Walking around wide-eyed and glistening with sweat, most first-time visitors to Thailand are in awe at the ubiquitous displays of Buddhist patronage—amulets dangle from the necks of passersby; women gracefully dodge past monks on narrow sidewalks in front of large monasteries while carefully avoiding rickety tables selling lottery tickets; and storefronts hawk countless photos and statues of aged monks, gods, and others worthy of veneration. In *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today*, Pattana Kitiarsa addresses pertinent questions surrounding the efficacious objects and people that dominate the landscape of Thai Buddhism. The all-too-early, recent passing of Kitiarsa was a tragic loss for not only the academic community of scholars of Thailand, but also for those who study religions more generally. *Mediums, Monks and Amulets* is a gleaming example of why this is so. In a short 149 pages, Kitiarsa covers a broad spectrum in Thailand by exploring “magico-religious protection[s]” (p. 18)—focusing on amulets, mediumship, deification, and the veneration of ritually potent monks—which, he argues, have rapidly increased in popularity since the 1980s. In this review, I will first present Kitiarsa’s ideas, as I understand them. Then, I will offer what I hope to be critical, yet helpful, reflections on those ideas.

Drawing the reader’s attention to a diverse group of Thai and Western thinkers, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets* is framed via a distinction between state-sponsored, textual, mainstream, “traditional” Buddhism, and “popular” Buddhism. The latter, according to Kitiarsa, is replete with a variety of “agents” functioning in everyday “religio-social institutions,” who thereby keep “religiosity alive, meaningful, and relevant to their changing society” (pp. 1, 5). Popular Buddhism is not “less serious, less rigorous, or further from the ideals of Buddhist moral perfection and self-transformation than traditional Theravada Buddhism” (p. 1). Rather, it is a religiosity that addresses worldly concerns of practitioners through constantly changing spaces created through commercialization, globalization, and urbanization. Accordingly, “popular Buddhism in Thailand is a large-scale, cross-social spectrum of beliefs and practices—incorporating the supernatural power of spirit, deity, and magic—that have emerged out of the interplay between animism, supernaturalism, folk Brahmanism, the worship of Chinese deities, and state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism,” with its boundaries extending as far as it can be commercialized (p. 2).

Kitiarsa offers a theoretical lens through which to view this process; he opts for a model of hybridity to avoid certain assumptions—the subsuming of popular Buddhism into “dominant, mainstream, institutional” Theravada Buddhism, and the notions of “static and isolated” religious (Buddhism, Brahmin, animist, etc.) beliefs and practices (pp. 14, 13)—that he sees as inherent in the scholarly utilization of syncretism. In Kitiarsa’s model, religious beliefs and practices of indigenous origins, spurred by mass media, adapt to accommodate urban lifestyles, thereby creating hybrid religious beliefs and practices embedded in popular Buddhism. Importantly, this hybridity is kept meaningful through tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and global capitalism. It is also constantly changing since “its processes and goals are subject to open interpretation and contestation of meaning” (p. 33). Furthermore, religion and the market economy “hybridize” belief through commodifying religious goods. These, for Kitiarsa, are evidence of “deterritorialization” in Thai religion, in which components of several...
religious traditions (e.g., Indian, Chinese, local belief, and court traditions) are combined, and there is a “fragmentation” of formerly dominant religious elements (e.g., the dominance of “state-sponsored Buddhism and the moral authority of the Sangha”) (p. 32).

Kitiarsa argues that hybridity is evidenced through three dominant processes. “Within the context of a growing capitalist economy and proliferating mass media, the processes of deification, mediation, and commodification run riot, constantly creating new forms of religious practice. Rather than evidence of crisis, fragmentation, or decline, in fact these new practices display the health and wealth of popular Buddhism in Thailand today” (p. 149). Deification is the exaltation of anyone—from kings to pop stars and monks to spirits—in public and private religious space, and narrative. Mediation is the use of various media and means of communication to “create an aura of sacredness” around a particular deity (understood in the above sense) (p. 6). Lastly, commodification is a process by which “religious symbols, rites, and places are converted into goods … blurring the distinction between a place of worship and a market” (p. 7). These processes, understood together through the lens of hybridity, are exemplified in case studies set forth by Kitiarsa in chapters 3 through 7.

Chapter 3 presents case studies of Aunt Toi, an urban spirit-medium, and Achan Somsak. The latter is a “magic monk”—a charismatic person with specialized knowledge in “magic, superstition or supernatural powers” who utilizes this knowledge for those who entreat (p. 36). Mediums who act as mouthpieces for deities are often popularized in mass media, as are magic monks who use mantras, magic, and amulets (p. 40). While both men and women may go to magic monks for assistance, spirit-medium cults, according to Kitiarsa, have become a refuge for many women. As monkhood offers social mobility to men, mediumship offers a type of mobility for women. Further, Kitiarsa writes, “urban spirit-medium cults, rather than positioning themselves as an alternative to mainstream Buddhist practices, have emerged as a moral and psychological refuge for an urban population, primarily women, who are disoriented, frustrated, and often struggling to survive on the margins of poverty and battling the hardships of urban life” (p. 146). In chapter 7, Kitiarsa returns to the subject of mediums, by presenting critiques on their authenticity, which range from the skepticism of Rama IV to modernist concerns towards supernaturalism. He also offers some perspectives from those who find no contradiction between rationality and mediums, who they claim can be empirically tested in order to determine authenticity.

The focus of chapter 4 is Phumphuang Duangchan, a famous folk singer who died prematurely in 1992, and who, for Kitiarsa, exemplifies the popular practice of deification. Today, Phumphuang is known more for her posthumous interventions in the lottery than her vocal abilities. For Kitiarsa, she exemplifies how the “connections between a belief in luck, gambling, spirit worship, and the desire for material wealth are the pulses of Thai popular religion” (p. 57). He argues that media, mass marketing, and “lottery mania” came together to popularize her cult and “gave voice to popular anxiety about the future in the midst of a severe economic recession,” particularly after the economic collapse of 1997 (pp. 72, 59). This vigorous enthusiasm for the lottery “is one of the major factors underlying the emergence of spirit-medium cults and the commercialization of Buddhism,” as it provides the “major motivation” for many people to visit spirit shrines and monasteries, where (lucky) lottery tickets are often sold (p. 72).

In chapter 5, Kitiarsa analyzes the cult of Luang Pho Khun, a charismatic, magic monk and medium who produces amulets of great popularity. He is cited by the press, scholars, and social critics as an example of the increase in supernatural and magical practices within Buddhist institutions, as well as representative of the commercialization of Buddhism in contemporary Thailand. However, by focusing on his biography and training, Kitiarsa wants to be certain not to reduce his agency and the complex nature of his cult (and the immense profits he generates) to merely an exemplification of this commercialization. The reputation of Luang Pho Khun’s amulets is widespread. According to Kitiarsa, these amulets, used to increase personal wealth, are now more popular than more traditional amulets for various protections and moral strength. Thus, the popularity of Luang Pho Khun’s images and amulets demonstrates that the “Thai perception of power is colored by the desire and anxiety surrounding commodity consumption and material wealth,” whereby “Thai men and women seek protective assurance and supernatural power that will enable them to be competitive politically and economically in the capitalist world” (p. 109).

In chapter 6, Kitiarsa examines the phenomenon of Chatukham-Rammathep amulets from Wat Mahathat in Nakhon Si Thammarat, which by boasting to bring power, wealth, health, and other success to their possessors created a multibillion dollar industry between 2006 and 2007. Particularly popular among business people,
the success of Chatukham-Rammathep amulets evinces a change in Buddhist “pieties.” Rather than “the passive, internalized piety of the past [i.e., one that emphasized mindfulness and moral action], people now adopt several outward and routinized practices of religiosity in everyday life” (p. 119). These outward signs include, for example, merit making, reciting prayers, wearing amulets and other talismans, and making and achieving vows. This evidences a change from a “devotional tradition” centered around agricultural cycles articulated in community and family calendars, to “a series of fetishized and market-driven pieties,” promoted by the media, and driven by a desire for “personal material wealth, success, and luck,” thereby challenging the “centralized and hegemonic Buddhism” of the national Sangha and Thai state (pp. 118, 112).

A useful highlight of *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets* is Kitiarsa’s use of ethnographic research and extensive interview quotations. However, while this type of evidence is ample, the brevity of Kitiarsa’s supporting arguments (even while bolstered by other thinkers) often leads to unsatisfactory, laconic conclusions (being at most only a couple of pages long). The ubiquity of amulets, deification, and mediumship is presented by Kitiarsa as the result of political instability, lottery mania fueled by economic worry, and societal insecurity. Those who seek them out are anxious or frustrated, in a state of personal or cultural crisis. However, it is hard to imagine a time when people, Buddhist people included, were not worried about their health and their family’s security. Unfortunately, while emphasizing the complex nature of the people and phenomenon in question, Kitiarsa fails to adequately explain the sociological and historical processes that gave rise to and sustain them. He also fails to address the reasons why some of these phenomena (e.g., Chatukham-Rammathep amulets) eventually decline in ubiquity and popularity—a point that may be more important than discussing their ascendency to fame. Overall, perhaps this lack of depth was exchanged for a breadth of content.

Underscoring his basic premise, Kitiarsa asks: “Are these popular religious practices compatible with mainstream Buddhist teaching? Can cultic practices and the popular commercialization of Buddhism be seen as complementary aspects of one uniform religion?” (p. 83, emphasis mine). Approaching the study of Buddhism(s) in Thailand from these initial assumptions seems, to me, problematic. I suggest that the starting point for examining any religion ought to be an expectation of difference and incompatibility—the acknowledgment that people can and do hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously, and act in discrepant ways. While centralized institutions or governments at times promote ideals that call for religious uniformity, in reality this ideal is rarely achieved. Rather than trying to demonstrate how various beliefs and practices somehow remain separate and yet work together in a complex, uniform religious system, perhaps it is more helpful to instead begin by acknowledging a lack of structure and systemization, which allows for ethnographic, historical, and textual diversity.

And while Kitiarsa repeatedly emphasizes throughout *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets* that popular Buddhism is in no way inferior to mainstream Buddhism, one must ask if making the distinction in this way is helpful. How does one meaningfully sort out what beliefs and practices belong in each category? Can one’s efforts to achieve their soteriological goals be part of their “worldly” concerns? Further clouding the issue is the fact that while he clearly explains what he takes popular Buddhism to be, the reader is left to guess what makes up mainstream, state-sponsored Buddhism. Perhaps it is not even clear that the “ideals” of mainstream Buddhism (and for Kitiarsa, therefore popular Buddhism) are “moral perfection and self-transformation” (p. 1). Does the assumed “newness” of a given practice (e.g., the popularity of amulets for wealth and magic monks) bias the scholar toward understanding it through a lens curved by globalization, Westernization, and capitalism? For example, Kitiarsa writes, “magic and monks are deeply intermingled in the practices of Thai popular Buddhism, even though they are not compatible in principle” (p. 36). However, he fails to explain exactly what this “principle” is and entails. For instance, if a corollary to popular Buddhism is the Buddhism as presented in Pali, then magic and Buddhism go hand in hand. The Buddha, arahants, brahmins, and others constantly engaged in “magic” are comparatively more impressive than the monks and mediums of today—flying though the sky, exercising super-acute hearing to listen in on others, and diving into depths of the earth only to emerge a great distance away, for example. Throughout Buddhist history there have always been marketplaces: kings built stupas and monasteries replete with powerful images; ordinary people gave food and shelter in exchange for *dhamma* (Buddhist teachings), merit, or even enlightenment; and cities were sustained through the acquisition of relics. While such economies of merit, apotropaism, and power may have transformed, the creative impulse of Buddhists to secure real-world felicities through powerful objects has sustained itself through time.
Overall, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets* is a valuable contribution to the study of Buddhism(s) in Thailand, and is a welcome complement to other recent works on mediums and magic monks.[1] Even if some of Kitiarsa’s conclusions are insufficient, the attention he draws to these important phenomena are certainly welcomed, and the emphasis he places on elevating these practices—often denigrated in previous scholarship—should be taken very seriously.

Note