ABSTRACT. A cult of healing through meditation that was observed in Bangkok, Thailand in 1974 is described, and the cult is interpreted in terms of two axes, the cosmological and the performative, and the dialectical, reciprocal and complementary relations between them.

The various ramifications of the cosmology are discussed - the categorization of the cosmos itself as a hierarchical scheme, the relations between man and non-human forms of existence, the ideas concerning power and its manner of acquisition and use, the relation between power and restraint, etc. The epistemological basis of the cult, which attempts cure through meditation, and the features of the ritual as they contribute to its performative efficacy are highlighted. The essay concludes by suggesting that there is a single scheme (episteme) underlying religious ideas and applications of knowledge such as meditation, medicine, alchemy, and astrology.

1. INTRODUCTION

I encountered the cult of healing which I describe and interpret in this paper in Thailand's capital city of Bangkok in 1974. The cult was predicated on the postulate that illnesses of various kinds, both physical and mental, can be healed or relieved through the practice of meditation (samadhi).

The interpretation of the cult takes place along two axes, which I shall label cosmological and performative. In my view a full understanding of ritual is achieved only when we have scrutinized it in terms of both these perspectives.

The cosmological perspective implies that ritual acts cannot be fully understood except as part of a larger frame of cultural presuppositions and beliefs which provide the phenomenological and subjective basis for engaging in the ritual in question. From this perspective ritual is seen as a translation of a cosmology, and the signs, symbols and other components of the ritual act as vehicles for expressing cosmological meanings. I must admit that I find the claims of the cosmological perspective unassailable: for example, it has to be admitted that Thai rites of various kinds, Buddhist as well as spirit cults, reveal much of their meaning when placed against the Buddhist cosmological scheme of the three lOKas (worlds) and the corporeal, sensory and mental faculties attributed to the various beings - the Buddha, gods, humans, demonic spirits, etc.

But I am also convinced that the cosmological perspective cannot exhaust the understanding of ritual, but must be supplemented by a performative model of ritual as communication. That is to say there is a danger that because beliefs are taken to be prior to ritual action, the latter is simply taken to be derivative and
secondary. Thereby ritual itself is in danger of being ignored as having its own distinctive structure and patterning and serving as a vehicle in its own right in appropriate contexts and situations for transmitting messages and meanings, and for the construction and experiencing of cultural and social reality.

Thus after first presenting in Part One a description of the healing cult as a case study, I shall attempt an interpretation in Part Two along the following lines.

The elucidation of the rather evocative concepts ‘the social and cultural construction of clinical reality’, ‘medicine’s symbolic reality’ (Kleinman, Eisenberg, Good in press) can perhaps in the Thai case be approached by first considering the religious *cosmological* scheme which has widespread ramifications with many areas of knowledge and life. This cosmological scheme embodies cultural presuppositions and beliefs which constitute a *theodicy* and give *meaning* to notions of illness and healing, fortune and misfortune.

The Thai cosmological scheme has several ramifications. It is, for example, a unified scheme which states correspondences, sympathies and antipathies, identities and differences, between non-human (deities/spirits) and human and animal creatures, between the microcosm of man and the macrocosm of the universe, and the dimensions in which they participate in each other’s natures. I shall suggest as a concluding hypothesis to this study that in the Thai case (as in other South and Southeast Asian cultures) the Buddhist cosmology, and local systems of knowledge and technique such as Meditation, Astrology, Alchemy, Medicine (Ayurveda), all share an underlying scheme of classification and hierarchy and hence a coherence that is by contrast absent in the knowledge systems of contemporary Western societies with their separation of ‘religious’ from ‘secular’ realms of knowledge, and of ‘specialisms’ from one another, thus making it difficult for specialist and layman alike to see an overall existential pattern.

Another distinctive feature of the Buddhist cosmology and philosophy is that there is no separation between the workings of ‘moral laws’ and ‘physical’ or ‘natural laws’; the concept of *dhamma* encompasses both. This again gives valence to understanding existential conditions and the manner in which human actions and cosmological events are thought to be linked. Finally, our cult employs a form or procedure of curing by which illness and its relief are projected against a generalised cosmic reality which is considered more ‘real’ and ‘enduring’ than the sensations, pains and ordeals of ‘this-worldly’ events. What do we make of this cultural mode for treating illness?

Now to turn to the performative features of the cult. It cannot be emphasized enough that the cosmological scheme is not simply an abstract mapping in the mind; the meaningfulness of the healing situation stems from the enactments of the ritual and healing process that translate and *create* the cosmology as an