The Revival of the Theravāda Nun Order in Thailand: Scriptural Authority and Cultural Resistance

Fieldwork period in Thailand: 21/03/2007-14/04/2007

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I. Abstract

In an on-going debate in Thai society about the possibility of reviving the Theravāda order of nuns (bhikkhuni), a multitude of quite diverging opinions and arguments both for and against the revival of the ordination lineage of the bhikkhuni-order has been brought forward. Amongst these are: Western influenced text-criticism that aims to identify the authentic stance of the historical Buddha towards bhikkhunīs; reference to secular law; feminist hermeneutics; and considerations of the gender inequality in Thai society. These arguments have been countered by traditionalists who refer to canonical texts which in their view do not allow women to ordain in Theravāda under the given circumstances (i.e. the non-existence of Theravāda nuns who would be able to carry out their part of the ordination procedure). At the same time, however, alternatives to a nun order have been suggested, such as the amelioration of the disadvantaged social position of the long-existing maechis (white-clad women who keep the eight precepts) or the introduction of para-monastic institutions which would allow women to pursue a spiritual practice similar to that of monks.

Several institutions in Thailand, seemingly accepting the traditional view on the impossibility of a revival of a canonically sanctioned nun order, have established various institutions/programmes that are to give Buddhist women a better chance to practice Buddhism or gain education in a similar way as Thai monks: e.g. Thammacarini institution in Ratburi, the Maechi Institute located at Wat Boworn in Bangkok, the Maechi college in Khorat, the dhammamātā programme initiated by Buddhāsāsa and located in Suan Mok, the ten precepts-keeping sikkhamātu of Santi Asok, or the maechis of Maechi Sansani’s Sathianthammasathan.

To many it seems to be questionable as to how far these institutions/programmes could be accepted as satisfying alternatives by those who plead for the introduction of a ‘real’ nun order. In fact, previous research has shown that there exists a wide spectrum of diverging opinions on the necessity of a nun order.
Within in this framework, my research set out to study the following questions: What are the arguments and motivations of Thai Buddhist women who want to ordain in Theravāda Buddhism? And what are the arguments and views of women who prefer instead to continue to practice Buddhism in a more traditional way?

As it has previously been suggested that sexist biases and patriarchy are engrained in Thai Buddhism, I was investigating the following research questions: Is this one reason why a large number of Thai Buddhist women do not pursue or even oppose the revival of a nun order in Thailand? Do the magico-animistic beliefs of the powerful impurity of menstrual blood as opposed to the purity of monks' robes, Buddha statues, Buddhist amulets and so forth play a role in this? Is the rather low prestige of maechīs in Thai society changing, or do we have to regard highly respected maechis, like Maechi Sansani, Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang and Maechi Can Khonnokyung, as exceptions? What lies behind the initiatives of creating para-monastic institutions for women in Thai society? Do they really provide an acceptable alternative for a ‘real’ Theravāda nun order?, especially with regard to the possibility of religious practice and the generation of merit (puññakhettaṃ) as a result of leading a ‘holy life’ (similar to that of monks who keep 227 training rules)?
2. Acknowledgment

I am very thankful to the following persons who all very profoundly helped me to gain very important insights into this research topic by giving me so much of their valuable time to interview them: P.A. Payutto (Abbot of Wat Yanawetsakawan, Nakhon Pathom), Ajarn Sumedho (Abbot Amaravati, UK), Phra Dutsadee Methangkuro, Phra W. Wachiramethi (Wat Benjamabophit, Bangkok), Bhikṣuni Nirāmisā. Dhammanandā Bhikkhuni (Nakhon Pathom), Sāmaṇeri X (whose name I will not mention in order to respect her request to protect her privacy), Sikkhamatuya Paniya (Santi Asok), Maechi Arun Phet-urai (Thai Maechi Institute), Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang (Chulalongkorn University), Mae Chee Sasanee Sthirasuta, Ajarn Citsai Phadungrat (Thammamata Project). Some of my informants requested to stay anonymous, altogether, or asked me not to mention them as a source of specific information or opinions. Many deepest thanks also go to Dr Mike Pamwell and Dr Frances Weightman (both from the University of Leeds, UK) who have given valuable suggestions on this paper. This research has been supported financially by the British Academy, for which I am very grateful. I wish to thank the National Research Council in Thailand for giving me permission to conduct fieldwork in Thailand. Also, I am very grateful to Ven. Prof. Dr. Phra Dharmakosajarn (Rector of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University) and Ajarn Thanaphon Somwang (Sripatum University) for their support.

3. List of Collaborating Thai Researchers or Thai Institutions

Ajarn Thanaphon Somwang (Sripatum University)
Pradhammakosajarn (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University)
4. Background

Current Thai Buddhism is characterized by an unprecedented polymorphism and complexity that have become manifest by the plurality of competing movements and cults, and an enormous variety of belief systems that are based on widely differing interpretations of religious texts and sources of normative and formative reference.¹

The ordination of Thai scholar Chatsumarn Kabilsingh of Buddhism as a female novice (samaneri) in the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism in 2001, sparked a fervent debate in Thai society as to whether it was valid and possible to revive the extinct female ordination lineage of Theravāda Buddhism. Within these debates, Thai intellectuals have brought forward a wide range of arguments for a possible revival of a nun’s ordination lineage: e.g. Western influenced text-criticism that tries to stratify the normative canonical texts historically in order to isolate the most original text layers; reference to secular law; feminist hermeneutics that favour the spirit over the letter of the canonical texts; and considerations of the inequality between genders in Thai society. All these arguments, however, are opposed by traditionalists (e.g. Phra Payutto, Thongyoi Saengsinchai) who try to refer to the authority of the Theravāda canon which in their view does not allow women to ordain in Theravāda under the given circumstances (i.e. the non-existence of Theravāda nuns who would be able to carry out their part of the ordination procedure). At the same, however, alternatives to a nun order have been suggested, like the amelioration of the disadvantaged social position of the long-existing maechis (white-clad women who keep the eight precepts) or the introduction of para-monastic institutions which would allow women to pursue a spiritual practise similar to that of monks.

At the same time, however, as mentioned before several famous and not so famous Thai Buddhist institutions in Thailand have established various institutions/programmes intended to give Buddhist women a better chance to practice Buddhism or gain education in a similar way as Thai monks.

¹ Seeger, 2007.
5. Objective of Research

The objective of this research project was to explore the landscape of today's "fragmented" Thai Buddhism with regard to the role of women who are interested in Buddhist teaching and practice. This means that I investigated the multivocality of debates and contestation concerning the introduction of the Theravada bhikkhuni order in Thailand and, in immediate connection with this, the religious space that is either factually or potentially available for Thai women who are interested in Buddhist practice. In this way, I set out to study whether and, if yes, how the roles of women in Thai Buddhism are changing in Thailand, today.

2 See Charles Keyes' keynote address for the 7th International Conference on Thai Studies "Buddhism fragmented: Thai Buddhism and political order since the 1970s" (Keyes, 1999b).
6. Research Method

Methodologically, I was using a number of different approaches in this research. I was able to conduct 10 extensive in-depth, semi-structured expert interviews with various key informants in Thailand (for details, see References/Bibliography: Interviews conducted in Thailand during the fieldwork period).

I was using the following questions as research questions:

- What are the arguments and motivations of Thai Buddhist women who want to ordain in Theravāda Buddhism?
- What are the arguments and views of women who prefer instead to continue to practice Buddhism in a more traditional way?
- What is the reason why a large number of Thai Buddhist women do not pursue or even oppose the revival of a nun order in Thailand?
- Do the magico-animistic beliefs of the powerful impurity of menstrual blood as opposed to the purity of monks' robes, Buddha statues, Buddhist amulets and so forth play a role in all this?
- Is the rather low prestige of maechīs in Thai society changing, or do we have to regard highly respected maechis, like Maechi Sansani, Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang and Maechi Can Khonnokyung, as exceptions?
- What lies behind the initiatives of creating para-monastic institutions for women in Thai society?
- Do they really provide an acceptable alternative for a 'real' Theravāda nun order?

Also, I was studying the opinions and views of influential Thai thinkers in connection with the interpretation of Pali canonical texts that are relevant to the founding of the bhikhunī order. Based on these findings, I was investigating the depictions and discussions of the availability of religious space for Thai Buddhist
women: I examined statistical material, material culture and, also, how the role and space of Thai Buddhist women are depicted and discussed in various media, especially in newspapers and the internet. Needless to say, that it was impossible to be exhaustive, given the wide range and number of sources available. This is one of reasons, why I want to conduct further research in order to gain more data for a more thorough analysis.

Also, I was collecting data concerning the history of specific institutions for Thai Buddhist women and was studying the biographies Buddhist women who excel through their practice of the dhamma or their teaching.

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3 My source for the statistical material is predominantly Somchai Maitri et al., 2546.
7. Research Result

I was able to observe that in accordance with the overall change and contestation taking place within Thai Buddhism, the meaning and identity of Thai Buddhist women is in flux and extremely complex. In order to create the framework for my fieldwork in Thailand, I had investigated the opinions of a number of influential Thai thinkers who have publicly expressed their opinions and views related to the interpretation of Pali canonical texts that are relevant to the founding of the bhikkhuni order. Here, contestation over the hermeneutical approach to the Pali canon was observed.

During the many interviews with the key informants (for details, see References/Bibliography: Interviews conducted in Thailand during the fieldwork period) I was able to obtain a lot of relevant data relating to the following points:

- history and functions of the Maechi Institute located in Bangkok;
- the various interpretations of canonical texts relevant in the nun ordination debates;
- thoughts and ideas concerning alternative institutions for Thai Buddhist women to practice the dhamma;
- relevant opinions about the roles of women in (Thai) Buddhism held by influential thinkers in Thai Buddhism;
- biography of outstanding Thai Buddhist women;
- practice and teaching of outstanding female Thai Buddhist practitioners;
- academic discourses related to the religious roles of women in Thai Buddhism;

Also, I was able to obtain a lot of relevant books and documents on the nun ordination controversy and the history and objectives of the Thai Maechi Institute. In addition to this, I was able to gain a lot of valuable insights into the perspectives of

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4 This part is a summary of a chapter of my PhD thesis (Seeger, 2005, p. 160-213) and two of my papers (Seeger, 2006; Seeger, 2007), but I also added some recently acquired sources.
Thai Buddhist women on the nun ordination controversy and the meaning, importance, and challenges of being a maechi in Thai society. Through discussions with various Thai scholars I was able to verify a lot of previous findings and research outcomes. In addition to this, based on this research I have been able to formulate further research questions and to develop a new research project (which I want to conduct in Thailand during the months July and August of 2008).

The following points can be regarded as the major results of my research:

- It seems that there is an increasing number of institutions that allow women to pursue their religious path and aim
- It seems that there is an increasing number of women who have been able to set new paradigms for women in general
- It seems that there is a greater momentum in the creation of structural changes that would allow all women to pursue the Buddhist path is needed
- It is often the case that the situation of maechis who live in a monastery together with monks depends to a great extent on the policies and ideas of the individual abbot who is in charge of the monastery
- As a consequence of the previous point the individual situation for maechis might change enormously depending on the policies of the abbot in charge of the monastery
- Systematic attempts to raise the status of women have been observed
- There have also been various initiatives to give maechis a legal status and definition
- The majority of maechis is still not pursuing advanced knowledge of Buddhist doctrine
- There is an increasing support for maechis and the introduction of a new bhikkhuni order both from intellectuals and Buddhist lay
- There is still broad resistance in Thai society to the ordination of bhikkhunis in Thailand
Scriptural debates

During the past 10 years or so, but especially since the sāmaṇeri-ordination of Chatsумarn Kabilsingh in 2001, a high number of Thai academics, feminists and scholar monks have expressed their stances on the question of whether it is possible to ordain women as Theravada bhikkhuni in a way that is sanctioned by the canonical Pali texts. Their conclusions have been rather varied, diverse and contrary. Traditionalists who have defended Theravada’s conservatism in this matter have argued that Theravada had developed into a specific historical entity of which the different text layers of their canonical and post-canonical texts give evidence and are a lasting effigy. They regard Theravada has a historical enterprise that has been able to preserve very successfully the most original Buddhist texts and life-style prescribed in these texts. This conservatism is motivated by the concern of “losing original meaning by a process of historical erosion, i.e. oblivion or intentional manipulation.” This “working against erosion by the passage of time […] has become their programme, the foundation of their identity.”

Based on this understanding, the Thai mainstream sangha has so far been making clear that a revival of the bhikkhunisaṅgha is impossible due to technical reasons, i.e. the absence of a Theravada bhikkhuni order which is required in the ordination procedure of a valid bhikkhuni ordination. As a consequence, during the debates about the possibility of the revival of a bhikkhuni order, Thai Theravada’s “hermeneutical practice” has been described by Thai scholars as paradoxical and

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5 E.g.: Phra Payutto, 2544; Rabiaprat Phongphanit, 2546; Duean Khamdi, 2544; Senate Commission for Affairs of Women, Youth and Elderly People, s.a.; Phra Sipariyattimoli et al., 2544; Thongyoi Saengsinchai and Chamnan Nisarat, 2544; Dhammanandā Samaṇeri, 2544; Mettānando Bhikkhu, 2545; Dhammanandā, 2546; Somchai Maitri, 2546; Rabiaprat Phongphanit, 2546; Channarong Bunnun, 2547; Kulavir Prapornpipat, 2548.

6 Here it must be noted that in this paper I use the terms “traditionalist” and “traditional” respectively out of convenience in order to refer to Thai thinkers who prefer to continue traditional practice with regard to the bhikkhuni ordination controversy. The use of this term does not imply, however, that proponents of the bhikkhuni ordination are not traditional with regard to other ideas or practices or that opponents of the bhikkhuni ordination are traditional in every aspect.

7 Seeger, 2006, p. 2


the Thai mainstream saṅgha has been criticised as having gender biases\textsuperscript{10} or being inflexible, structurally anachronistic, \textsuperscript{11} and chauvinistic.\textsuperscript{12}

But despite all this, the 1928 proclaimed prohibition by the then Saṅgharāja (Thai Buddhist Patriarch) that forbids monks to ordain women as sāmaṇerī, sikkhī, or bhikkhunī is still in force today.\textsuperscript{13}

However, traditionalist Thai scholars and thinkers who regard the introduction of Theravada bhikkhunīs in Thailand as impossible for the aforementioned reasons, do not perceive this as a deadlock situation for women interested in Buddhist practice. Despite their consistent insistence on the perpetuation of Theravada’s traditional conservatism, they regard Thai Theravada as being quite flexible, and they have proposed a variety of alternative avenues of practice for Thai Buddhist women. For traditionalists, the establishment of a new institution or the improvement of the situation of Thai maechīs\textsuperscript{14} is not necessarily seen as a poor substitute for the bhikkhunī order, but rather is promoted as a chance for women to use the creative potential of the tradition to circumvent difficulties which the existence of a Theravada bhikkhunī would necessarily imply.

Thai maechīs as a substitute for bhikkhunīs?

Thai maechīs are characterised by their practice of keeping eight or ten precepts, their white robes and their shaven head and eyebrows. In Thai society maechīs can be seen occupying a great variety of roles, such as social workers, mediums, meditation masters, teachers of Pali and Abhidhamma studies, recluses, and temple servants. They might live in a monastery together with monks, in a nunnery, temporarily in the forest or in private houses.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{10} Rabiaprat Phongphanit, 2546, p. 59; Phra Chai Varadhhammo in Cittima Phanutecha and Natthaya Bunphakdi, 2548, p. 108-110.
\textsuperscript{11} See, for example: Suwanna Satha-Anand, 2001; Pramuan Phengcan, 2544; Kulavir Prapapornpipat, 2548; Suwanna Satha-Anand in: Cittima Phanutecha and Natthaya Bunphakdi, 2548, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{12} Pagorn Singsuriya, 2004, p. 269.
\textsuperscript{13} Rabiaprat Phongphanit, 2546, p. 115-6; Wirat Thiraphanmethi/Thirananthangkun, 2546, p. 61; Kulavir Prapapornpipat, 2548, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{14} “Mae” means mother in Thai. It is not quite clear, though, where “chi” derives from (Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, 1991, p. 36-37)
\textsuperscript{15} Van Esterik, John, 1996, p. 33-41; Muecke, 2004, p. 221-238; Latdawan Tamafu, 2548, p. 67.
Despite the structurally disadvantaged, inferior position and commonly low status of maechis, an apparently growing number of maechis have achieved a rather high standing and in some cases gained a huge number of very influential devotees and disciples. Many of these maechis - but by no means all - are former members of the Thai middle-class while their followers and supporters are in many cases middle-class, too.

In this research project I was able to identify a number of outstanding female Thai Buddhist practitioners who excel as Dhamma-teachers, are revered as Buddhist "saints" - in some cases miraculous powers are attributed to them -, serve as spirit mediums or are highly esteemed for their social engagement.

The aforementioned ongoing scriptural debates, together with an increasing number of independent nunneries, the observed approximation of roles between monks and maechis, the support from Thai middle-class women for maechis and the examples of outstanding female Thai Buddhists suggest that traditional religious roles of Thai women are contested and, at the same time, that the number of widely acknowledged Thai women is increasing. This does, of course, not mean that formerly there were no or less outstanding female Buddhist practitioners in Thailand. But facilitated and expressed by the print-media, internet, other digital devices, and material culture, like icons and architecture, these contemporary female Buddhist women have been recognised to a much broader extent and have a much higher number of followers. This indicates a de-marginalization and a significant redefinition of the religious roles of women that is currently taking place in Thailand.

Nonetheless, as already mentioned, many people doubt that the current Thai maechi institution can factually or potentially be a real alternative to the missing bhikkhuni order. So far, there are only individual maechis or practising Thai women who - based on their religious or social accomplishments - have developed a certain amount of charisma, either through their practice or through their specific personal background and social standing. The maechi institution as a whole or any other

17 Ladtawan Tamafu, 1548, p. 57; see also: Lindberg-Falk, 2000a, p. 53; Muecke, 2004, p. 227; Aphinya Fueangfusakun, 2544; Phr. Phaisan Wisalo, 2544, p. 2.
18 Kamala Tiyavanich reports that: "In regional traditions there were prominent women renunciates but their identities and teachings do not appear in official records because they were devoted to meditation rather than scholastic training. Nevertheless, some of these women ascetics remained in the memory of elderly people and monks. There is plenty of evidence that teachers of regional Buddhist tradition held female ascetics in high esteem" (Kamala Tiyavanich, 1997, p. 281).
similar institution has not yet been able to build up "charisma of office" or "institutional charisma" that would equal that of the monks.\textsuperscript{19} The saffron or brownish robes of Thai monks have become a powerful cultural symbol in Thailand to which sometimes even magical properties are attributed. Based on their ordination monks are automatically placed at the social peak of Thai society and even the Thai king would show his respect to a monk, irrespective of the monk’s former social status. The material support given to monks is analogous to this respect.

According to Phra W. Wachiramethi, “in the next decade the space [available to] Thai maechis in Thai society will increase faster than that of bhikkhunis”, as maechis are already partly established. At the same time, however, bhikkhunis are only in a very early formative stage.\textsuperscript{20} Even the ordination of Thai women into other traditions than Theravada is still not easy as brownish-robes-wearing “ordained women” are quite a new thing in Thai society and there is still ‘not enough collective consciousness’ for this novelty.\textsuperscript{21} Santi Asok’s brownish-wearing sikkhamatus are only acknowledged by insiders or even sometimes regarded as followers of other non-Theravada Buddhist schools.\textsuperscript{22} The traditional gender expectation of Thai women always to take care of their families, especially their aging and ailing parents, is still widespread. Contrary to male ordination the going into homelessness (pabbajjā, upasampadā) of women is normally not encouraged.\textsuperscript{23}

It seems that at the moment the establishment of Theravada bhikkhunis would not find broad support in Thai society due to resistance from main-stream saṅgha and a high number of influential thinkers who are concerned about the integrity and authenticity of the Theravada tradition. While it seems to be unlikely that a Theravada bhikkhuni order will be officially recognised in the foreseeable future, it is apparent that support for it from the lay and from influential academics and monks is growing. Female monastics might not be recognised by the law but it is only a matter of time before they will have accumulated enough institutional charisma to allow them to gain respect and support from the Thai people in a similar vein as the male saṅgha does. If the important organs of mainstream Thai saṅgha, do not come up with solution that can be accepted as satisfying and convincing for proponents of a bhikkhuni order in this situation, but retreat to avoid a clear stance

\textsuperscript{19} See: Aphinya Fueangfusakun, 2544 ; Somchai Maitri et al., 2546, p. 2, 124-5; see: Bell, 2000, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{20} Interview with Phra W. Wachiramethi on 04/04/2007.
\textsuperscript{21} Interview with Bhikṣuṇi Nirāmisā on 05/04/2007.
\textsuperscript{22} Somchai Maitri et al., 2546, p. 3, 147; interview with Sikkhamatuya Paniya on 05/04/2007.
\textsuperscript{23} Lindberg-Falk, 2002, p. 119, 123, 141-143.
Mainstream Thai Theravada should face this challenge and see it as an opportunity and not a danger. At the moment, there is apparently quite a need of religious experts in Thailand, as 6,900 Thai temples have been abandoned. At the same time, Thai women are turning to other Buddhist schools for ordination, like the increasingly popular tradition of Thich Nhu Thanh or the Fo Guang Shan movement which has a branch temple in Bangkok. Thai mainstream sangha has to change if it wants to be relevant and work against its ongoing loss of authority and esteem, both structurally and in terms of its stance towards the female gender. Having bhikkhunis or other alternative para-monastic institutions that get equal structural support to male monastics might have an enormous impact on the religious landscape in general.

A growing number of individual Thai women who are wearing the robes of the bhikkhunis or sanañkaris, either from the Theravada or other traditions together with a significant number of macchis and female lay-practitioners, have begun to set new paradigms as women with equal spiritual accomplishments to men. They might play an increasingly important role both as models for accomplished spiritual practice (patipatti) and as Dhamma teachers (pariyatti). While the main-stream Thai sangha has not been able to respond adequately to problems of modernity especially in connection with women’s issues, the discussed de-marginalization of Thai Buddhist women might nevertheless have a reviving effect on the Thai Buddhist landscape.

24 Phra Phaisan Wisalo, 2546, p. 363; Rabiaprat Phongphanit, 2546, p. 72; Somchai Maitri et al., 2546, p. 173, 266; Sanitsuda Ekachai, 1999, p. 227-234; Sanitsuda Ekachai, 2001, p. 218-227; Senate Commission on Women, Youth and Elderly People Affairs, [s.a.], p. 40.
25 Interview with Bhikṣunī Nirāmīśā on 05/04/2007; interview with Phra W. Wachiramethi on 04/04/2007; Sutthikhun Kongthong, 2550.
26 Phra Phaisan Wisalo, 2544, p. 2; Somchai Maitri et al., 2546, p. 291.
8. Conclusion and Recommendation

Given the amount of time available during the fieldwork period of approx. 3 weeks, I was able to gain quite a lot of relevant data that allowed me to examine the changing roles of women in Thai Buddhism, today. Having said this, however, I have to add that after having started my research in Thailand it became very quickly quite clear that it would be necessary to conduct further research on this most interesting topic. While this research project was focusing on structural changes relating to the roles of women in Thai Buddhism, it would certainly be very insightful to examine individual biographies of outstanding women in Thai Buddhism on a more thorough basis. This would allow studying a shift of paradigm by the use of case studies. It would help to gain a better understanding of religious conflicts in Thailand and the change of roles of Thai Buddhist women as a result of globalisation and on-going westernization of Thai society. These research outcomes would certainly enable us to not only gain better understanding of Thai society and Buddhism more generally but also complement the research results of this research project.

The following questions will inevitably become more and more relevant in Thai Buddhism and, as a consequence of this, should be addressed and examined by further research:

- Will women’s increasingly de-marginalized roles in Thai Buddhism change doctrinal Buddhism that has for so long been dominated by men?
- If yes, how, in what way and to what extent will this happen?
- What impact will it have on Buddhist practice, religious art and symbolism?

These questions are obviously enormously important for further research projects on Thai Buddhism.

Overall, I want to summarize that in my opinion the research project has been extremely successful and insightful. I was able to make a high number of important observations which have allowed me to draw a number of conclusions that either support, complement or are in contradiction with research done previously in this
field. I plan to make the outcomes of my research projects available to a wider public in due course.
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