Saisuree Chutikul from Thailand holds a seat at the Committee in charge of applying the Convention for a 4 years mandate.

¹² The budget of this institution in 2001 was 26.2 million of Baht, a little more than 813,000 \$CAN (JICA, 2003, 7).

¹³ For further information in this institution see: <http://unifem-eseasia.org/projects/Thailand/gdri.htm>. It is part of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women.

auspicious national and international context, this last wave becomes more radical in its position against a patriarchal Thai Buddhist clergy and state. Thus, it begins with the ordination of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a former Thammasat University teacher and daughter of Taiwanese ordained *bhikkhuni* Voramai Kabisingh. Chatsumarn chooses to go to Sri Lanka to be ordained in the Theravada tradition, rather than in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, as was the case with her mother. Her gesture is still seen as challenging the political and religious order. However, contrary to the first wave when the *bhikkhunis* were imprisoned, humiliated and forced to disrobe, some of the state's MPs have since sided gradually with the *bhikkhunis*, as it did for other new religious movements. The change of attitude from the state leaves the clergy in a somewhat secluded position over new religious Buddhist organizations; illustrating the growing contrast between the radical conservative traditional elites and the reforming new elites. In addition, the orthodox Buddhist clergy must now face increased criticism and growing discontent by the lay Buddhist community over its corruption and mismanagement of laics' donations. This dissatisfaction stems, among other things, from the Buddhist clergy's numerous blunders, which are well covered in the media. Criticism is also mounting over the clergy's patriarchal conservative values that it supports and institutionalizes.

The monopoly of the Buddhist clergy over the kingdom's religious affairs must now manage the opening of the state over various initiatives of religious organizations located at the periphery of the religious orthodoxy (Ekachai, 2001, 298; Lindberg-Falk, 2007, 241). It illustrates how pluralism and equality are progressively being institutionalized by key political institutions. The dialogue between the values promoted by international organizations and the Thai state has permeated national culture and participated in opening a space for women's rights in the kingdom.

Conclusion

In sum, it is believed that this third wave is an integral part of movements for the rights of women in the country. In addition, the movement of *bhikkhunis* is associated with welfare activism of religious organizations, which aims to promote gender equality in the Buddhist clergy and within Thai society in general. It is also possible to identify common goals for the Thai women's movements in the third period and the third wave of *bhikkhunis*. In this regard these goals included equal rights, access to education, the fight against poverty, prostitution and finally child labour (Kabilsingh 1991, 17; Pongsapich, 1987, 8 -9). The convergence of both waves illustrates the willingness of the *bhikkhunis* movement to improve social conditions within the country. In an environment where social status is still closely linked to the concept of karma (causality), the community of *bhikkhunis* is seen as one solution to religious repression based on gender. Religious practices and discrimination still contribute to the construction of gender identity in the country. The popular belief that gender is the result of the individual's karma is common (Kabilsingh 1991, 31). Within this social environment, it is not surprising that the struggle for women's right in the kingdom is also a reality in the field of religion. The similarities between the demands of women and the *bhikkhunis* now fit in an international context where Thai women can benefit from transnational networks ready to mobilize for women's rights (Tsomo, 1999). Thus, the demands of the Thais are no longer isolated and

the state must consider the impact of transnational networks on its image and its economic performance.

This paper examined at how cultural legacies and religious orthodoxies supported by military government and the Buddhist clergy have progressively been confronted by world secular norms, such as United Nations Conventions, which were then in turn transferred to religious Thailand. The opening of the democratic space in the 70s led to a growing acceptance by the authorities to mobilization against its policies and inequalities. A civil society eventually emerged out of this process and resulted in the possibility of expressing and advocating for more radical changes, especially from women's groups in the kingdom. The oscillation between democratic and authoritarian regimes resulted in the inability for women's right movement to develop in a linear form of historical progression, as in the case of Women's movement in America (suffrage movement, deconstruction of patriarchy, etc.) (Roces 2010, 3).

If the term Asian feminism was avoided in the paper, it is precisely because Asian activists have an aversion for the term. An example of this is the fact that Chatsumarn Kabilsingh and the *bhikkhunis* do not refer to themselves as feminists. Feminism is understood as being un-Thai, a source of decadent values and finally a rupture to social morality, since it is perceived as favouring individualism over the rights of community. This refers to the Asian Values debate. Here feminism is understood as promoting liberalist values, a form of neo-colonialism from the West. Nevertheless, what this paper demonstrates is that they are similarities between women's movements, the *bhikkhunis* movements and their transnational allies, including in the West. Thai women discovered that they could benefit from what Mina Roces and Vera Mackie refer to a 'transnational imaginary' to attract followers and sympathizers worldwide (Roces 2010, 15-16). In the case of Thailand, the strategy is on two levels: lobbying for legislative reforms (advocacy groups and welfare oriented groups) and conscious-raising promotion (Lindberg Falk 2010, 114). I conclude, as does Mina Roces, that in the case of Thailand and Asia, "narrative of the feminine is shaped - by religion, culture and history" (Roces 2010, 3). It is not produced solely by economic development (Inglehart & Norris 2003).

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Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand. M Litalien. Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies 19 (2008). 2008. Les bouddhistes cambodgiens de Montréal en contexte. International institutionalization of gender equality and gender religious activism in Thailand Introduction In the early 2000s, a new religious opportunity for women was made. M Litalien. The system can't perform the operation now. Second edition. Movements. An introduction. Donatella della porta and mario diani. © 1999, 2006 by Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani. BLACKWELL PUBLISHING 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK 550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia. The right of Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani to be identified as the Authors of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved. Women and girls face discrimination regardless their national and religious background and even their professional skills. Why? The misunderstanding of the core ideology of feminism is the first cause. This is why the importance of gender equality in the society must be kept in the spotlight. Moreover, social development explicitly depends on it. Besides, it is not only women's issue.