

VI CLASS, STATE AND THE ASOKE

Biography of Krak Phrae Fan, Santi Asoke

"I was born in Nakhon Pathom on the 9th of February 1949 to a Chinese family. I have one younger sister and two older sisters. My father had two wives and for some years we all lived together in one house. My father had 12 children with his minor wife: eight daughters and four sons. When the minor wife had five children they moved out with my father. I was then 10 years old. I and my sisters stayed with my mother. My mother supported the family by becoming a food vendor, later she sold clothes. My father is Chinese, whereas my mother was of Sino-Thai origins. My father is now 75 years old and my mother would be 83 years old, if she was still alive. The minor wife of my father is 70 years old. My father used to have a clothes retail shop, but later started a pig farm in Nakhon Pathom.

My eldest sister studied at the secondary school for only one year, and then started work. At first she sold clothes in our aunt's shop. She married when she was 22 years old and has now four children. Her family used to live in Nakhon Pathom, but later moved to Bangkok. They had a shop in Nakhon Pathom, selling electrical appliances. Now one of their sons is selling *salapaws*³²⁴ to support the family. My sister sold cosmetics as "direct sell". One of her sons is working in Japan. One of her sons is already dead and the youngest one is studying in a technical school. I have met my sister once after I became *krak*. She is not at all interested in the Asoke group.

My second sister is a teacher. She has a B.A. in English and is teaching in a primary school in Sriracha. Her husband is a broker dealing in real estate. They have three children, two daughters and one son. My sister is six years older than me. All her children are still studying.

My youngest sister lives in Chachoensaeng and has a photo shop. Her husband died a couple of years ago and she has one son who is 10 years old. Before I became a *krak* I used to visit her quite often, but now I am not allowed to go to visit lay people alone, I would have to have someone from the temple with me.

When I graduated from the school in Nakhon Pathom, I came to Bangkok to study at Suan Dusit Teachers' College for four years. My major subject was science and my minor subject was mathematics. I also choose handicraft as a minor and learned to make flower garlands quite well, but now I have forgotten it already. Anyway, here in Santi Asoke it would no longer be appreciated as it is against the precepts.

Then I moved to Ban Saeng to study for two more years in order to get a Bachelor's degree in science education. I studied chemistry and mathematics. I stayed

in a dormitory where I shared a room with another girl. In Suan Dusit there were ten girls sharing one room.

After graduating I moved to Bangkok and lived in Pratunam. My first job was to teach Thai. They promised to give me a position as a science teacher in that school later. A friend of mine informed me about another position in another school, a girls' school, and I quit after two weeks and moved to this other school. I taught there for one year. My students were about 15 to 16 years old, I was then 23 years old.

Then I moved back to Nakhon Pathom and started to teach in another girls' school whilst staying in my mother's house. I taught in that school for one year. I was not a civil servant but a freelancer teaching on a temporary basis. That year I started to wear make-up. A new teacher came to Nakhon Pathom and as she was very good at doing make-up, she taught me how to do it. I felt that it was not good to wear make-up, I only did it for the society. I wore make-up every day for about one year, but I stopped gradually after meeting the Asoke group.

I taught in this school for one year and moved to another school. In that year, 1974, I taught in three different schools, two were in Nakhon Pathom, one was in Bangkok. That year, I finally became a civil servant and taught permanently for more than two years in the school in Bangkok, but continued to live in Nakhon Pathom in my mother's house. I taught chemistry in a secondary school in Yannawa in Bangkok. That was a boys' school and very famous so I wanted to teach there, even if it was quite tiring to travel every day back and forth between Bangkok and Nakhon Pathom. That is when I learned to fall asleep easily on the bus. I taught there for about three years, until 1977. After that I got a position teaching in Nakhon Pathom again, in a government school. I was happy to move closer to my mother's house as she had become ill. I had to take care of her, as my sisters had moved out of the house already. She died in 1980, after which I moved to the house of a friend of my mother's.

I taught in this government school for three years, until 1980, and after that I went to teach in an other school which was also in Nakhon Pathom. That school was a primary school, it situated very close to the big *chedi*³²⁵ and I had a short walk to that school. I taught for five years in that school - then I joined the Santi Asoke.

I had met the group in 1977 in Santi Asoke in Bangkok. I came here with a former student of mine who was interested in Santi Asoke. My student knew this group because the group had been preaching in his school in Yannawa. I was not impressed by the group at all. I can't remember feeling anything when I met them. I just looked around in the temple. I remember talking to one of the monks, Than Thiracitto.

I had been interested in Buddhism for about two years then. In 1975 I went to visit a place in Petchburi, where there were lots of female practitioners. The monk there asked me: "You want to show respect to Buddha, but what do you know about Buddhism?" I told him that I know the basic idea of the Three Gems - Buddha, *dhamma* and sangha. The monk answered: "Buddhism is science. You have to prove it by living it. You are a scientist, and you use tests to experiment. In religion you have to use your own body to experiment". The monk offered to teach me and asked me to resign from my job, which I did in 1975. Before that I was "ordained" in Petchburi for seven days, and became a *chi bhraam*.³²⁶ After the first week the monk asked me to come again, which I did for many weekends. He then asked me to stay there permanently. My letter of resignation was finally signed by the head master. It was the fifth letter of resignation that I had submitted. I resigned from my school in 1975 and took my last salary to my mother. She cried and did not want me to stay in that monastery. She did not like the monk there because she felt that he was forcing her daughter to resign. Even my older sister asked the school authorities to refuse my letter of resignation. After I had resigned, they told me in the school that they were short of chemistry teachers. I took back my last letter of resignation, cancelled all my plans and started to teach chemistry again.

Now all my colleagues and friends knew that I was interested in Buddhism and they informed me about various places to study. I went to three different places to study Buddhism and to meditate. Santi Asoke was the fourth place I visited. I was not impressed by the magic practices and beliefs that dominated the mainstream temples that I had visited. When I visited the Santi Asoke, I immediately felt that this is the place where I want to die. I had no plans to get married, so I was looking for a place and a group where I would feel safe and stay the rest of my life. That was on the 12th of September 1977.

I was then living in Nakhon Pathom and used to travel to Bangkok to Santi Asoke every weekend I could. Sometimes I also visited Daen Asoke in Nakhon Pathom, but it was more difficult to reach that place, even though it was much closer to my home. One had to walk a long way through the forest to reach Daen Asoke.

Santi Asoke was different from the other Buddhist groups; the food, the life style and the preaching. Other temples did not teach us how to sleep - here in Santi Asoke they had a schedule when to sleep and when to eat. I did not read many of their books, although they sent me quite many. My mother told me to return the books as I was not reading them. I never worked here in Santi Asoke, I just came here to talk and to look around. I was not vegetarian then. I did not dare to come here if I had been eating meat. I practised strict vegetarianism for seven days before visiting the place, so that when anyone asked me, whether I am vegetarian, I could answer: "Yes". I did not find it difficult to become a vegetarian, it was just that if I

went out with my friends, I sometimes ate meat just like them.

Somebody suggested to me that I should become a Sikkhamat, but I felt that I should practise at home first, eating vegetarian food, and living a simple life without make-up. I used to walk barefoot to my school in order to practice. I told my mother that I wanted to become a Sikkhamat and she accepted it better than my earlier plans. I practised by reducing my meals gradually to only one vegetarian meal a day. I stopped meditating after I met this group.

I wanted to practise at home until I was quite sure that I could make it. I was fairly sure about myself by 1982, and started to stay in Pathom Asoke every week for six days. The seventh day I would go home to my aunt's house for one day, so that I did not have to *wikab*³²⁷. Actually I was only sleeping in Pathom Asoke, and in the morning I had time to listen to the early morning preaching. After that I drove my motorcycle back to Nakhon Pathom and went to teach in the school. In the evening, I returned to Pathom Asoke. I used to attend big Buddhist ceremonies organised by the Asoke group. I attended *plukse* and *Phuttha phisek* for instance first time in 1978. After that I went there every year, if my school gave me permission to go, and if my mother was not too sick.

In 1983 I applied to become a Sikkhamat. After handing in the application I went back home again and continued teaching. During those years I also saved some money in case I could not stay in the temple, and would have to come back to the outside life. I felt that I needed the money as a security. Now I have given away nearly all that money.

I finally resigned from the school and joined the group in August 1985 as an *akhantuka chon*.³²⁸ I moved to Pathom Asoke to begin with. I stayed there for four days after which I came to Santi Asoke, as there happened to be a car to Santi Asoke. My plan was to come to Santi Asoke and study six days a week, and work one day in Chomoro³²⁹. In fact the timetable I had planned turned out to the opposite way round; I went to work in Chomoro six days a week to sell coupons every morning around five o'clock and I stayed in Santi Asoke only one day a week. This continued for several years.

A friend of mine, here in Santi Asoke, became ill and I followed her to Pathom Asoke where she later died. I stayed in Pathom Asoke for some years. I became *pa* on the 23rd of October 1988. Two years later I moved back to Santi Asoke and, in 1991, I started to teach science and mathematics in Sisa Asoke, when they started the first Asoke school there. I stayed as a *pa* for a little bit longer than five years and became a *krak* on the 7th of May 1994.

What I really liked was travelling, playing, eating and sleeping. I came here to get rid of all those things that I used to like."

6. 1. THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE ASOKE MEMBERS

We will start by looking at the place of birth of the Asoke members. In Thailand the social division between urban and rural is very deep as is evidenced in recent surveys.³³⁰ The central plains, the valley of Chao Phraya river has traditionally been regarded as the most fertile area for agriculture. After the Bowring Treaty of 1855 had attached Thailand to the modern economic world system, the central plains and Southern Thailand became thriving areas for business and trade. The Northeast of Thailand, in contrast, has been the least developed area ever since it was annexed by the central power in the late 19th century. The Northeast is disadvantaged in two ways: The population consists mainly of ethnic Laos who are treated as second class citizens in the Thai society. Their ethnic identity, and even their mother tongue although a Thai related language, has a low status. The land in the Northeast has been exploited by loggers and developers, by cash-crop cultivation and land speculation. The GDP per capita in Greater Bangkok area is four times higher than in the Northeast which has further encouraged uncontrollable migration to the capital city from the Northeast.³³¹

6. 1. 1. Place of birth

The Asoke monks mainly originate from these two economically and socially very contrasting areas: 48% of the monks come from Central Thailand and 35% from the Northeast. The division between the Sikkhamats is, however, very different: 68% of the Sikkhamats come from Central Thailand, whereas only 18% were born in the Northeast. These figures, however, have to be interpreted with some scepticism since seven out of the 23 Sikkhamats refused to reply to the questionnaire, claiming that it was "too difficult". We can assume that many of these Sikkhamats do originate from the Northeast, knowing that the level of education is lower among the Northerners in general, than among the Central Thai.

50% of the novices originally came from the North, 25% from the Northeast and 25% from Central Thailand. 46% of the aspirants originated in Central Thailand and 40% in the Northeast. 6% came

from the North and 6% from the South.

The laypeople who replied to the questionnaire at the *mahapawarana* gathering in Pathom Asoke were predominantly educated urbanites. 56% of the laymen were born in Central Thailand and only 20% were born in the Northeast. 34% of the laywomen were born in Central Thailand and 26% in the Northeast. The third largest group of laywomen were originally from the South i.e. 21%. Most of those who were born in the South are still active there. 13% of the laymen were also Southerners.

Of the Asoke people, both monastic and laypeople, who replied to the questionnaire, 47% came from Central Thailand, and 29% from the Northeast. From the North there were 12% and from the South 9%.

TABLE 3: Geographic origins of the Asoke people

	Monks	Nuns	Novices	Aspirants	Laymen	Laywomen
Region						
Bangkok	16	4	-	3	7	5
Central	24	7	1	4	10	8
North-east	30	3	1	6	6	10
North	10	1	2	1	3	6
South	4	1	-	1	4	8
Other	-	-	-	-	-	1
TOTAL	84	16	4	15	30	38

Some conclusions can be drawn from these figures: it is not surprising that the Asoke group has such a concentration in Central Thailand, since that is the area from which the movement started and originally drew its support. On the other hand neither is it surprising that 35% of the monks originally came from the Northeast as studies of mainstream monks have shown that the Northeasterners form the great majority of monks.⁵³² What is interesting is the combination of monks from very different origins in the Asoke group. The 35% of the Northeastern monks shows that Asoke cannot be

considered to be a fortress of the well-educated urban Sino-Thais from Central Thailand. The Northeast has her own Buddhist tradition of forest monks with many nationally highly venerated meditation teachers,³³³ which does offer an alternative and more strict form of practice for a Northeastern monk than the mainstream. The fact that Northeasterners still join the Asoke movement indicates that the Asoke group has, in one way or another, managed to present itself as an attractive alternative for the Northeastern Buddhist practitioners.

The high number of Southerners amongst the laywomen is quite surprising as the Asoke have no temples in the South. There is, however, the group known as Taksin Asoke which seems to be quite active.

As Bangkok is the centre of material wealth in Thailand, it is even more important to study how many of the Asoke group members originate from Bangkok and compare it with the number of the people originating from urban or rural areas outside Bangkok.

19% of the monks originally come from Bangkok. Whereas, 25% of the Sikkhamats were born in Bangkok, and none of the four novices came from the capital. 25% of the female aspirants were from Bangkok, and 14% of the male aspirants originated from Bangkok. A relatively small number of the laypersons attending the *mahapawarana* were born in Bangkok: 13% of the laywomen and 23% of the laymen.

The material collected by the Asoke members themselves in the *plukse* ceremony in Sisa Asoke on the *maghabucha* day the 14th of February 1995 gives a slightly different picture of the geographical origins of the Asoke laypeople. The group published a top ten list of the provinces with most participants in the *plukse*:

1. Sisaket	291
2. Bangkok	275
3. Ubon Ratchathani	193
4. Nakhon Ratchasima	94
5. Nakhon Pathom	94
6. Surin	93
7. Khon Kaen	81
8. Udon Thani	67
9. Roi Et	65
10. Buriram	64

This list covers 1317 persons of the total 2181 participants, and of the 1317 persons 948 came from the Northeast, whereas only 369 originated from Central Thailand. Expressed in terms of percentages this means that: 72% came from the Northeast and 28% came from Central Thailand.

The general statistics indicate that of the total 2181 participants, 61% originally came from the Northeast, 23% from Central Thailand, in addition to 13% from Bangkok, 9% from the North and 3% from the South.

TABLE 4: The geographic origins of the Asoke people at the *plukse*

Region	Laypeople
Bangkok	275
Central	278
Northeast	1331
South	79
North	218
TOTAL	2181

These statistics both confirm the results from the *mahapatwarana* and indicate an even stronger support for the Asoke group in the Northeast than indicated in my study. The proportion of Southerners has decreased, as it is naturally easier for the Southerners to travel to Nakhon Pathom than to the Northeastern province of Sisaket.

6. 1. 2. Family background

Another way of measuring the social background of the Asoke group is to examine the profession of the father in the family.

45% of the monks stated that their fathers were farmers by profession. Half (50%) of the Sikkhamats were the daughters of farmers

i.e. eight of the 16 Sikkhamats came from peasant families.³³⁴ 28% of the monks replied that their fathers were merchants and 18% of Sikkhamats said the same i.e. three of the 16 Sikkhamats were born in merchant families.³³⁵

A considerable number of monks originate from families where the father was a civil servant: 17% of the monks in total. A civil servant can be anything from a post man to a primary school teacher or municipal administrator. In the Thai society, a civil servant has high prestige, albeit a low salary. There is a clear dominance of ethnic Thais in this group, as the path to becoming a civil servant has been restricted for the ethnic Chinese and even Sino-Thais for several decades. In this group with high prestige there is the natural ambition to educate their children also to become at least civil servants at the same level as their fathers.³³⁶

Only one of the Sikkhamats was born into a family where the family head was a civil servant, whereas three Sikkhamats indicated that their fathers belonged to the free professions which, in this survey, will be classified as "others". These include one fisherman, one tailor and one labourer. Two of the four novices said that their fathers were farmers and the other two were merchants. Seven of the fifteen aspirants' fathers were merchants, and only four came from peasant families.

The heaviest concentration of families where the father was a civil servant is amongst the laymen where 50% had this background. A further 23% came from merchant families and only five from a peasant background.

There was a more even distribution among the laywomen: 29% of the laywomen originated from merchant families, 29% from peasant families and 26% from families where the father was a civil servant.

TABLE 5: Profession of the father of the Asoke people

Father	Monks	Nuns	Novices and Aspirants	Laymen	Laywomen	Total
Farmer	38	8	6	5	11	68
Merchant	24	3	9	7	11	54
Civil Servant	15	1	2	15	10	43
Other	5	3	2	3	5	18
-	2	1	-	-	1	4
TOTAL	84	16	19	30	38	187

Altogether, the statistics indicate that the monks, the Sikkhamats and their supporters largely originate from peasant families. The great majority of the mainstream monks also originate from the peasant backgrounds but, contrary to the mainstream, in the Asoke group 45% of the monks also come from merchant and civil servant families, i.e. from higher social stratas.

6. 1. 3. Educational background

The third indicator of social background of the Asoke members in this survey was measured by examining the educational background of the monks, the Sikkhamats and the laypeople. Educational opportunities in Thailand are unevenly distributed and higher education is indicative of family wealth, a future privileged position in the society, high prestige and opportunities for upward mobility.³³⁷

29% of the monks have only primary school education, but an almost equal percentage, i.e. 28%, have university education. There are three monks in the Asoke group who have studied at the highly prestigious Chulalongkorn university, two at the Thammasat university, one at the Mahidol university and one at the Kasetsart University. Eleven monks have studied at the Ramkhamhaeng University, which is an open university and thus less prestigious, but which can still boost the upward mobility of a peasant child who manages to graduate.³³⁸ Six monks have studied at other universities. The rest

of the monks have studied either at a high school or a college.

There is a sharp distinction amongst the Sikkhamats between the highly educated and the lowly educated groups. Nine of the 16 Sikkhamats have only visited primary school - and we must remember that seven Sikkhamats refused to answer to the questionnaire, because they regarded it as "too difficult". We can presume that these seven Sikkhamats belong to the group who has only primary education or even less. This would mean that 16 of the total 23 Sikkhamats have had very little formal education. Five Sikkhamats have university degrees; one from the Chulalongkorn University, one from the Chiang Mai University, one from the Mahidol University and two from Ramkhamhaeng University. The rest, i.e. two persons, indicated that they had either visited high school or college.

Two of the four novices graduated from university, one has a primary school education and one has visited high school.

Equal proportions of aspirants hold university degrees or had only had primary school education i.e. five persons each. Gender makes a slight difference here: four female aspirants had university degrees, whereas only one male aspirant had a similar background. Two aspirants visited high school and three studied in college.

The overwhelming majority of the lay people who replied to the questionnaire in *mahapawarana*, were academics: 68% of the laywomen had university level education and 60% of the laymen.³³⁹ Only one laywoman and three laymen had primary school background. The strong concentration of academics amongst the laypeople in the smaller sample collected in the *mahapawarana* in 1994 gives a total of 42% with a university education in the Asoke lay group. 29% of the monastics had been to university and 34% of people only had primary school education. The larger sample collected from the *pluksek* ceremony cuts the proportion of academics down to 17% of the whole group of Asoke adherents.

The educational background of the laypeople according to the statistics collected in the *pluksek* in Sisa Asoke reads³⁴⁰:

No education	79
Primary school	1120
Secondary school	448
Vocational school	172
University	362

The largest group, 51% of the participants, had only primary school education, 25% had secondary school education. Only 16% of the participants had university degrees and 8% had vocational training. Proportionally the largest group of uneducated people originated from the Northeast where 44 persons indicated that they had no education whatsoever. The same applies to the laypeople with only primary school education i.e. 786 persons out of the total of 1120 originated from the Northeast. Proportionally, the largest groups of academics originated from the Northeast (178 persons) and from Central Thailand (136 persons). However, this only represents 13% of the Northeasterners whereas, amongst the Central Thais, the percentage is 24%. Interestingly the largest group of people with vocational training originate from Central Thailand, i.e. 77 persons which is 14% of the total.

TABLE 6: The educational background of the Asoke people

Schools	Monks	Nuns	Novices and Aspirants	Laymen	Laywomen	Total
Primary	25	9	6	1	1	42
High School	18	1	3	6	4	32
College	16	1	3	5	7	32
University	24	5	7	18	26	80
-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Total	84	16	19	30	38	187

The educational background of the lay participants in the *pluksek* ceremony differs slightly from the material collected from the *mahapawarana* meeting. From these surveys we can conclude that

the Asoke followers originate from both the highly educated and from the lowly educated strata of the Thai population.

6. 1. 4. Professional background

One more indicator of the social background of the Asoke people was to examine the professional background of the monastics and volunteers working for the group, and the laypeople still working outside the group.

25% of the monks were farmers before they were ordained. 20% of the monks had worked as civil servants and 9% had been merchants. A large group of monks have had different professions which are classified here as "other" professions, e.g. taxi drivers, bankers, soldiers, editors etc. 14% were studying before they joined the group and 7% were monks in mainstream monasteries.

Two of the novices had been merchants and one was civil servant, one worked in the group of other professions.

43% of the Sikkhamats had been working in public enterprises i.e. private companies, banks and factories. 18% had been working as civil servants and 18% were farmers before their ordination. One woman was a student and two were merchants.

Five of the aspirants had been civil servants, three merchants and four farmers. Gender in this case was not significant. Three female aspirants and two male aspirants had been civil servants, and two female aspirants and one male aspirant had been merchants before joining the Asoke group.

The professions of the laypeople prior to their joining the group are interesting - especially those who have joined the group on a voluntary basis, abandoning their worldly careers, living in the temples or in the lay group of practitioners. 44% of the laywomen who replied to the questionnaire were working full-time for the group. The professions of these laywomen varied from dentists to nurses and teachers. Only 26% of the laymen worked for the group full-time. Many of these were fairly young men in their 20s or early 30s - many of them former students.

TABLE 7: Profession before joining the Asoke

Profession	Monks	Nuns	Novices & Aspirants	Laymen	Lay-women	Total
Student	12	1	1	4	8	26
Farmer	21	3	4	-	1	29
Merchant	8	2	5	1	1	17
Civil-servant	17	3	6	17	20	63
Monk	6	-	-	-	-	6
Other	20	7	3	8	8	46
TOTAL	84	16	19	30	38	187

The profession of the participants at the *plukse*k was also listed in the statistics collected there. The overwhelmingly largest single professional group were the farmers - 26% of the total. 9% of those present were civil servants and 11% were private employees or entrepreneurs.

Teacher/ university teacher	127
Student/ school pupil	229
Civil servant	218
Private	256
Farmer ³⁴¹	577
Other	774

The largest group in these statistics were, however, people whose professions were classified as "other" - 35% of the total. The group of "others" includes the temple residents and permanent guests from different centres, who are no longer considered to have a profession i.e. approximately 200 persons, of whom the great majority took part in the *plukse*k ceremony. Another large group of "others" were the senior citizens; in total there were 419 people, aged 60 or older. In addition, there were a number of housewives, which was unsurprising considering that 60% of the participants were women.³⁴²

5% of the Asoke members indicated that they were either school teachers, university lecturers or professors. Together, with the civil servants, private employees and entrepreneurs they form the higher educated group of 534 persons who can be regarded as being lower middle class. The primary school graduates, the secondary school graduates and the persons with no education whatsoever total 1674 persons who, in addition to the 577 peasants and some youngsters in the group of 229 students and school pupils form the group of “others”.

6. 2. SOCIAL PRESSURE

According to Wilson, “minority religions are likely to suffer a bad reputation”,³⁴³ which is very true of the Asoke. The group is perceived as highly controversial and unorthodox amongst the Thai public, and negative stories about it are regularly published, particularly, in the Thai language press. The legal exclusion of the Asoke sect from the state sangha further confirms its image as a deviant Buddhist group.

According to Wilson, family relations are affected when a member of the family joins a sect: “Within the family, sect members are free to live in accordance with their own moral norms, yet the very fact that their moral assumptions differ from those of the society at large, is a source of tension.”³⁴⁴ Therefore, it is interesting to explore the impact of this social pressure on Asoke sect adherents and their families.

6. 2. 1. Length of affiliation

The Asoke group was formally excluded from the state sangha in 1989, after which the Asoke monks were no longer allowed to call themselves as monks, *phra*, but instead call themselves *samana*.³⁴⁵ Nor are they allowed to wear the brown robes they used to wear. After the crisis in 1989, the monks have been forced to wear white robes above their brown clothes in order to indicate that they are mere laypeople in the Buddhist hierarchy of Thailand. Yet 17% of the Asoke monks have joined the group after the year 1989. Three of

the Sikkhamats have also been ordained after the year 1989, but there one should remember that the path to become a Sikkhamat is considerably longer than the path to being ordained as a monk. We can thus assume that the three Sikkhamats were already involved with the group before 1989.

The most interesting figures are in the group of the novices and aspirants, because they have been elevated to their present positions fairly recently. Two of the four novices have been less than four years in their present position, which means that they were elevated to that position after 1989, and two have been in that position for 5-9 years already. Three novices have been loosely affiliated to the Asoke group since early mid 1980s, whereas one novice paid his first visit to Daen Asoke as early as 1976.

Six of the aspirants have been in their positions for less than four years, seven have been in their positions for 5-9 years and two have already 10 to 14 years behind them. Naturally we can again presume that their affiliation with the group reaches further back in time, but it still also shows that the legal steps against the Asoke group did not discourage these people from continuing along the path they had chosen. In fact, the male aspirants indicate starting their initial affiliation with the group during the first half of the 1980s, whereas the female aspirants can trace their affiliations back to the years 1975-78.

The laypeople attending the *pluksek* ceremony in Sisa Asoke were also requested to count how many times they had attended the ceremony.

1 time	562
2-5 times	770
6-10 times	575
10-15 times	196
16-19 times	37 ³⁴⁶

36% were attending the *pluksek* for the second to the fifth time. Since laypeople are not usually able to attend the week-long ceremony every year, these two to five years of participation clearly cover the critical year 1989. 26% of the persons were attending the ceremony for the 6th to the 10th time. Again, this figure also indi-

cates that the pending court case and the heavy accusations in the Thai language press have not affected the adherents dramatically. 25% of the persons participated the *pluksek* ceremony for the first time, but their affiliation has probably lasted for some time already.

TABLE 8: Length of stay in the Asoke group

Years	Monks	Nuns	Novices & Aspirants	Laymen	Laywomen	Total
0-4	15	3	8	5	3	34
5-9	29	2	9	8	14	62
10-14	21	4	2	14	17	58
15-19	14	3	-	3	2	22
20+	4	4	-	-	-	8
-	1	-	-	-	2	3
TOTAL	84	16	19	30	38	187

16% of the laymen attending the *mahapawarana* ceremony in Pathom Asoke started their affiliation with the Asoke group after the group was declared illegal. This figure is considerably smaller among the laywomen, where only 7% have started their affiliation after 1989.

Most of the Asoke monks i.e. 34% have been ordained during the last 5-9 years from 1989 to 1994 whereas 25% have been ordained for 10-15 years. 25% of the Sikkhamats have been in their present position for 20 years or more already, equally many have been for 10-14 years and 18% have been Sikkhamats for 15 to 19 years.

The great majority of the lay-people have been faithful to the group for 10 to 14 years: 44% of the laywomen and 46% of the laymen. 36% of the laywomen have been affiliated to the group for 5-9 years and 26% of the laymen. Only a few have had contacts with the group for longer than 15 years: only 10% both of the laywomen and

laymen. This can, of course, be explained by the fact that a longer affiliation usually leads to ordination and a change of status. Yet these figures clearly show that the official exclusion of the Asoke group from the state sangha and the negative publicity concerning the Asoke group has not been all that successful. There has still been a silent flow of supporters and followers to the Asoke group even after the legal crisis in 1989.

6. 2. 2. Reaction of the family members

Another aspect of social pressure concerns the reaction of the family members of the Asoke monastics and lay supporters. Again the harsh propaganda, the frequent condemnation of the Asoke group in the Thai language press and the pending court case have had less effect on the Asoke families than might be expected.

Somewhat surprisingly, 75% of the Sikkhamats had family members within the group even though the status and role of a Sikkhamat is completely new and unfamiliar to the Thai society and could therefore be problematic and difficult to understand and accept by the family members. Only three Sikkhamats did not have any family members who supported the Asoke group. Of these three Sikkhamats, one had recently been ordained which maybe explains the lack of support by her family members. Two of these Sikkhamats have already been ordained for about 20 years, both come from upper middle-class Chinese merchant families which maybe explains the negative attitude held by the family members.

57% of the monks had family members in the group of lay supporters. Three monks even had their wives as lay followers and two monks had their children in Asoke schools. The most common pattern is, however, to have a mother or father and siblings among the lay followers. According to Thai Buddhist belief, the ordination of a son transfers a considerable amount of merit to the mother. This seems to have been adopted by the mothers of the Asoke monks as well.

A similar situation applies to the lay followers where 66% of the men had some family members in the Asoke group. 50% of the laywomen had family members follow them to the temple, whereas 44% had no family members and could even expect some hostility

and suspicion to their group of affiliation by their family members.³⁴⁷ Interestingly, however, none of the laypeople who had family members in the group indicated being the parent or a sibling of a monk or Sikkhamat. There were no major differences according to gender: 57% of all men - lay and monastics - had family members in the group and 53% of all women.

The most problematic group in terms of family relations were the aspirants, where only five had family members in the Asoke group and 10 had no family members who would have accepted their choice of life style. Gender in this case was not decisive: six female aspirants and four male aspirants had no family members in the group, whereas two female aspirants and two male aspirants had family support for their life style.

The statistics on monks and Sikkhamats shows, however, a higher level of acceptance by families than is the case of novices and aspirants. This probably indicates that at the time, novices and aspirants were still regarded as dwelling in a liminal stage where they are neither venerated as monastics nor respected for their lay status.

6. 3. THE RECRUITMENT OF ASOKE MEMBERS

In order to examine the recruitment process of people into the Asoke, the following questions were presented in the questionnaire: "How did you learn about the Asoke group?", "Where did you meet the group for the first time?" and "Where did you meet Bodhiraksa for the first time?".

Monks mentioned reading books and listening to tapes as an introduction to the Asoke ideas. One monk mentioned that he learned about the Asoke group through a "rumour". First encounters with the Asoke group have usually taken place in public places like the Lumbini park in central Bangkok, in department stores, or in schools and other places around the country during the time when the group was still allowed to move freely.

Sikkhamats also either read a book or accompanied a friend on a visit to the Asoke monks. The majority of the Sikkhamats have a longer affiliation with the Asoke group than the monks. First en-

counters with Bodhiraksa and the Asoke monks has taken place in the old centres like Daen Asoke or in Prakarn Asoke in Samut Prakarn.³⁴⁸

Novices mention reading a book or listening to a tape as a first introduction, or accompanying a friend on a visit to the Asoke group. The affiliation reached back to 1976 for one novice, whereas the others established contact in the 1980s.

Male aspirants encountered the group in mid 1980s, whereas female aspirants usually needed more time to convince themselves that they could reject the worldly life, follow the group and strive to become ordained. The latest encounter took place in the year 1983 and the earliest in the year 1975.

Laypeople usually mention reading a book as an introduction, but where they received the book is not mentioned.³⁴⁹ In the later years, new members have also been recruited through the tapes. The next encounter after reading the books has usually taken place in Santi Asoke or in other centres, often during the national gatherings.

Many laypeople first encountered the group in rural districts during the times when the monks and the Sikkhamats travelled around the country to preach and present their slide shows. Very often these activities took place in schools or in teachers colleges, which has resulted in the recruitment of many teachers to the Asoke group. Many people have also simply followed their friends on visits to the various Asoke centres.

In most cases people met Bodhiraksa at the same time that they met the group. People tend to remember the precise date of their first encounter with the Asoke group, or at least they can still recall the month and year in which it occurred.

One layman met the group in Daen Asoke as early as 1976, but he did not meet Bodhiraksa for nine years until they met in Pathom Asoke in 1985.

Several laywomen encountered the Asoke group for the first time in Lanna Asoke in Chiang Mai, which shows that even newly started groups with no well-established centres or temples can be successful in recruiting new adherents.

6. 3. 1. Advancement in the Asoke hierarchy

Any layperson who wishes to become ordained in the Asoke sect should follow a certain gradual pattern of advancement. The first step is to apply to become a temporary guest (*akhantuka a chon*) who will stay in the temple area. There are separate dormitories for men and women in Santi Asoke, Pathom Asoke and Sisa Asoke.

The temporary guests prolong their stay every seventh day by asking permission (*wikab*) from Bodhiraksa or the person who has been preaching that day. A temporary guest is free to leave after the seven days and has no further obligations. During their stay in the temple area they have to be vegetarians and observe the eight precepts.

A person should stay as a temporary guest for at least three months before he or she can apply to become a permanent guest (*akhantuka pracaam*). A permanent guest also needs permission to prolong his or her stay every seventh day. Female guests often ask permission from the Sikkhamats to prolong their stay. A permanent guest must be vegetarian and observe the eight precepts. A person should stay in the position of permanent guest for at least six months before he or she can apply to become a temple resident (*aramik*). The person should stay for 18 months as a temple resident before he or she can apply to become an aspirant (*pa*).

Many of the temple residents are waiting for the permission to advance on the path to ordination, and thus all aspirants are chosen from amongst the temple residents. Yet, there are also temple residents who do not wish to be ordained, particularly amongst the women. They have realised that they have no chances of being ordained during their lifetime due to restrictions on the number of Sikkhamats. There is a certain degree of mobility in and out from the position of temple resident as was evidenced in the analysis of the number of the Asoke adherents discussed in Chapter II. Many of the temple residents, as well as the permanent and temporary guests, wear deep blue Northeastern peasant *mohom* shirts and blue trousers or sarongs. Usually they walk barefoot and eat only one meal in a day, but there are many exceptions to this both in terms of dress and with regard to the number of meals.

The first serious step on the way to becoming ordained is to become a *pa*. A man should stay in that position for at least four months before he can be promoted to the next step. A woman has to stay in that position at least for six months before applying for promotion. Male aspirants wear brown trousers and female aspirants wear a brown sarong. Both have white shirts and women still have long hair, but not longer than ten centimetres. Their daily duties include assisting the monks and Sikkhamats, washing their clothes, cleaning public spaces and buildings, and helping in the kitchen, especially in serving food to the monastics. Many aspirants work in the schools. There are aspirants only in Santi Asoke and in Pathom Asoke.

The next step for a male aspirant is to become a *nak*. Then he shaves his head, but continues wearing similar clothes except for a brown stripe in the collar of his white shirt. His duties are the same as before. A man is expected to stay in that position at least for four months.

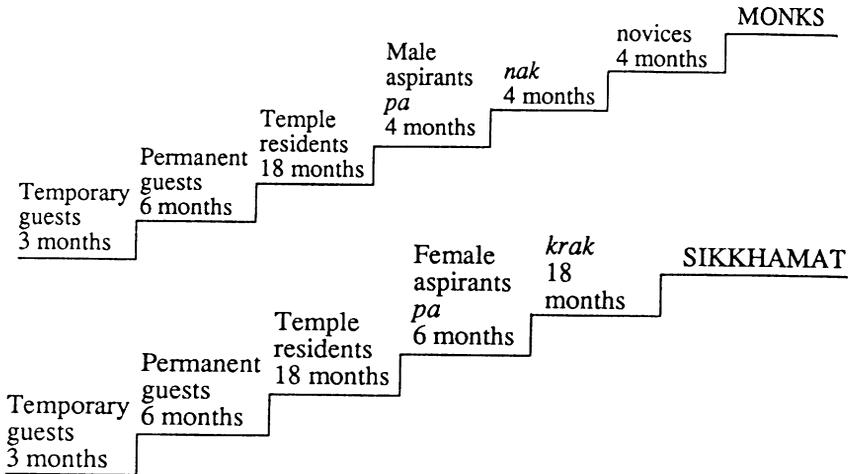
A female aspirant advances from the level of *pa* to become a *krak*. She also shaves her head and continues wearing similar clothes as earlier except for a brown shawl (*sabai*) which she hangs on her left shoulder in more formal occasions. A woman should stay in that position for at least 18 months.

A *nak* can advance after four months to become a novice (*samanutthet*). As a novice he starts to wear clothes which are similar to the monks: a brown sarong, a long loose brown shirt reaching down to the knees and a white outer robe. In the collar he wears a light brown stripe which distinguishes him from the monks. He should stay in that position for at least four months before he can be ordained as a monk.

A *krak* can advance to become a Sikkhamat after 18 months, but as the ratio of the Sikkhamats is restricted according to the number of monks, the path of advancement is also restricted to the female aspirants both *krak* and *pa*. One *krak* calculated that she can become a Sikkhamat, when there are 104 monks i.e. 11 monks more than at the present. On the other hand, to become ordained as a Sikkhamat, a woman has to be less than 50 years of age. There will

probably be exceptions to this in the future as the age of the female aspirants is getting higher due to the long wait.

FIGURE 9: Advancement in the Asoke



The decisions concerning advancement are made by the ones on the higher hierarchical levels. The monks decide about the advancement of the male candidates and the Sikkhamats decide about the advancement of the female candidates. The Sikkhamats have a meeting in which they interview the candidates on all levels, especially the *pa* and *krak*. After this, they bring their decision to the monks, who do not pose any questions to the female candidates.³⁵⁰

The steps from *pa* to *nak* or from *pa* to *krak* do not follow automatically. Sometimes a *pa* can be overtaken by his/her junior in promotion if the senior candidate fails in the interviews, or if he or she specifically wants to stay longer in his/her present position, hesitating to advance. Many aspirants have also resigned but still stay in the group as ordinary lay people, or they stay in the neighbourhood of a temple and continue to donate food to the monastics and attend the sermons.

6. 3. 2. General requirements for advancement

The main prerequisite for a serious Asoke follower's advancement, both spiritually and hierarchically, in the group is to strictly observe the eight precepts.³⁵¹ To assist this practice, one can take a small booklet called "Handbook of the eight precepts" (*ubosuttha sin baet*). This book helps the Asoke practitioners to examine their daily behaviour in the form of action, speech and thought with reference to the eight precepts.

The book first presents each precept in a short Thai version and then in the longer Pali version. After the presentation, examples are given as to how the person should evaluate his or her own behaviour and how many points one can credit to oneself. The practitioner receives zero points if he or she has broken the precept by action. The practitioner receives one point if he or she has broken the precept unintentionally, merely by accident. The practitioner receives two points if he or she did not commit any offending action but was talking about it. Three points to a practitioner who neither commits nor talks about the offending action, but still thinks about it. The highest four points can be noted when the practitioner manages to stop his or her thoughts about the offending act. Furthermore, the practitioner also has to be able to promote the opposite: namely positive feelings before the full four points can be given.

In the case of the first precept, one should not only refrain from killing but one should even reduce one's anger. Thus the positive action against anger is to show compassion (*metta*) and forgiveness. The second precept encourages one to refrain from stealing but is interpreted as "reducing greediness" (*lobha*). Thus the positive action is generosity. The third precept discourages "illicit sex" and is interpreted as "reducing passion" (*kama*). The positive feeling here is to increase one's feelings towards other human beings in the sense of "fraternity". The fourth precept encourages people to refrain from lying and thus increase the truth, which is interpreted as polite speech and which should subsequently promote the feeling of unity. The fifth precept encourages practitioners to reduce delusion and addiction to the six vices which are drinking, smoking, gambling, practicing illicit sex, frequenting night entertainment and being lazy. To

receive the full four points the practitioner should even campaign against these vices. The sixth precept requires the person to control his or her food consumption and ultimately limit the number of meals. For four points, one should even convince other people of the benefits of eating less. The seventh precept requires the person to reduce his craving (*rakha*) for dancing, music and for all decoration. To gain full points one should even feel happy to live without these things. The final precept for the lay people encourages them to refrain from sleeping in beds and sitting on elevated chairs in order to reduce their ego (*mana*). Instead of elevating themselves with elaborated pieces of furniture, they should show modesty (*maknoy sandot*).

The handbook should be filled daily and each week the book should be shown to a monk or a Sikkhamat for comments. The monastic should sign the handbook in order to confirm that she or he has seen it.

The handbook is freely distributed to any lay person, but it is obligatory for the temple residents and permanent guests. They are free to choose the person to whom they want to show their handbook. Male practitioners always go to the monks, but the female practitioners may choose between a monk or a Sikkhamat. Theoretically, the Sikkhamats are responsible for the female temple residents, but no-one can force a laywoman to show her handbook to a Sikkhamat.

The purpose of the book is to make the lay person more aware of his or her daily behaviour and to assist in the observation of the precepts. In the Asoke group, some lay people and temporary guests write diaries in free style and show them regularly to a monk or to a Sikkhamat for their comments after which they receive a signature.

Another paper that the temple residents and both temporary and permanent guests have to fill in is the *wikab* paper (*bai wikab*). Every seventh day, these people have to ask for permission to stay longer in the temple and, at the same time, show the monk or Sikkhamat how well they have managed to follow the rules of the temple.

The first question concerns the practitioner's health, where she or he can reply "sick" or "not sick", and then describe the illness or the symptoms. Next question concerns the number of meals per day

the person has consumed during the last seven days. If the person has eaten more than once a day, she or he will have to give the number of meals and describe what she or he has eaten in the early morning, in the afternoon or in the evening. Usually these extra meals consist of fruits or milk products.

The fourth question is concerned with sleeping hours, whether the respondent has slept during the day. If she or he has slept in the day a reason for this has to be given. Reasons for sleeping daytime are often such things as "travelling by bus" or a reference to sickness.

The fifth question deals with the ID-label (*bat prachamtua*) that everyone is expected to wear on her or his clothes. If the person did not wear it every day, the reason must be given again. Usually the explanation is: "I forgot it" or even: "I have lost it". The sixth question concerns going barefoot, a rule, which is usually not too difficult to follow.

The seventh question is concerned with whether the person got up at 3.30 a.m. - an explanation should be given if she or he slept longer. The eighth question asks whether the person went to the temple (*sala*) to listen to the preaching, and the next question is whether she or he joined the communal meal in the temple. If not, the reason should be given - the reasons are usually that the person was working somewhere else: in the offices, in the shops or in the restaurant. The last question concerns the evening meditation which is not obligatory for anyone.

The last point is to report the place where the person is sleeping: whether in the back-room of the restaurant, in the shop or in the dormitories. Sometimes the respondents fail to sign in the central register where they sleep, as they feel too sleepy to go to register and instead go to sleep wherever they are.

Finally a short description of person's state of mind should be given. The monastic then reads the paper, comments and asks reasons for the negative answers and signs the paper.

These are the group standards of conduct in the Asoke sect. Wilson emphasised the importance of an explicit commitment as a prerequisite to a sect member. In the Asoke group the "Handbook" should assist the members in their maintenance of their affiliation

through their behaviour. They should satisfy several tests of merit each day: wake up early, eat only one vegetarian meal, control their temper when interacting with other sect members and so forth. The values that the sect members listed in the questionnaire should not only be put in practice daily but are even controlled by the members on the higher hierarchical level.

6. 4. SUMMARY

My statistics include 187 persons, both lay and monastic, participating at one national gathering called *mahapawarana*, and 2181 lay persons from another national gathering - *plukse*. To summarise the wide range of material accurately, I shall only repeat a few points from the best samples. The sample of the monks, which included 84 monks out of the total of 92, i.e. 91%. The extensive sample of 2181 laypeople covered nearly all the participants in the *plukse* gathering. These two samples are more representative than the smaller samples of other groups. Only 16 out of the total of 23 Sikkhamats 23 replied, and the small samples of laypeople from *mahapawarana* include only 30 laymen and 38 laywomen from a gathering of approximately 2000 persons.

In order to determine the social strata of the Asoke people I shall only discuss the place of origin, education and profession of the respondents.

35% of the Asoke monks come from the poorest provinces of Thailand - in the Northeast. The proportion of monks coming from the wealthier provinces, Bangkok and Central Thailand, amounted to 47%. 61% of the lay people were born in the Northeast and 25% came from the Central region. The place of origin cannot function as the only indicator of social strata, so I also examined the level of education which was, in fact, more revealing than the geographical origin.

Of the Asoke monks, 25% have visited only primary school, which means 4-6 years of schooling. A further 28% of the monks have visited universities, the rest has secondary education or tertiary education in vocational institutes. This means that education is evenly distributed amongst the monks. 51% of the laypeople had

only visited primary school and 16% had studied at the universities. A low level of education amongst the laymen is typical.

I also considered the professional background of the Asoke monks: 25% were farmers before taking the ordination, 20% were civil servants and 23% had other professions, mostly in private companies, but they were not merchants which might indicate greater wealth. About the same percentage of the lay people, i.e., 26% were farmers, whereas 15% were civil servants and 27% were either civil servants or working for private companies. Here, the professional background seems to be fairly balanced, both lay and monastics share similar professional backgrounds. The incomes of these groups are difficult to ascertain precisely, but clearly neither farmers nor civil servants belong to the strata usually seen as being “upward mobile”.

This short review clearly shows that the Asoke people cannot be regarded as representing the urban, upwardly mobile middle-class. Asoke is a group where 51% of the lay followers have only primary school education, and 61% of them originate from the poorest region of Thailand. The laypeople seem to be more dominated by the poorly educated, rural Northeasterners, whereas the Asoke monks originate in more balanced proportions from the different social stratas in Thai society.

Therefore, I reject the earlier assumptions cultivated by researchers that the Asoke group represents the upper and upper middle classes in Thailand.