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a cura di
edited by
Massimo Leone

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From Earth to Altar, through the Supermarket

The Offerings of Food to the Buddha between Thai Tradition and Modernity

SIMONA STANO

ITALIAN TITLE: *Dalla terra all'altare, attraverso il supermercato. Le offerte di cibo al Buddha tra tradizione Thai e modernità.*

ABSTRACT: Getting next to a statue of the Buddha in Thailand you might be surprised to find, along with the usual offerings of food consisting of bananas, coconuts, and milk, big boxes of Oreo cookies, bottles of water, and other canned drinks or foods. Are they the symptoms of the so-called “westernization” of the East? Or rather, the simulacra of an increasingly growing consumerism? Or perhaps, more simply, new forms of the traditional sacrificial practices? Building on a general overview on the religious act of sacrifice and focusing on that particular practice which is the sacrificial offering of food to the deity, the present article tries to think over — mainly through the tools of the semiotic approach — the contrasts and interferences between tradition and modernity, sacred and profane, and, especially, Cult — intended as a system of religious devotion towards a particular figure — and cult — conceived as a thing that has become popular or fashionable among a particular group of people — in some religious ritual practices, with particular reference to food and the Thai context, chosen as case study because of some interesting examples of hybridization observed on the field.

KEYWORDS: Food; offerings; Buddhism; Thailand; cult.

Getting next to a statue of the Buddha in Thailand you might be surprised to find, along with the usual offerings of food consisting of bananas, coconuts and milk, big boxes of Oreo cookies, bottles of water and other canned drinks or foods. Are they the symptoms of the so-called “westernization” of the East? Or rather the simulacra of an increasingly growing consumerism? Or perhaps, more simply, new forms of the traditional sacrificial practices?

Building on a general overview on the religious act of sacrifice and focusing on that particular practice which is the sacrificial offering of food to the deity, we will try to think over — mainly through the tools of the semiotic approach — the contrasts and interferences between tradition and modernity, sacred and profane, and, especially, *Cult* — intended as a system of religious devotion towards a particular figure — and *cult* — conceived as a thing that has become popular or fashionable among a particular group of people — in some religious ritual practices, with particular reference to food and the Thai context, chosen as case study because of some interesting examples of hybridization observed on the field.

1. *Sacer facere*, “to make sacred”

Derived from the Latin *sacrificium*, composed by *sacer* and *facere*, the word *sacrifice* refers to all the ritual gestures by which different kinds of goods (food, objects, animals and even human beings) are subtracted from the profane condition and assigned to a sacred one. Different disciplines, including the history of religions, sociology and anthropology, have tried to describe the complexity of the sacrificial act, suggesting some explanatory theories about their origins and functions.

The first attempt in this direction is *Primitive Culture* (1871) by Edward Burnett Tylor, who points out the character of *gift* of the sacrifice. William Robertson Smith (1886) insists instead on the idea of *communion* with the divine, interpreting the sacrificial act as a way to strengthen, through the offering of the totemic animal, the relationship between one’s own tribe and the gods. Echoing this perspective, Emile Durkheim (1912) highlights the importance of the sacrificial banquet for *social cohesion*: the sacrifice does not create communion and sharing only between men and the gods, but also among human beings themselves, who share the experience of exercising the sacrificial act — and, where applicable, also the joint consumption of the meal offered to the gods — and their position of *offerers* and, at the same time, *petitioners*.

In *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* (1899), Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert refer instead to the etymology of the word and the definition proposed by Tylor, criticizing the approaches that define

the sacrifice as a primitive and not much structured practice: being a gift for superhuman entities, as well as a process that makes sacred what previously belonged to the profane realm, in fact, it presupposes the ability to discern between the sacred and the profane, as well as to distinguish between immanent and transcendent.

The notion of gift takes on further specification in *Ethnologische Bemerkungen zu theologischen Opfertheorien* by Wilhelm Schmidt (1922), who, reminding the passage from the first sacrificial practices — dating back to the archaic societies of “hunter gatherers” and consisting in offering part of the harvest and the hunt to one or more Supreme Beings — to the sacrifice, typical of the pastoral and agricultural societies, for the dead — the ancestors, who need food offerings in order to feed themselves in the afterlife —, points out the nature of *exchange*, that is its being done “in exchange” for the achievement of a result. Referring to the contributions of Schmidt, Angelo Brelich (1963) distinguishes three types of sacrifice focusing on the concepts of *ownership* and *relationship*.

In the case of firstlings, typical of hunter gatherers societies, the first part of the harvest or hunting is given to an “extraneous entity” in order to desacralize the remaining one, which can be then consumed. Essential character of this sacrificial practice, therefore, “is that it precedes the consumption of food by the human group: the first piece is for superhuman beings, the ‘rest’ for men” (Brelich 1963, p. 45, *TdA*). This presupposes a conception of the world as something that is not of men’s property, but non-human beings’:

eating the food taken from non-human nature, therefore, would be a sacrifice: to do so — because it is necessary to do it —, men must desacralize food, that is to make it suitable for the profane consumption. The way to do this is to concentrate its ‘sacredness’ in the *first* part which is duly ‘returned’ to the superhuman owner.

(*ibid.*)

The *sacrifice as gift*, which is typical of agricultural cultures is based on the idea of human property — or at least of their belonging to the profane reality — of the goods offered to superhuman entities. In this case, therefore, it is not desacralized what men need for their sustenance; on the contrary, “what they give — and no longer return — it’s ‘consecrated’ to the non-human beings” (*ibid.*, p. 46).

Finally, the *communion sacrifice* typically consists in the killing of a victim and its consumption by the sacrificer community and it causes not only the strengthening of the connection between the community and the otherworldly entity to which the victim is offered but also, as Durkheim pointed out, of the relationships among the same human beings.

According to the descriptions mentioned above¹, the sacrificial act can be interpreted as a form of Cult ritual to all intents and purposes. In particular, its efficacy can be conceived in terms of *influence*, or “make someone do something”², — as food or other goods are offered to the gods in order to obtain their benevolence or, more generally, something in return (sacrifice as *gift* and *exchange*) — as well as in terms of *attestation* (“being of being”), since the sacrificial act attests the truthfulness of both the ontology of the deity and its relation with the sacrificer(s). It seems to be related to the sacrifice even the concept of *self-motivation*, for which the ritual bestows upon the worshipper the capacity to act in the world, and, as we are going to see later, that of *self-transformation*, when the efficacy of the sacrificial act consists in encouraging the worshipper to change and pursuit certain virtues.

Nevertheless, Greimas’ typology of modalities does not seem to exhaust the possibilities of semiotics to think over the act of sacrifice and the forms of rituals that are related to it. Much can add, for example, the analysis of the signs, discourses and practices that characterize the sacrificial act and its deployment, as well as the historic and cultural dimensions.

Since it would be impossible to examine here all the aspects that such an argument would require, we will only consider in what follows a particular kind of sacrificial act, that is the *offerings of food*, at first with a quick and very general overview and then focusing on a case study that will allow us to broaden the discussion, getting back to the analysis of the links between sacred and profane, tradition and modernity, as well as *Cult* and *cult*.

1. Considered the immense literature on sacrifices, the short introduction presented does not pretend to be exhaustive at all, but it simply aims at providing a general framework for questions here proposed.

2. Cfr. Greimas 1966, pp. 67–91 and Greimas and Courtés 1979, pp. 202–204.

2. Offering food to the gods: from firstlings to Vedic rituals

Composed by *ob*, “ahead, towards” and *ferre* “to bring”, the Latin verb *offerre*, gave rise — through the secondary form *offerire* — to the Italian *offrire* (*to offer* in English), which means “to bring or put forward; to submit and convey; to dedicate to someone” (Pianigiani 2011, *TdA*). Hence the noun *offering*, generally used to refer to the physical act of offering a gift to the deity.

It is a practice whose origins date back a long way. As Paola Bizzarri and Davide Pelanda remind in their book *La fede nel piatto*, in fact,

since ancient times men have thanked the gods through sacrifices and offerings of food. Since the most ancient times the share of the meal has represented the desire to relate to the Other, the divine, but also to the other men: it was a banquet of friendship and variously conceived unity.

(Bizzarri and Pelanda 2008, pp. 15–16, *TdA*)

What has changed over time and still varies between a sociocultural system and another is the way of performing and the functions that such practices have come to assume: if among the Sumerians, for example, the priest lit the scented braziers in front of the crowd reciting chants and hymns, then inviting the gods to eat and drink the goods offered to them, the Egyptians celebrated instead offerings in the most sacred places of the sanctuary, out of sight of the faithful. The Greeks distinguished offerings on the base of their addressee(s): the *choaí* (χοαί), consisting of libations of wine, milk and honey or water, was reserved for the dead and the chthonic deities; the *spondaí* (σπονδαί) to the gods of Olympus; the *aparchaí* (ἀπάρχαί) consisted in firstlings of agriculture placed in the sacred woods or thrown in the rivers that were devoted to Demeter, Dionysus and the Nymphs; and so on. Even in ancient Rome the oblation of food and gifts of all kinds was highly codified: an altar (*ara*) was placed in front of the temple and, next to it, there was a fire on which libations of wine and incense were poured. The sacrificer, with his head covered by the *toga*, then proceeded, together with the *praeco* and the *tibicen*, to the sacrifice of the animal, which was decorated with ribbons and then sprinkled with wine and *mola salsa* (spelled flour wet with brine). Once the victim was sacrificed, it was split into two parts: the liver, the heart and the lungs were devoted to the gods; while the meat, that was the

profane element, was consumed by all the people who were there.

Looking at the major religious traditions, then, the practices related to the offerings of food to the gods get even more structured and complex: in the Judaic tradition, for example, the sacrificial acts involving food are so numerous and varied that several scholars have tried to build up typologies, leading to classifications even very different the one from the other. So Aaron Rakeffet–Rothkoff distinguishes among propitiatory, dedicatory, votive, ordering, of peace, of elevation, etc. sacrifices, while Cristiano Grottanelli identifies three major types — burnt offerings, peace offerings and sin offerings — according to the consumption — null, partial or total — of the sacrificed victim by the offerers or the priests. And these are only two of the many examples that could be cited.

Various offerings of food are contemplated also by the Islamic religion, which includes both the animal sacrifices and the offerings of vegetables and many semi-liquid compounds.

The Vedas speak about *yajña*, that is the offering of fruits and vegetables, butter, milk, meat, curds, rice, leather, etc. and the rituals associated with it.

As it can be easily inferred even from this brief and partial overview, the variety and complexity of the practices related to the offerings of food make it impossible to point out general arguments without taking into consideration the differences between the various semiospheres they pertain to. For this reason, we will focus on the following on a particular case study that will allow us to think over some issues in our view of primary importance for the analysis of food offerings to the gods and the rituals connected to them: the overlap between tradition and modernity, the interferences between the sacred and the profane and, especially, the encounters between *Cult* and *cult*.

3. When the *cult* meets the *Cult*: the offerings of food to the Buddha between Thai tradition and modernity

The offerings of food are one of the oldest and most popular Buddhist rituals: in addition to the usual offerings of food proffered during the rites celebrated on the occasion of some festivals, there are the oblations of food left at the altars of hungry ghosts dispersed among

small houses and public buildings, the alms to the monks and the offerings to the so-called Three Jewels (the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha*). Beyond the differences related to the existence of different branches and traditions internal to Buddhism, the offering of food — as well as that of other objects such as flowers, incense and candles — is generally considered as a meritorious act that recalls the need for offerers to abandon any form of greed or selfishness and refers to a particular symbolism.

To prevent any kind of artificial generalization, we will deal below with a particular and more limited case study, that is the offering of food to the Buddha in Thailand (a context characterized by a particular form of Theravada Buddhism influenced by the echoes of traditions and customs from China and Sri Lanka³).

3. According to the census of 2000, Buddhist of the Theravada tradition are the largest religious group (94.6%) in Thailand, followed by Muslims (4.6 %). Theravada, which literally means “the Teaching of the Elders” or “the Ancient Teaching”, is the oldest surviving Buddhist school. For further information about Theravada Buddhism (generally and particularly in the Thai context), cfr. Gethin 1998, Holt, Kinnard and Walters 2003 and Phongphit 1985.

3.1. From tradition to modernity: does the Buddha prefer Culture or Nature?



Figure 1. Offerings of bananas, coconut and *mapos*



Figure 2. Altar with offerings of flowers and food (coconut with drinking straw).



Figure 3. Bowl of offerings containing, among other things, incense sticks, green teabags, a bottle of water and other canned foods.



Figure 4. Bowl of offerings containing, among other things, canned foods, a fruit milkshake, some biscuits, a bottle of coconut juice and some sanitary products.



Figure 5. Offerings of canned biscuits and teabags.



Figure 6. Offerings of incense, canned foods and sanitary products (in the foreground) and some fruits (in the background).



Figure 7. Offerings of fruits (bananas, *pitaya* or “dragon fruit”, apples and *longan* or “dragon eyes”) and money.

These images depict different types of offerings to the Buddha: taken in the summer 2011, they are particularly meaningful for the interesting semantic oppositions that they represent.

If in the first picture (Fig. 1), we can see some fruits — *natural* elements — in a bowl placed in front of a statue of the Buddha, in the second one (Fig. 2) it comes on more clearly the *cultural* component of the offering, represented by the coconut that is no longer in its natural state, as if just picked from the palm — and as it was offered in the case of Figure 1 — but ready to drink and even furnished with an appropriate drinking straw. The presence of elements that point out aspects related to *Culture* then grows exponentially if we analyze the following images: Figure 3 depicts a bowl of offerings that contains, among other things, a package of incense sticks, a box of green teabags, a bottle of mineral water and other canned foods. Similarly, in Figure 4, the offerings to the Buddha consist of a box of fruit milkshake, a bottle of coconut milk, some packages of biscuits and other canned foods, as well as some sanitary products. In Figure 5, another interesting element appears on the packaging of the products: the brand. Arranged in an elegant geometric pattern, the offerings placed on the little wooden altar located next to the statue of the Buddha consist in some packages of *Oreo* and *White Castle* cookies, as well as in some wrapped boxes containing infusions.

In Figures 6 and 7, instead, the element that highly stands out is the *contrast*: in the first case, we can see in the background a bowl of fruits, while in the foreground there are some canned foods and wrapped sanitary products. Finally, in the last image (Fig. 7) the *natural* component (bananas, *pitaya*, apples and *longan*) is interposed with the *cultural* one, which no longer consists in canned foods, but in some notes. If we wanted to express such contrasts in terms of semantic oppositions, then, we would have:

tradition: modernity: Nature: Culture: unwrapped: wrapped: anonymity:
brand

The traditional offering, consisting in fruits — elements which are closer to Nature than to Culture⁴ —, is characterized by the absence

4. Although we are talking about the fruits of the earth, in fact, we should not forget

of packages and wrappers and can be described as “anonymous”, that is no marked by logos or labels that specify its name or features. Modern forms of oblation, packaged products can be recognized for the *brand* that appears on them and which, together with different kinds of inscriptions, clarifies their identity. Crossing point between these two extremes, the coconut depicted in the second image (Fig. 2) sees its *natural* features altered by man, whose intervention can be found in the different form assumed by this food and above all in the presence of the drinking straw — *cultural* product — inside it.

It is peculiar, finally, the case of Figure 7, where packaged products are replaced by money, cultural element *par excellence* and probable metaphorical reference to the same system of production of consumer goods.

Beyond the symbolism that, though in different forms, pervades all types of oblations depicted⁵, what stands out in the transition from traditional offerings mostly consisting in fruits and products of the earth to the most modern forms of food offering to the Buddha — which, however, have not replaced the first ones, but have simply joined them — is the appearance of what we might provocatively define the *cultural* or *human surplus*⁶, that is the presence of a number of elements that refer to the intervention of man on Nature and affirm, in a sense, the appropriation of the latter by the former.

An observation that has many implications if we reconsider what we said on the sacrifice in the first part: more than for desacralizing the natural elements that men need for their sustenance (so that they become suitable for the profane consumption), it seems here to be the predominant the *consecrating* character of the offering act, which assumes particular connotations. If it is the result of human intervention — from simple interventions on natural elements thought to facilitate their consumption to more complex forms of processing, packaging

that it is nevertheless the case of partly cultural products, as they are marked by human intervention (consider, for example, the processes related to agriculture, harvesting and the various kinds of treatment the products are subjected to, etc.).

5. It is still crucial the presence of dairy products — which, resulting of a long process and being animal products that do not involve any kind of violence, symbolize a right conduct of life, which allows the mind to reveal its nature through the practice over time and with the dissolution of the contaminations —, infusions and other foods with a strong symbolic value.

6. The reference is to Marxian theories, cfr. Marx 1870.

and identification of products — to be offered to the deity, is not the same human labor — and, hence, profane — that is, in a sense, *sacer factum*, “sacred made”?

The divine action, thanks to which the profane world is provided with natural goods, is, therefore, supported by human intervention, which occurs on that same nature bringing back to the deities a part of it, but not without having before charged it with a certain cultural or human surplus. And the same act of offering consecrates this cultural surplus, bringing the sacred and the profane in a point of extreme closeness. Perhaps not incidentally: the figure of the Buddha, whose name literally means “the Awakened one” — the one who, starting from the profane life, gradually distanced from it reaching enlightenment —, well illustrates the close correlation and opposition between the sacred and the profane typical of Buddhist philosophy.

But there is something more.

3.2. “Cult” or “cult”?

In addition to the elements analyzed in the previous paragraph, in the transition from traditional offerings consisting of fruits to the most modern forms of offering made of wrapped products of different kinds, another interesting aspect seems to emerge. It is what, referring to the definition proposed by the dictionary, we may call *cult*: “a thing that has become popular or fashionable among a particular group of people” (Wehmeier 2005, p. 156).

As it clearly came out in the description of the proposed images, the anonymity of the natural offerings is opposed to the highlighting of the brand — a brand that often refers to a context that is different from that in which the sacrifice takes place — of the most modern forms of oblation consisting in packaged products. But why should the products of the foreign market and mass distribution be preferred, or at least placed side by side, to the fruits of the earth and other types of local and, in a manner of speaking, more natural (or, better, less “culturalized”) offerings?

If it is true that, from the material point of view, the dynamics of the globalization of consumption and the expansion of the catchment area of the western production system have resulted in the dissemination of these products even within the Thai context, from the symbolic

point of view the inclusion of cult — and of forms of cult, we should not forget, that refer to the western context — in Eastern practices of Cult is quite surprising.

The presence of such elements, in fact, seems to break to some extent one of the pillars of Buddhist philosophy, that is the detachment from the material and physical pleasures of the body, according to which food is considered as a necessary element for survival, but a good to which man must eliminate all forms of greed and pleasure.

The inclusion of cult in the Cult act of sacrifice, by contrast, would raise in a way the first one from the profane level to the sacred universe, affirming the predominance of the *attestation* aspect (a “being of being” that, more than confirming the truth of the divinity or his relationships with the community that makes the offer, would be more related to the last one and to the celebration of that *cultural or human surplus* we mentioned above) over the other forms of symbolic efficacy.

But we know that is not like this: as we highlighted in the introduction about the sacrifice, and as many texts on Buddhist practices point out, we should not forget that the efficacy of food offerings to the Buddha can be primarily conceived in terms of *influence*, as the offering is made to thank the Buddha and to obtain his benevolence, as well as to remove the impurities linked to the profane life. According to the Buddhist religion and, particularly, the Theravada tradition that has spread in Thailand, every action of man on nature is marked by impurities, as it causes more or less severe forms of violence; for this reason, monks can eat only alms donated to them by the so-called “laymen”, who can remedy the contact with these impurities through the same act of offering — to the monks but also to the Buddha, through the intermediary of the first ones —, “sacrificing” their more expensive and appreciated goods.

Then the component of *self-motivation* seems to be also very strong, because the ritual bestows upon the offerer the capacity to act in the world; and finally we should mention that of *self-transformation*, for which the efficacy of the sacrificial act consists in encouraging the person who makes the offering to change and pursue certain virtues, that in this case are represented by the ability to abandon the dimension of pleasure associated with food and pursue moderation.

How to explain, then, the inclusion of the above described forms of cult in such practices of Cult?

Once again, the answer comes from the dictionary: referring to the etymology of the word *Cult* and going back to the Latin root *colère*, “to cultivate”, we obtain a definition in this terms: “to take care of, to pay homage to, to venerate” (Pianigiani 2011, *TdA*). And what better than offering what is valuable — a “value-object”⁷, we might say — to venerate and to pay homage to the divinity?

Then, referring to the definition of cult mentioned before, we can now perhaps understand better the meaning of the offerings of teabags, biscuits and other wrapped products often marked with logos and marks related not only to the endogenous production system, but also to the exogenous one: is not the value of an object linked, in some way, to the Subject that, with that Object, is related? And are not the choices of the single individuals influenced by the culture in which they are involved in? If we conceive cult as “something that has become popular or fashionable among a particular group of people”, therefore, its inclusion in the offerings of food to the gods — and, more generally, in any form of Cult — should not surprise us too much: to “cultivate” the divine and pay homage to him there seems to be, in fact, nothing like what *Culture* — term whose etymology, not surprisingly, refers to the Latin *cultus*, which derives from *colère* (cfr. Pianigiani 2011) — has somehow “cultivated” over time, making it “popular or fashionable” for those who belong to it. Even if this element is apparently completely in contrast to the philosophical and eschatological statement of the forms of Cult that we are analyzing.

It is then that, among American cookies and plastic bottles, a question arises. A question that this paper does not pretend to solve, but rather to relaunch as a challenge: is there perhaps any form of — Eastern or not — *Cult* that does not involve a certain dose of *cult*?

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7. The reference is to Greimas’ theory on narratology (cfr. Greimas 1969, 1970, 1976 and Greimas and Courtés 1979).

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