

The article presents the animistic beliefs in Thailand, fortune-tellers, astrologers, Thai spirit houses, as well as Buddhist Noble Paths, Practice and rules

Animistic Beliefs in Thailand

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Buddhism is an extremely tolerant religion and in principle it allows the integration of any other religion to a much further extent than other religions do the same. In the case of Thailand, the everyday set of religious beliefs incorporates a fair share of animistic traditions. And while in the Western connotation, any form of animism is considered a mark of a primitive society, Thais in general don't at all hide their animistic beliefs but practice them openly, and not just in remote villages but in between the skyscrapers of modern Bangkok as well. And they even defend animistic beliefs as part of their cultural heritage.

In the Bangkok Post of July 5, 1991, Sanitsuda Ekachai (her features in the Bangkok Post are among the best in Thai journalism) referred to a research project, Tracing Thai Beliefs, conducted by Professor Dr. Suwanna Satha-anand and Asst. Professor Nuengnoi Bunyanetr of the Thai Studies Institute of Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University.

Sanitsuda Ekachai cited Dr. Suwanna pointing out that "the Thai cosmic order... is characterized by such words as chaatphop (lifetimes), phromlikit (fate), choke (luck), duang (astrological power), phee (supernatural powers and spirits), kam (karma, action in previous lifetimes), sawan and narok (heaven and hell)... According to Thai cosmology, what happens to us in the present life - which is within the continuum of lifetimes - is determined not only by our actions in previous lives but also by external powers and supernatural forces which are beyond human being's control."

And Sanitsuda Ekachai quotes Dr. Suwanna verbatim with the assessment that "they [believes in supernatural powers] are not edged out by consumerism. On the contrary, they co-exist very well as you can see around yourself."

Sanitsuda Ekachai looked around herself, and what she found was: "In this ever more over-heated city, there is a Mercedes Benz dealer who looks to the comfort of the resident genius loci by keeping the spirithouse inside the coolly air-conditioned showroom." She also notes that in Thailand, "coup-plotters still consult fortune-tellers for the most opportune time for their actions. The same goes for investors planning big projects, couples contemplating marriage, parents-to-be facing a Caesarian birth, wives hoping to see off mistresses, mistresses hoping to confound wives."

Animistic beliefs are nothing extraordinary in East Asia. The Chinese, for example, easily rival the Thais in their beliefs in spirits, dragons and a vast assortment of gods. Carol Clewlow and Robert Storey wrote in their travel guide on Hong Kong: "Chinese religion is polytheistic, having many divinities. Every Chinese house has its kitchen or house god, and trades have their gods too. Students worship Wan Chung, the defied scholar. Shopkeepers pray to Tsai Shin, god of riches... In Chinese it [geomancy] is called feng shui - literally wind water - the art (or science if you prefer) of manipulating or judging the environment. If you want to build a house or find a suitable site for a grave then you call in a geomancer. Without feng shui an apartment block cannot be built, highways cannot be laid, telephone poles cannot be erected and trees cannot be chopped down... Businesses that are failing may call in a geomancer. Sometimes the solution is to move the door or a window..."

Construction of Hong Kong's underground Mass Transit Railway began with an invocation by a group of Taoist priests who paid respect to the spirits of the earth whose "domain was about to be violated."

How matter-of-factly Hong Kong Chinese businessmen, even those of European origin, take into account the multiple spirits, good and bad, when making business decisions, has been captured by James Clavell in his novel *Noble House*. On pages 80 and 81, Clavell's hero, Tai-Pan Ian Dunross, accompanies an attractive female American business executive, Casey Tcholak, into his company headquarters:

"He guided her in, pressed 20, the top button, noticing absently that she wore no perfume or jewelry, just a thin gold chain around her neck.

'Why's the front door at an angle?' she asked.

'Sorry?'

'The front entrance seems to be on a slight tilt - it's not quite straight - I was wondering why.'

'You're very observant. The answer is *fung sui*. When the building was put up four years ago, somehow or other we forgot to consult our house *fung sui* man. He's like an astrologer, a man who specializes in heaven, earth, water currents, and devils, that sort of thing, and makes sure you're building on the Earth Dragon's back and not on his head.'

'What?'

'Oh yes. You see every building in the whole of China 's on some part of the Earth Dragon. To be on his back's perfect, but if you're on his head it's very bad, and terrible if you're on his eyeball. Anyway, when we did get around to asking, our *fung sui* man said we were on the Dragon's back - thank God, otherwise we'd've had to move - but that devils were getting in the door and this was what was causing all the trouble. He advised me to reposition the door, and so, under his direction we changed the angle and now the devils are all deflected.'

She laughed. 'Now tell me the real reason.'

'*Fung sui*. We had very bad joss here - bad luck - rotten in fact until the door was changed.' His face hardened momentarily then the shadow passed. 'The moment we changed the angle, everything became good again.'

'You're telling me you believe that? Devils and dragons?'

'I believe none of it. But you learn the hard way when you're in China that it's best to act a little Chinese.'"

In Thailand , according to the *Traveller's Guide to Thailand* , published by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, notes on one of the kingdom's festivals, the Ploughing Ceremony: "The Ploughing Ceremony is of Brahman origin and the auspicious day and hour are still set by the Brahman astrologers." And as the Thai newspaper *Nation* reported in a review of the year 1972, it was on an auspicious time given by the royal astrologer when Prince Vajiralongkorn, the eldest son of King Bhumiphol was invested as Crown Prince on December 1, 1972 , exactly at 12:23 .

In Thailand just as in Hong Kong , spirits are matters to be taken into consideration just as the British take into consideration the weather. One always has to be prepared for capers. However, with concern to spirits, Thais as well as the Chinese are more inclined than the British with concern to the weather, to attempt to influence the supernatural powers, today as much as a hundred or two hundred years ago.

Citing ethics professor Dr. Suwanna Satha-anand, Sanitsuda Ekachai pointed out that in Thailand , the use of black magic "has become a tool in our consumerist society to ensure success in business and what not."

Spirit Houses

While fortune-tellers and astrologers offer their services around Wats and on sidewalks throughout the country, the most striking evidence of the importance, the belief in spirits plays in Thai everyday life are spirit houses. In every compound throughout Bangkok and the whole of Thailand - outside or in Thai homes, hotels, hospitals or office buildings - there is a miniature gaily-painted house, placed at a level with or slightly higher than the eyes of a standing person of average height, the abode of Phra Phum, the Lord of the Land or the Lord of the Place.

When a new home is to be built, the first thing to do is to find a suitable place in the garden for the spirit house. Selection of the location and placing of the little house can only properly be done by someone well versed in the lore - usually a Brahmin priest. It must face either north or south - preferably north; it must not be in a spot where the owner's house overshadows it, else the spirit will not come to live in it. A post is set up at the chosen site and the little house is perched atop the post.

The small house contains a single room with an outer terrace (slightly lower than the room) where daily offerings to the guardian spirit are placed. A symbolic picture of the spirit is carved on a small piece of wood which is placed inside the little house with its back toward the far wall. The picture is in a standing position with a leaf-like halo around the head. In the right hand is usually a double-edged sword and sometimes in the left hand, a book. It is believed that deaths of the people under the spirit's protection are registered in the book.

There is, incidentally, a similarity between the Thai spirit house guardian and the Chinese guardian spirit of the village. The Chinese shrine also has a wooden carved picture of the spirit, usually with a fly whisk in his one hand and a book in the other.

At the time of installation of the spirit house, food, fruit, candles, incense and flowers are placed on a table before the shrine while the spirit is invited to come and make his home in the shrine and protect the property and the residents of the new home.

Each evening, fresh flowers, incense sticks and candles are placed on the small gallery of the little house. Extra special food offerings are made on important days such as the anniversary of the installation of Phra Phum in his house, on New Year's Day and other special occasions. It is a rule that such food will be offered only in the morning and not later than 11:00 .

When a stranger arrives as a guest in the house, he or she should, according to Thai customs, first ask the spirit for permission to stay for the night and for protection before going to sleep. This is because Thais believe that if they do not follow this tradition, their sleep will be disturbed with awful nightmares, while the evil spirit or "Phee" would sit on his/her chest and cause him/her to have great difficulty breathing. Moreover before the guest's departure the next morning, he or she should pay a farewell visit to the spirit house, and request a safe journey. The same respect and courtesy is shown the spirit by the guest as given to his host.

If any of the family members have a premonition of misfortune, want to overcome some difficulty or have a great need for something which seems impossible to obtain, they will light a candle and incense and, in a sincere, respectful manner, ask the spirit for his help. At the same time, the family member will promise a reward for the spirit in return, such as a duck, chicken or a huge coconut; sometimes the reward may be a number of servants, elephants or horses. If the prayer is granted and the reward not given, it is believed that nightmares will haunt the guilty one or unpleasant things will happen to him. Hence, the miniature servants or animals which are made of clay or paper, usually appear in the little house, to symbolize living servants and animals.

The home owner who starts out with a small home and a small spirit house, when and if he is blessed with good fortune and able to afford it, will improve or enlarge the spirit house before his own.

While spirit houses of Thai homes typically are just about the size of bird houses, they can be of substantial size in front of office buildings or hotels. A number of particularly large spirit houses can be seen in Bangkok at and near to the intersection of Rajadamri Road and Ploenchit Road. Located there is the most famous spirit house, or rather spirit shrine of Bangkok, Erawan Shrine.

The shrine was built in 1956 when the original Erawan Hotel nearby was under construction. However, misfortune accompanied the work at the hotel; a number of accidents happened, and when word got round the workers that spirits were against the project, an astrologer and spirit doctor was called. He concluded that, indeed, the spirits of the place have been offended as some trees in which they used to live were chopped down.

After this 'cause' of the accidents had been singled out, the shrine was built rather hastily. It has to be noted that the shrine has nothing to do with Buddhism. The statue housed there is of Brahma, one of the gods of the Hindu Trinity. Nevertheless, most of the worshippers at the shrine are nominally Buddhist.

Since 1956, Erawan Shrine has become something like a Thai Lourdes Grotto where people go to have wishes miraculously fulfilled.

Other very large spirit shrines are nearby at the World Trade Center and at the Amarin Plaza. However, both are by far not as popular as Erawan Shrine.

Along New Petchburi Road in Bangkok are several factories for spirit shrines of all sizes, and Chatuckak Weekend Market also has a section for spirit houses.

4) The Noble Truth of The Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering: It is the Noble Eightfold Path (or the Middle Path because it avoids the two extremes of sensual pleasure and self-mortification), that leads to the Cessation of Sufferings.

To weed out cravings and ignorance, these two chief evil-doers of individual existence and to overcome rebirth, old age, disease, death, sorrows, lamentation, pain, grief and despair, to make an end of this whole mass of misery and thus to attain Nibbana, Liberation and Salvation one should practice the Noble Eightfold Path (or the Middle Path)

The Noble Eightfold Paths

1) Right Knowledge, which means an intellectual grasp of the Teaching of the Dhamma, the Four Noble Truths and the Law of Karma;

2) Right Intention, which involves the elimination of all ambitions, revenge, hatred, greed lust and violence;

3) Right Speech, which means stamping out all lies, controlling speech, being courteous, considerate, scrupulously true, no evil words escape from lips, compassionate and full of sympathy, with a heart full of loving-kindness and free from secret malice;

4) Right Action, which means the avoidance of destruction of any living being, of taking what has not been given, indulging in sensuality, slander and intoxicating liquor or drugs;

5) Right Livelihood, which means pursuing a trade or occupation compatible with the above;

6) Right Effort, means to prevent new evil entering one's mind, to remove all evil already there, to develop such good in one's mind and to maintain a good and meritorious state of mind that has already arisen;

7) Right Attentiveness, which means the continual recollection of all phenomena about bodily structure, all parts of the human body, all states of health, all impurity and purity of mind, contemplation of various states of

mind and all kinds of temperaments;

8) Right Concentration, which is the threshold of Nibbana, consists of the Four Great Efforts, namely, the effort to avoid and to overcome evil states of mind, and the effort to develop and to maintain good states of mind. It is also a composed state of mind which is accompanied by Right Knowledge, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort and Right Attentiveness. The purpose of attaining Right Concentration is to develop the eye of wisdom.

However, the most simple teaching which the Buddha taught, was to do good, to avoid evil and purify the heart. According to the Buddha, the hearts of ordinary men are not pure. They are filled with greed, ill will and delusion. Greed and hatred are impurities caused by desires which ignorance is the cause of delusion, especially delusion of self. Ignorance, in fact, is the cause of desire itself and thus the primary cause of all suffering and of rebirth. The Lord taught, purifying the heart: 1. by practicing self-control, and self restraint; 2. by meditating upon one's ownself; and 3. by following the Holy Eightfold Path that leads to the cessation of all sufferings.

Some Practice and Rules

The Five Rules Morality (Pancha Sila) for laity, namely, abstention from: 1) Killing any living being, 2) Stealing, 3) Adultery, 4) Lying, and 5) Drinking Intoxicating Drinks.

The Eight Rules of Morality on Buddhist Holy Day, especially for older people, namely, abstention from: 1) Killing any living being, 2) Stealing, 3) Adultery, 4) Lying, 5) Drinking Intoxicating Drinks, 6) Eating after midday, 7) Dancing, Singing, Music, Stage-plays, Garlands, Perfume, Cosmetics, ornament and 8) Using luxurious beds.

In addition to the above, namely, the Eight Rules for Older People, the novices practice Ten Rules for Novices and the monks practice 227 other Rules."