Agency and Belief Is Kamma "Natural"?
Appraising Julia Cassaniti's Argument

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[Abstract]

In this paper I am assessing Julia Cassaniti's (2012, 2015) claim that Buddhists in Thailand perceive religious concepts (specifically "kamma") as natural entities, comparable to natural laws. Her claim is based on, and intended to lend empirical support to, Don Handelman's thesis that formal character of cosmologies determines the emphasis a religious tradition puts on "belief". Cassaniti expands on the thesis proposing that cosmology and belief are connected through people's representation of agency. I am arguing that Cassaniti misrepresents the relationship between public discourse and real representations of religious concepts and, more specifically, discounts cultural conventions informing the Thai way of using langue. Thai religious and cultural practices also clearly indicate a situation incongruent with Cassaniti's assertion that agency is perceived by Thai Buddhist as inherent to the acting subject which is fully responsible for both its present actions and their broader, kammically determined, cosmological context. Lastly, I am pointing

out some problems related to her analysis of data collected through interviews.

Key words: Theravāda Buddhism, agency, belief, religious representations, research, Julia Cassaniti

Introduction

When Pascal Boyer in his review of Tanya Luhrmann's book *When God talks back* (2012) remarked that "'belief' is hard work" (Boyer, 2013b) he was echoing the Anthropologists' long-standing concern with the complexity of people's attitudes towards their cultural concepts. Problems rising at the interface of public pronouncements, explicit and implicit beliefs, differential directive power of concepts have provoked a scale of scholarly reactions ranging from the plea for refining to the complete abandonment of the concept of "belief". Rodney Needham famously commented on the Penan of interior Borneo about half century ago: "I realized that I could not confidently describe their attitude to God whether this was belief or anything else. … In fact, as I had glumly to conclude, I just did not know what was their psychic attitude toward the personage in whom I had assumed they believed" (Needham, 1972, 1). In line with his contention that "[t]he notion of belief is not appropriate to an empirical philosophy of mind or to an exact account of human motives and conduct" (Needham, 1972, 188) Stephen Stich makes it central to his book that the folk concept of belief "ought not to play any significant role in a science aimed at explaining human condition and behavior" (Stich, 1985, 5). Clifford Geertz asked "[w]hat does 'belief' mean in a religious context? Of all the problems surrounding attempts to conduct anthropological analyzes of religion this is the most troublesome and therefore the most often avoided" (Geertz, 1973, 24). And Dan Sperber, to add yet another theoretical perspective notes, that "the history of religious ideas, ethnographic studies of verbal behavior (e.g., Bauman & Sherzer 1974, Bloch 1975) and plain introspection strongly suggest that statements can be made with quite different purposes and with a great variety of degree and type of commitment, ideas can be entertained and held to be true in

a variety of ways, criteria of rationality may vary with types of statements and classes of "beliefs" (Sperber, 1985, 48).[1] Simply, "[i]t is difficult to understand what believing is due to its complexity. … [t]he question of what belief means (or should mean) is located in diverse fields of interest such as logic, the psychology of meaning-making, mental illness, religious experience, studies of the nature of truth, decision making, law and jurisprudence, and in various religions and worldviews" (Angel et al, 2017, 4).

Tanya Luhrmann's book, an ethnography of an American Evangelical group, assesses the complex cognitive processes involved in producing the belief that a supernatural agent God is around and actually talks back. This is an instance of what I will call "committed religious[2] belief": a belief that people act upon, belief with directive power. Such a belief comes either in a "distributed" form of acceptance of moral, dietary and other behavioral norms or in a "condensed" form of magically interpreted rituals, soteriologically motivated meditation, religious learning and other ways of direct engagement with supernatural agents or religiously defined goals. Non-committed, "background" beliefs (e.g., "God and Jesus are of one substance", "God exists", or post hoc explanations of events like "It is my kamma", "I had a bad/good luck", "C'est la vie") do not *inform* or *instigate* action.[3] While some religious propositions were explicitly formulated as background beliefs, others might have assumed this role despite their intended committed doctrinal framing. The Buddhist *doctrinal* concept of kamma is a good example. As Suntaree Komin

[1] This, of course is only a shallow scoop into the discussion on belief. A very useful overview and powerful interdisciplinary discussion offers Angel at al 2017.

[2] "Religious" – related to extra-empirical agencies believed to respond to people's intentional behavior.

[3] Of course, also background beliefs can instigate action if these are perceived as indicators of committed beliefs. The distinction I am making here between background and committed beliefs is similar to the one Pyysiäinen makes between $belief_A$ (belief with religious content) and $belief_B$ (belief as an attitude) respectively. However, his $belief_B$ – "an attitude in which one emotionally feels religious concepts to be relevant" seems to broader than my understanding of committed beliefs as instigating action. (See Pyysiäinen 2011: 147.)

shows,[4] in contemporary Thailand "[t]he concept of karma as a religious preaching to build a better life cycle is not in reality a guiding force in regulating Thai social behavior" but "it serves psychologically as a defense mechanism for a whole range of negative experiences" (Komin, 1990, 128). No evidence, historical or contemporary, indicates consistent, large-scale acting on the presupposition of kammic consequences and this lack of directive power contrasts with the high presence of the term "kamma" in public discourse. The doctrinal notion of kamma (a pattern of soteriological consequences of one's mental, verbal and bodily acts) is thus apparently less internalized than its theologically incorrect folk representations to be discussed later. A possible explanation is that the doctrinal concept frustrates social and physical causal expectations the basic requirements of successful action-representation. It means that the folk representation of kamma, fusing the idea of ethical law with that of quasi-material malleable substance,[5] becomes ritualistically relevant while the doctrinal abstract law of kamma permits no ritual instrumental (eliminating, cleansing, etc.), or interactional (praying, soliciting, coercing, etc.) manipulation. And as the concept also doesn't furnish an insight into one's future states it has no large-scale religious relevance. (A point discussed in more detail next. See also Hubina, 2017 a, b, c.)

The Evangelicals' techniques described by Tanya Luhrmann represent an instance of practices and institutions such as meditation, contemplation, ecstasies, hallucinatory trips, rituals, various forms of rehearsal and education that have been developed to internalize religious concepts. The ideal end point of these practices consist in the disappearance of the concept's meta-representational embeddings such as "the Bible says that…", "our tradition has it that…", "my parents taught me that…",

[4] Her study of psychology and behavioral patterns of Thai people is based on data derived from two national samples, 1978 with a total of 2469 samples and 1981 with 2149 samples.

[5] In Thailand, kamma (T. gam, กรรม) is often called "*khrɔgam"* (เคราะห์กรรม), explicitly indicating such a blend. Associated ritual practices reveal that this *khrɔgam* is represented as a subtle-material substance which can be "diluted" or any other way reconfigured or extricated from the body.

"I believe/hope that…", and the belief's becoming transparent "factual belief"[6] with directive power.[7] In one theoretical model this is conceptualized as the fifth level of internalization of cultural content at which the concept becomes a motivational belief: "as genuine beliefs the doctrines not only guide, but they also serve to *instigate* action; they possess motivational as well as cognitive properties" (Spiro, 2003, 164). Spiro (*ibid*) also warns against the anthropologists' mistaken presumption that their informants and respondents have internalized their beliefs on this fifth or the fourth level while people generally hold their cultural/religious beliefs on the level of "cultural clichés".[8]

Apart from pathological cases, there seems to be no evidence that people hold religious beliefs in either factual, or self-evident "properly basic", as philosophers put it[9] form. Religious beliefs, always short of ostensive empirical referents, are almost by definition representational (embedded in the awareness that this is what *we* – members of this religious group, culture, tradition, etc., – believe and do).[10] Commitment to

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[6] See Sperber, 1985.

[7] "The very transparency of some schemas helps give them motivational force because although the person sees the world a particular way, it is experienced as an undeniable reality" (D'Andrade, 1997, 38).

[8] Spiro distinguishes five levels of "cognitive salience" of religious (cultural) concepts. The four levels preceding the full internalization of a concept are 1. acquaintance, 2. understanding, 3. believing (which doesn't necessarily imply one's acting in accord of the belief), and 4. guiding where "cultural doctrines are not only held to be true, but they inform the behavioral environment of social actors" (Spiro, 2003, 164).

[9] Alvin Plantiga quotes a nineteenth-century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck writing against the natural theology and arguments for the existence of God:"Of the existence of self, of the world, round about us, of logical and moral laws, etc., we are so deeply convinced because of the indelible impressions which all these things make upon our consciousness that we need no arguments or demonstration. Spontaneously, altogether involuntarily; without any constraint or coercion, we accept that existence. Now the same is true in regard to the existence of God. The so-called proofs are by no means the final grounds of our most certain conviction that God exists" (Plantiga, 2003, 423). In religious literature, the proper basicality of religious beliefs is stated as a normative goal, a heroic achievement of special, often supernatural, figures. As a description it is typically, as in the quote above, declared and urged defensively rather than mentioned as a trivial aspect of reality.

[10] See Sperber, 1985, 59.

religious beliefs is thus more a deference to their embedding authority than a response to its full internalized representation.

None of this should come as controversial. Significant obstacles to the full internalization of religious concepts have been persuasively outlined in literature. Obeyesekere (2002, 131-134), for example, has described existential tensions, "aporias of existence" as he calls them, which hamper such a full internalization of the doctrinal concept of kamma. Scott Atran, to give just one more example, argues about religious concepts that "[i]f people literally applied such prescriptions to the factual navigation of everyday life, they likely would be either dead or in the hereafter in short order–too short for most individuals to reproduce and the species to survive. The trick is in knowing how and when to suspend factual belief without countermanding the facts and compromising survival" (Atran, 2012, 212).

Julia Cassaniti (2012, 2015), however, has developed an argument implying an unproblematic, transparent belief in kamma among Buddhists in her research-site, the town of Mae Jaeng in Northern Thailand. The argument is meant to provide an empirical support for a broader theoretical proposal – based on the Bateson's understanding of the theory of logical types and advanced by Handelman (2008) – that *belief* is central to religious traditions with cosmologically external Other but unnecessary in those traditions which don't pose such transcendent foundations of the world (Cassaniti, 2012, 300). She argues that unlike Christianity, Buddhist cosmological framework is in no need of bridging between this world and the Transcendent Other as all forces holding the world together are inherent to it. This in turn renders the Buddhist doctrinal concepts, such as kamma, intuitive and "natural" (Cassaniti, 2012, 312). In her own words:

"Belief serves the purpose of bridging the rift between the natural and the divine in the Christian context, and is rendered unnecessary in the internally constructed cosmology in the Buddhist context" (Cassaniti, 2012, 312).

Specifically, with regard *kamma* she claims:

"Karma is real for people in Mae Jaeng, especially insofar as that an adherence to it produces effects. 'Karma is like gravity,', I was told more than once: 'It just is'. … No one professes disbelief in karma in Mae Jang. The reason people don't see *not* believing in karma as an option is that to them it is not a belief; it is a construct that organizes the world and has the kinds of self-evident qualities one might associate with common sense, the natural order, or universal truths" (Cassaniti, 2015, 150-151).

Cassaniti specifies the mechanism which makes the doctrinal kamma feel "natural". For her, unlike Handelman, it is not only a matter of ontological boundaries. As she says, Handelman's argument "may not explain fully what it is about the boundary, psychologically, that necessitates belief in one perspective and not in the other. I want to lend empirical support to Handelman's argument while adding an additional proposal. I argue that, at least for people in the Christian and Buddhist communities I worked with in Northern Thailand, the difference in belief is not only about boundaries but is also, crucially and more specifically, about agency" (Cassaniti, 2012, 300). Cosmological speculations and the emphasis (or lack of it) on belief are linked by people's representation of agency: in monotheistic frameworks one's agentive power is perceived as incomplete, dependent and always mediated by God; from the Buddhist perspective determined by the concept of kamma, the agency is viewed as direct and inherent to the acting subject. The subject is fully responsible for both its present actions as well as its place in broader, kammically determined, cosmological context.

"In Buddhist traditions, (at least, in the Buddhist tradition followed in the community I worked in), … there is no active external Other; instead, agency is conceived of as involving solely the agentive nature of the individual, rendering belief in something other than the self irrelevant" (Cassaniti, 2012, 303).

It should be made clear that Cassaniti cannot be granted the quali-

fication "at least, in the Buddhist tradition followed in the community I worked in". First, an empirical support to a universal theoretical proposition cannot be an exceptional case. Second, though there are very local interpretations of the Dhamma to be found in Thailand – the Dhamakaya interpretation of nibbāna or the belief that deities are exempt from the law of kamma held in parts of Northeastern Thailand, what she describes is a standard Thai religious belief. Thus what she has to say of belief and agency must be generalizable to the wider Thai context.

These, however are not the most serious problems with her argument. The main problem consists in Cassaniti's identification of public *pronouncements* about people's beliefs with their real mental representations. This makes Cassaniti's call for "greater skepticism and closer analysis of the phenomena" involved in the concept of belief (Cassaniti, 2012, 298) ring hollow. Some more specific interpretive and analytical problems will also be discussed in due course.

Discussion

What people do and say that they do

The core of Cassaniti's argument constitutes her analysis of answers to three interview questions concerning supernatural concepts and perceptions of agency asked of Buddhists (N = 59) and Christians (N = 58) in her research-site. She buttresses the conclusions by presenting a broader Thai cultural context to which I will turn first.

Centering on the difference between the Thai words "to believe" (*chɯa* เชื่อ) and "to respect" (*naptɯ̄* นับถือ) Cassaniti argues that while Christians *believe* in God Buddhists *respect* the Buddha.[11]

In addition to the fact that religious traditions tend to make arbi-

[11] Cassaniti carries her lexical argument much further. As she explains, "[t]he word for the Buddha's teaching, dhamma, is the first syllable of the Thai word for nature, thammachat, and a common refrain says that dhamma is nature: "dham khuu thammachat. People do not think there is an argument to be had whether nature is more or less true" (Cassaniti, 2012, 301).

trary apologetical distinctions – Gospel vs. myths, Dhamma vs. views/ wrong views (*ditthi*/*miccha ditthi*), religion vs. superstition – arguments based on lexical differences are notoriously problematic as the differences do not always reflect distinctions in referents or meanings. Cassaniti wouldn't want to argue that Thais don't recognize free will as a human constitutive part only because Thai language doesn't have the word for it. Such claim, apart from being empirically inaccurate, would obviously contradict her own position. Also, while the Buddhist doctrine of kamma depends on the presupposition of free will there is no specific word for it in Pāli – the language of the Theravāda canon, either.[12]

Caution is specifically advised for cultural contexts similar to that of the Thai where linguistic and other symbolic means usually trade – put briefly though rather clumsily – representational semantics for attitudinal reference: what a pronouncement says about the word is less relevant than what it indicates about the speaker's attitude. For example, a market-seller can forbid you to take a picture of the sold items "because they are 'mai suei' (ไม่สวย)", "not pretty". Why, then, are they being sold, is not supposed to be a follow-up question as the seller doesn't actually mean it. Apart from expressing the speaker's wish the content is utterly irrelevant. The attitude has been expressed and no other semantic or logical implications of the pronouncement are consequential.

An arsenal of perfunctory appellations and phrases like "Good Buddhist", "Thai style", "all religions teach the same", "magical rituals attract people to the monastery where they learn the true Dhamma (the Buddha's teaching)", "kamma is a moral law" or extraverbal signals, such as the famous Thai smile reliably stifle potentially annoying inquiry or thoughts. For example, Gosling, commenting on his research, reports that

[12] "Chetachamnong serī" (เจตจำนงค์เสรี) – "free-will" is a strictly technical, philosophical term inspired by the Western tradition which people outside the field are rarely familiar with. The Thai words "serīphāb" (เสรีภาพ) and "isaraphāb" (อิสรภาพ), as well as the Pāli words (f.) "sakamati; seritā" refer to freedom from physical constrains rather than to free will as an innate property. But as we will see, there is an observable tendency in Thai culture to externalize agency and attribute many causes for one's behavior to broader underdetermined background social, psychological or extra-empirical.

majority of monks "were unable to state specifically what they wished to do on disrobing and gave very general answers, e.g. "earn my living as a good citizen and a good Buddhist" (Gosling, 1980, 424).

Besides, Thai culture also strongly biases the use of language towards creating desired hyper-real state over registering the real:

The *chṭa – naptṭ* difference is in this regard comparable to the "renting-selling","looking for-buying" or "money-means" and other terminological distinctions devoid of corresponding different referents. The generally acknowledged role of these verbal tool is to impose, not reflect, reality. The expression "renting amulets" (chao phra, เช่าพระ)is used for monks engaged in canonically prohibited *selling* (khāi, ขาย) magical amulets. Obviously, no purchaser would ever ask about the renting conditions. In the same way, "to look for" (hā, หา) is used instead of the common "to buy" (sū, ซื้อ) for and by monks involved in this activity equally prohibited by the monastic code. Lastly, the canonically approved "means" (pat jay, ปัจจัย), in the sense of "means of livelihood" or "subsistence" is the public discourse alternative of the disapproved money. (See also Hubina, 2012, 48-53.).

A less technical example of the decoupled aspect of Thai public discourse is the frequency of the Kālama sutta – referred to also by Cassaniti (2012, 301) – in public conversations contrasted with the people's actual dedication to critical thinking, rational investigation and "science-mindedness" the sutta, by its prevailing interpretation, advocates; no comparative evidence suggests the prevalence of these attitudes and practices in Theravāda cultural context when compared to its monotheistic counterparts.

With regard to the proposition that belief is indexical of people's representation of agency Cassaniti cites a monk who feels sorry for Christians who believe that God is helping them because Buddhists know there is no such a help and people actually have to rely only on their own skills (Cassaniti, 2012, 309). In the broader Thai context such criticism of delegating agency goes actually both ways and Christians scorn Buddhists

for their “attributing it all on kamma”. As a Christian informant recently told one of my students, “I thought they [the Buddhists believing in kamma] were not taking responsibility and did not want to develop themselves, and they were victims. Then, I learned about them, studied psychology, and found this was an automatic reaction on their part, and found a way of speaking with them and empower them to overcome their problems”.[13] Indeed, that the Buddhist voice is more prominent should not come as a surprise in a country with over 95% of its population self-identifying as Buddhists.

The prevailing anthropological research consistently indicates that instead of placing agency into the acting subject, as Cassaniti claims, Thais and more generally Theravāda cultures show a heightened tendency of ascribing agency to external forces. From early ethnographic reports (Hanks 1962), to the present studies (Mulder 1979, Spiro 1982, Komin 1990, McDaniel, 2011) Thai and the Southeast Asian mental landscapes have been characterized by high tolerance of uncertainty, aversion to long-term planning, and the feeling of dependence on underdetermined supernatural agencies such as kamma, stars, spirits, or fate.

For Thailand this can be illustrated by the ascriptions of calamities to luck/luck-kamma (*khrơ*/*khrơgam*) which include “suffering from a series of unpleasant events, bad health, unexpected expenses, losing job and difficulties to find a new one, broken family, misbehaving child, being abandoned by one’s spouse, becoming addicted to substances and gambling, becoming a victim of bad temptations, all the things that make your life to sink down” (Gaewthārā, 2013, 11).

Another telling example is the concept of rape. Thai language has two terms for rape: *khom khūn* (ข่มขืน), and *plam* (ปล้ำ). Only the former is used in legal contexts but the latter permits an exculpatory discourse emphasizing the perpetrator’s position as a victim of uncontrollable lust. Similarly, an unfaithful husband can defend himself claiming to be a victim of his mistress’ love-magic. Magical potions and amulets believed

[13] I thank to Francis Chan for this specific reference.

to lend charm and attraction abound in the religious market.

Identical motive emerges from Mulder's description of drunks treated in Thailand in a sympathetic, soothing manner, being called "older brother" and "uncle" by others who are "giving in to [their] wishes, but altogether generally failing to appease the threatening power that has been set free by the spirit of alcohol. If all goes well, the next day everybody seems to have 'forgotten', and one is obviously not held responsible for one's behavior the night before" (Mulder, 1979, 78). It also seems, as I wish to add, that the drunks generally enjoy these occasions of license, consciously exaggerating the influence of the alcohol knowing that the external source will be blamed for their unrestrained behavior. Alcohol, drugs, lust, karma, stars, fate, *khro* and other "powers" exculpate wrongdoers to the extent that as one observer commented it "robs Thai society, as a whole, of agency" (Nanthayapirom 2017).[14]

As mentioned earlier, the complexity of the issue of *belief* results from the dynamics between verbal expressions, explicit and implicit forms of beliefs and variegated directive force or the level of internalization of cultural concepts. What people believe, what they believe they do/should believe and what they say about these beliefs are very different things. Public discourse may well have it that kamma is "natural like gravity". But for this to be a real mental representation there should be evidence of people actually behaving on this premise. But this Cassaniti's analysis of the answers to her questions fails to supply.

Karma, God and Belief

Cassaniti asked her Christian and Buddhist informants the three questions:

1. Why did (someone you know) die, 2. What will happen after

[14] This is not to say that the concept of free will is not recognized. It obviously is a standard element of representations of personhood but the representations of its scope and limits are culturally specific.

your own death and why? 3. Why do you pray (or wai phra)?

On the first question Cassaniti reports that 59% of Buddhists gave physical circumstances as cause, 57% of them cited kamma and most of them a combination of both. On the other hand, 78% of Christians quoted physical and biological causes and 31% referred to God as a cause of death (Cassaniti, 2012, 304-305). In support of Handelman, she interprets this as the Buddhists referring more often to the cosmologically *internal/natural* causes (one's kamma) and Christians invoking cosmologically *external/transcendent* causes – God. The distinction between the "natural and internal" kamma and the "supernatural and external" God is crucial though completely arbitrary. Cosmological internality and externality of religious concepts can be formulated verbally. But what does such a formulation mean in terms of real mental representations which only matter in explaining people's behavior and its motivation? The report shows that Christians (78%) invoked physical and biological causes more often than Buddhists (59%). These are "natural" causes determining world processes. But though Cassaniti explains kamma on the model of natural laws to emphasize its naturalness, she utterly discounts these explicit Christian references to natural laws and takes the Buddhist references to kamma as sole indicators of the search for natural, internal causes and of construing agency as inherent to the acting self. Christians are left with the external power of God despite the fact that only a third of the Christians, as opposed to more than a half of the Buddhists, invoked in their answers a supernatural concept.

On the second question Cassaniti reports that while Christians, albeit recognizing the soteriological consequences of moral actions, made frequent references to God as the ultimate arbiter, 100% of Buddhists "see moralized actions stemming from the self as the central causal factor affecting life after death" (Cassanitti, 2012, 305).

She explains:

"Of the Christians in Mae Min who offered a statement about causation in their discussions of life after death, only five (28 percent of 18) discuss

actions stemming from the self as part of this causation. The majority instead (83 percent, 15 of 18) see God as the direct causal agent. For example:

I believe in God, so he'll take me to a good place. [Sada]

I think I'll go to someplace between heaven and hell, at first, before I go to one or the other. Though where God sends me, only he knows. [Ongkaew]

I can't answer, because God will decide, he's the one to decide. [Na Yuta]

God will come and get me and take me to heaven. [Chaipon]

It's up to God. If he'll bring me there (probably referring to heaven) or wherever, it's up to him. God will take me, or how we'll be, it's up to him. [Niyom]

Here it is clearly God who decides the events in one's life after death." (Cassaniti, 2012, 306)

The first answer [Sada] doesn't seem to match the conclusion. Sada gives a state of mind – her[15] belief in God – as the reason why she will go to heaven. How is this different from Buddhists' belief that their states of mind determine the afterlife? God here responds to Sada's mental states the way kamma responds to that of Buddhists.

More importantly, the line of these "moralized actions of the self" stretches back to the infinite past and is unfathomable to "ordinary

[15] Sagdā (ศักดา) is a Thai male name why Sadā (สฎา) is a female name. From the transcription it is not clear which one is meant here.

minds".[16] This is especially relevant since the "naturalness" of kamma, as it is argued, follows from its being represented as something that we produce and *have a direct access to*: "Agency occurs through an internal, natural system of karma with which an individual must engage through the work of the self (a self that, as I discuss below, one has direct access to, and thus does not need to believe in) […] The important point here is that this karma is seen to be made by and for the individual, and is seen as a leading cause of death" (Cassaniti, 2012, 305). The account misrepresents both the doctrinal and the folk views of kamma. The Pāli canon explicitly declares the workings of kamma "inconceivable"[17] the way the Bible pronounces God's mind inscrutable.[18] And with regard to the folk representations, Cassaniti herself notes that "[e]xcept for the truly enlightened, it is thought that no one knows the exact workings of karma, but people around me guessed all the time, and connected present actions to good effects in the future. The process of karma is complicated, and for most people it's practically unknowable, but it is not considered esoteric"

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[16] Obeyesekere's observation on "psychological indeterminacy" of kamma, the fact that one knows nothing about one's past deeds by which one's future is almost entirely determined, is relevant here. Comparing the concept of kamma with the Christian doctrine of sin he says: "In a religion like Christianity we are all born with a constant load of original sin; any sin or meritorious action I commit is something I am for the most part conscious of. The effect of sin is psychologically determinate, and I can do something about it through what the religion has made available to me: faith, sacraments, confessionals, and the like. Not so in karma theory; not only is the load of sin or merit that I am born with different from everyone else's, but I do not know what that load is. Karma produces a psychological indeterminacy regarding the life contours of one's present existence that adds to the instability regarding one's moral and spiritual condition that I mentioned earlier" (Obeyesekere, 2002, 132-133).

[17] "The result of kamma is an inconceivable matter that one should not try to conceive; one who tries to conceive it would reap either madness or frustration" (AN, ii. 80, Bodhi 2012). Or elsewhere "Thus, Ananda, there is action that is incapable [of good result] and appears incapable; there is action that is incapable [of good result] and appears capable; there is action that is capable [of good result] and appears capable; and there is action that is capable [of good result] and appears incapable" (MN iii, 215, Bodhi 2012).

[18] Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (Rom. 11:33–34; cf. Job 42:1–6; Ps. 139:6, 17–18; 147:5; Isa. 57:15; 1 Cor. 2:10–11; 1 Tim. 6:13–16 King James Version)

(Cassaniti, 2015, 156). As "fully enlightened" is a supernatural category[19], there is no ground for the "most people" qualification. Kamma and God are equally inscrutable and people do make guesses about the workings of both. To claim, without corresponding empirical evidence, that there is a difference and kamma is perceived as "natural" amounts to exoticization of the Buddhist community.

This being said, the doctrinal concept of kamma is much probably less intuitive and thus difficult to internalize, than the concept of God. Doctrinal and folk representations of God co-opt the concept of person and thus permit the internalization of the concept as an element, albeit extraordinary, of social interactions (God listens, responds, acts, feels …). Contrary to Cassaniti, the doctrinal kamma, a mysterious law describing unobservable patterns, is a much weaker candidate for being appropriated as something natural and intimate, integral to acting self.

As with other religious concepts, people's real representations of kamma – multifaceted and often contradictory – differ dramatically from the doctrinal dictum. It has been convincingly demonstrated that even sincerely held doctrinal notions fail to correspond to their spontaneous implicit representations (Barrett, 1998, 1999, 2006, Slone, 2004, Pyysiäinen, 2009).

As an illustration: modifying the experiment Jonathan Haidt has described in his *Righteous Mind* (2012) I have been probing, for three years now, into my Buddhist students' representations of kamma. Unsurprisingly, what I have been receiving from my students[20] were the standard theo-

[19] Modern Buddhist apologists would argue, probably with Cassaniti, that enlightenment is "natural" as it signifies seeing things as they are and a pain-free approach to world. A collection of Dhamma talks given by Luang Phō Thian (หลวงพ่อเทียน) one of Thai prominent monks believed by some to have achieved the enlightenment, bears the title "Normality" (*pagati*, ปกติ) exactly with reference to this notion. Accounts like this one omit the ontological aspect of the enlightenment (or better – "awakening") which consists in stopping the circle of rebirths as well as supernatural features such as divine eye, levitation and many others associated with the notion of enlightenment.

[20] B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. students at the College of Religious Studies, Mahidol University in Thailand, mostly Theravāda Buddhists, some of them monks.

logically correct answers about the abstract ethical law, often embroiled with the complaints about distorted folk beliefs. But when I asked them to sign a "contract" to sell or give me for free all their and their relatives' good kamma (merits), they – over 70% of them – have refused to do so. Notwithstanding the fact that the contract was completely meaningless from the doctrinal perspective they have just advocated.

Together with the Komin's findings quoted above, the students' responses (but also the range of Thai practices aimed at manipulating existential powers including kamma which Cassaniti doesn't fail to notice) indicate that instead of a transparent belief or a "natural system" guiding people's everyday behavior, the concept of kamma is represented as a transferable subtle-material substance external to and separable from the acting subject. (See also Hubina, 2017c.) The doctrinal notion of kamma even when held as sincere explicit belief doesn't seem to wield directive power. To interpret the believers' likening kamma to natural concepts (such as gravity) as anything more than a mere rhetorical expression requires an empirical support that Cassaniti doesn't provide.

Buddhists and Christians alike act with various levels of conviction that their behavior directly influences their future states. But this belief, rather than informing their everyday behavior, finds its expression in special ritualistic contexts. Cassaniti fails to provide examples of the behavioral counterparts of the lexical and conceptual distinctions she quotes. Do Mae Min Christians really *behave* as if all was in God's hands and their acts had a zero or negligible impact on the afterlife? Do Buddhists act in a way that lays bare their constant soteriological concerns? The answers, obviously, must be negative.

Most of what I have said so far can be repeated about Cassaniti's analysis of the responses to the third question. In line with her general argument Cassaniti draws a distinction between Christian magical interpretation of prayer as a means to achieving a goal through the help of God and prayer as a commemorative, symbolic act in the Buddhist context. In her own words:

> "The Buddha, and the religion more generally, are needed not necessarily because they offer external aid in the form of divine agency but, rather, because people use Buddha and their religious practices to remind themselves how one goes about achieving particular (and desired) states of mind. These states of mind are directly related to causation: karma is based on the intentionality, the internal state, of the actor, and positive internal states are seen as achieved directly through the action of the self" (Cassaniti, 2012, 308).

Even if Cassaniti was granted her view of prayer, the ubiquity of magical practices in Thailand presupposing assistance of supernatural agencies including the Buddha, doesn't permit the proposed generalizations about agency. Even less so when "the magical power of words", as the very title of Tambiah's now classic article goes, is generally well recognized across Theravāda cultures and scholarship. As mentioned above, impersonal supernatural concepts entail expectations and attitudes congruent with physical causation while the belief in a personal God permits engagement defined by social causal assumption. The concept of God thus allows a scale of attitudes and practices – such as hope, trust or prayer – that cannot be developed toward underdetermined impersonal kamma. But this doesn't imply or amounts to a difference in "externality" or "naturalness" of religious concepts.

Conclusion

Cassaniti seems to be taking the issue seriously. She puts forward that "taking belief for granted in scholarly perspectives may miss certain processes that are at work when belief is or is not articulated by subjects themselves; processes that … involve problems of authenticity, commitment, and agency". She also calls for "greater skepticism and closer analysis of the phenomena" involved in the concept of belief (Cassaniti, 2012, 298). But if what we have said about her argument is sound one might wonder where the confidence for its developing comes from.

Besides Handelman, an apparent source is the Durkheimian

assumption that in some cultural contexts the difference between the natural and supernatural is blurred or utterly absent (see Cassaniti, 2012, 297, 298, 301, 305, 310). The assumption, however, is wrongheaded because though particular ideas about the world's processes can be wrong, the distinction between the natural order and its violations is innate and universal (Pyysiäinen, 2003, 61-75; 2009, 12, Boyer, 2000; 2013a, 173). Cassaniti disregards the distinction between the natural and supernatural causal nexuses represented behaviorally as the distinction between standard instrumental and ritualistic, i.e., causally opaque yet unalterable, acts. Instead, she builds her argument around the abstract, culturally dependent cosmological differentiations which have no obvious behavioral counterpart and might not be even possible to represent.

Cassaniti's intention to give Handelman's theoretical thesis some empirical footing in terms of people's agency-representation is laudable. Unfortunately, together with her ambition to "point to the need for further research on the connection between local conceptions of agency and ideological commitment" (Cassaniti, 2012, 312) it remains frustrated by her disregard for the complexity of the issue and some poor methodological choices.

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