

## THE "PHI" (ผี)

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### *Introduction*

The belief in supernatural beings is innate in man. The Thai people as a race call such supernatural beings by the generic word "phi", which includes both gods and devils. The phi, like man in a general sense, are of two classes, the good Phi and the bad phi. When the Thai came in contact with the highly hinduized Khmer or Cambodians in Central Thailand in the 12th century A.D. and had become a ruling race in that region, they adopted most of the Khmer hinduized cultures, especially the ruling class. Throughout subsequent centuries the Thai and the Khmer mixed racially and culturally to an appreciable degree. By this time the Thai were gradually becoming known as the Siamese and the old Thai word "phi" like its owners had also undergone a change in meaning. In the famous stone inscription of the great Siamese King Ramkamhang dated 1283 A.D. reference was made to the King of Khmer of that time as "phi fa" which literally meant the heavenly phi. Actually "phi fa" meant a divine king, which cult had been adopted by Siamese kings of the later periods. Instead of referring to a divine king as phi fa as hitherto, it has now changed into a "thep" or "thevada" from the Sanskrit "deva" and "devata" which mean a god or, literally, a shining one. It followed that all the good phi of the Thai had by now become thevada or gods in their popular use of the language. The generic word "phi" therefore, degenerated into a restricted meaning of bad phi. It now means a ghost, a devil or an evil spirit. Nevertheless the old meaning of phi in certain cases is not yet dead and still lingers in some expressions in the language. For instance, of any evil deed done in secret, we sometimes say as a warning, "men never see the evil deed done but the phi does." In order not to divulge the source of any formula, especially a

medicinal prescription which is effective, the owner will say that the formula is "phi bok" (ผีบอก), or told by a phi, so as to give it a sacred and mystical effect. The phi here is a good phi or a thevada

The dividing line between gods and devils like men, is a thin one which is a matter of varying degrees. Some gods are bad and some devils are good. There are, in fact, almost as many kinds of good and bad phi as there are of men. It follows therefore, that out of these phi there emerges a class whose position is on a border line between the gods and the devils. They are called "chao phi" which means a lord or prince phi but is sometimes also called thevada. Such supernatural beings, half phi and half thevada, form the subject of my paper.

### *The Chao Phi* (เจ้าผี)

To the imagination of folk people, an uninhabited and desolate place such as a forest or a wilderness is full of unseen beings or phi, mostly malevolent ones. Over these numerous phi there is in each such place a lord or chao phi who rules in his or her particular domain or sphere of influence. There is always a shrine built by the people in a prominent place as a residence for the chao phi where personally the people can make offerings and ask for the chao phi's goodwill and protection. The chao phi is, therefore, a tutelary guardian spirit who is called in Thai "arak" or "theparak". "Arak" is in Sanskrit "araksha", to protect, and "thep" is "deva" or deity, but the people reverently call such chao phi "chao phaw" or "chao mé" which means either the lord father or the lord mother as the case may be. When addressing the chao phaw or chao mé the worshipper will refer to himself as "luk chang" which means an elephant calf. This is interesting. I venture to think that in the old days herds of elephants roamed far and wide. A herd of elephants might at any time come up suddenly and destroy the crops of the people. In such a circumstance the folk were helpless and unable to cope with the situation. To a primitive mind anything extraordinary

or abnormal which inspired awe was accredited to the supernatural. Here the chief elephant of the herd must have been no other than a chao phi in disguise who came to punish the folk for their negligence towards the chao phi who was their unseen father. By calling themselves luk chang or elephant calves and entreating the elephants to leave the place, the chao phi in elephant's disguise would be appeased. This is probably the origin of the term "luk chang".

At the clearing or opening into a forest or at any prominent place there usually stands a shrine to the chao phi who is supposed to look after the forest as his domain. Anyone going into the forest must stop at the shrine to pay respect to the chao phaw or chao mé as the case may be. If someone desires to cut trees for his own domestic use or to kill game, he must pay respect to the chao phi and ask for permission. The usual way to do this is to make one end of a stick into a hook and stick the other end in the ground or hang it at a certain place on a level with the eyes of a person standing. This is an act of respect among the Siamese. The head of a superior must always be in a high position and when he is sitting, it is disrespectful for an inferior to stand above a superior. That is why we have to crawl or sit down when a superior is squatting on the floor. If the superior is sitting on a chair, the inferior must not walk in with his head erect and above that of the former. He has to go in with a bowed head as a sign of respect.

The question arises as to why a hook is made on the stick when asking permission from a chao phi. The word hook in Thai is "khaw" and so also the word to ask permission. It is a play on a word with identity in sound but difference in meaning. When a stick with the hook has been placed, it is usually to be left overnight. If the stick remains intact in the morning, then it is a sign that the chao phi has given his or her consent. Such a convention is not confined only to the supernatural beings, but may be used also for inaccessible humans. If you are tired and thirsty while

travelling in an uninhabited place, and you come suddenly on a plantation where there are many ripe melons to quench your thirst, but are unable to locate the owner of the plantation, then the best thing for you to do is to make a hook and place it somewhere nearby as a sign asking permission to take away a few melons. Then you can take them without incurring the ill-will of the owner or appearing to be a thief.

When there is a sure sign from the chao phi that permission is given, the folk can go into the forest to fell trees or kill game, enough for their own domestic needs only. When they leave the forest with their felled trees or game, they will stop at the shrine again to give their thanks to the chao phi. If they have killed game, they will cut a certain portion of the animals killed, usually the ears and the tips of the nose, as an oblation to the chao phi. It is a paradox that most of the uneatable parts of the animals are usually given to the chao phi as a suitable offering. Such a practice is general among many races of people in their primitive animistic belief.

It is indirectly known by the folk people that in certain seasons, especially the rainy one, the chao phi even if he is asked, will not give his or her consent for anyone to go and cut wood or kill game. If anyone dares to do it, something unwonted may happen to him or he may become sick with fever. This is due to the anger of the chao phi. Such a belief has indirectly a utilitarian and preservative value for the people whose outlook is still primitive. Young trees and animals can grow and thrive unmolested during certain parts of the year. Nowadays some progressive people from towns, going out to fell trees or shoot game with the help of local folk, ignore the practice and tradition. The folk begin to sense impotency in their chao phi and imitate their modern-minded brothers without the knowledge that there is harm in it; hence harm has been done to the forests and game.

The chao phi whose domain is the forest is sometimes called chao pa or lord of the forest. In fact there are chao phi of various

locations, There may be a "chao khao" or lord of the mountain, a "chao thung" or lord of the open land, a "chao tha" or lord of the ferry or landing, a "chao thi" or lord of the place. The people believe that these spirits travel during the day between midday and two o'clock in the afternoon. On a day's march the people will stop travelling for a while during such times, fearing that they will unintentionally tread upon the toe of the unseen, and become suddenly ill through their anger. This is practical. To travel during the heat of the day through open land is unbearable when the sun is hot overhead. You may have sunstroke which means that you have trod on the toe of one chao phi or another.

The chao phi as already mentioned were developed probably from natural objects which inspired awe in the people, hence they are nature spirits. But there is a particular class of chao phi which developed from the spirits of the dead and grew about the memory of outstanding dead persons. They are worshipped with love or fear because of the reputation of their virtues or their vices. No special name is given to such chao phi. To the people there are no differences in kinds of chao phi, for all have similar attributes and habits. But in the Northeast of Thailand, these chao phi have been known as a particular class named "phi mahesak", a corrupted word from the Sanskrit "mahesakha" which means great power. They are much feared by the people, especially the phi mahesak whose reputation when alive as a human being was savage and cruel in the extreme. A slight neglect or omission of worship to these spirits on the part of the people will result in great harm.

#### *The Phi (Evil Spirits)*

The phi here, as already mentioned, means in its restricted sense a ghost, a devil, or an evil spirit. It also means the spirit of the dead and the corpse of a person. There are many kinds of such actively malignant phi, some of them are traditional ones, but others by their peculiar names betray foreign origins. Out of these numerous phi the following names are well known.

*Phi Krasü* (ผีกระสือ). This spirit appears as a hag or an old ugly woman like the European witches. Though living in the midst of the people like an ordinary human being, it avoids all contact with them if possible. Its eyes have a lowering look (ตาขวาง), which is characteristic of phi in human form, not only of phi krasü but also other kinds of phi. The phi krasü has a liking for rawish and fishy things (ของสดคาว) as its food. It devours also human excrements. In the dead of night it will go on a prowl to seek its food. It never goes out with its whole body, but with its head and entrails only. Do not ask how this can be done for the way of the phi is always mysterious and irrational. If one sees in pitch darkness during the dead of night a glimmer of light, it is the phi krasü itself; for while prowling at night with its head and entrails, it emits such a glow of light. By analogy we call a glow-worm in Thai, a "nawn krasü" (หนอนกระสือ) or the krasü worm. A bull's eye lantern is called "khoam krasü" (โคมกระสือ) or the krasü lantern.

During childbirth the phi krasü being attracted by a smell of blood or other offensive smell, will come to enjoy its preferred food. If precaution is not taken to prevent its coming by keeping the place clean and clear from such evil smells and keeping the opening to the lower part of the house blocked with thorns, or the room where the childbirth has taken place, unguarded by a sacred cord (สายสิญจน์) and mystic characters and drawings (ยันต์), the phi krasü will readily get into the room when everybody is fast asleep. It will stealthily enter into the body of the newborn babe and eat the entrails until the baby dies. Unsatisfied with such a small morsel of food, for the phi krasü is very voracious, it will get inside the mother's body and feast gradually on her entrails also. The mother will then become ill. She will grow thinner and thinner and lose her appetite for ordinary food but will be habitually greedy to devour anything which is rawish and fishy. The phi krasü will not come out of the body until the victim wastes away and dies. This characteristic

of the phi krasü gives a few similes to the Thai language. A person who is voracious is said to be "voracious as a phi krasü" (คนกินเหมือนผีกระสือ), or "to eat like a phi krasü (กินเหมือนผีกระสือ). If a person becomes thinner and thinner through illness of a certain disease of the stomach or intestines, he is said to be lean like a person sucked by a phi krasü (ผอมเหมือนผีกระสือ). A cluster of abnormally thin bananas is said to have been sucked by a krasü (กล้วยกระสือ-สด). A root stock of a certain kind of plant called in Thai "plai" (โพล zingiber casumnar) which has a yellow colour is called wan krasü (วันกระสือ) or krasü plant. It owes its name to the fact that some rootstalks of this plant emit a glow of phosphorescent light at night time.

*Failing* to get its rawish and fishy things inside a human body, the phi krasü will confine itself to devouring human excrements. It will wipe its mouth with any cloth which it finds left hanging. Hence people are careful, when drying any cloth in the sun, not to leave it overnight. A practical thing to do. If in the morning any cloth left hanging is found to have ochre coloured stains, it is a sign that the phi krasü has polluted the cloth. The appearance of such stains on the cloth usually occurred during the rainy season. It is due no doubt to mildew. If you want to know who is a phi krasü, boil the cloth. By boiling it, the phi krasü will feel a smart burning pain around its mouth. The longer the cloth is boiled, the more pain it will suffer. It forces the phi to appear in its human form before the person boiling the cloth and to offer to buy the cloth. Then the person can be identified as phi krasü. When any person is known to be a phi krasü, the people, instead of burning the person like a European witch, will avoid all contact for fear the phi krasü will harm them during sleep. If an old woman who is supposed to be a phi krasü bargains for anything which she wants to buy in a shop, and the shop keeper knows that she is a phi krasü, he will accept her price readily. He fears that a refusal will make the old woman angry and she will harbour malice.

There is a popular belief that an old woman who is a phi krasü when dying of old age, will not be able to die easily. She will suffer a long drawn-out illness unless she succeeds in spitting her saliva into the mouth of anyone who is to be her direct descendent. She will then die in peace and her descendent will succeed her as a phi krasü. If the woman has no descendent, or no one consents to receive the legacy, the way out is to transfer some of her saliva to a cat, and the woman will then die in peace. Nothing is said as to whether the cat becomes a phi krasü or not.

The phi krasü is perhaps not an indigenous phi of the Thai. The word krasü appears to me probably not of Thai origin, for it makes no sense. The Mon people here also believe in phi krasü, and I in my younger days knew one old woman of Mon extraction who was supposed to be a phi krasü. She was much feared by the neighbours. Naturally I as a young boy feared she would get into my body and eat up my entrails; every time I saw her from afar, I always got out of her way as fast as my legs could carry me. After a lapse of more than half a century I can still recall the old woman's face. I have asked a Burmese friend about the phi krasü, and after describing its characteristics to him, he replied that the phi krasü is identical with the Burmese nat or phi called "soang". What it means he does not know. Perhaps phi krasü and soang are primitive spirits whose names have now lost their meaning. In Vietnam such a being is called "ma-lai" and it may be compared also with witches believed by in the Indonesians and the Malays.

*Phi Krahang.* (ผีกระหัง) This is said to be a male phi krasü. Judged by its characteristics which are scanty, it must be of a different species altogether. Unlike the phi krasü, little is known of this phi except its name. It is a popular belief that a man who has become an adept in the art of magic will grow wings and be able to fly. He will then turn into a phi krahang and use two long pestles (สากตำข้าว), used for pounding rice, as his legs and a small pestle (สากตำแป้ง), used for pulverizing rice, as his tail, I wonder what



happened to his original legs. Nothing has been said about its ways and habits save that it likes to devour dirty things like a phi krasü. It is said that a person who becomes a phi krahang will not expose or let any one touch his posterior part. He fears that his real nature will be detected for he has a stump of a tail. Whether the phi krahang harms people is a matter of conjecture. I think it does, as all phi are, by nature, hostile to man, but in what manner it does harm to people is not definitely known. Both phi krasü and phi krahang are not generally known outside central Thailand. Allied to them are the "phi phoang" (ผีฟาง) of the people of the North and North-east Thailand.

*Phi Phoang* (ผีฟาง). The phi phoang is in some respects similar to the phi krasü. It likes rawish and fishy food, and it also emits glimmering same lights while prowling in the night. The word phoang is, I think the same as **Phloang** in Thai which means bright or glow. Hence a phi phoang is by its very name a kind of glowing phi. In other respects the phi phoang is unlike the phi krasü. Nothing is hinted of its sex, nor does it go out at night with only its head and entrails. The above description of the phi phoang is what has been gathered from the people in Chiangmai, but the phi phoang of the Northeast, though agreeing in certain particulars with the phi krasü, has a variant peculiarity. It is said that a person who has with him a "wan" plant of a powerful kind will become a phi phoang. Wan is an undefined class of herbs and plants, usually with rootstalks. They are used as medicine or as food and some of them are poisonous. According to popular belief, certain kinds of "wan" have magical properties. If such "wan" is taken by or kept with a person, he will be invulnerable or invisible or whatever peculiar quality it may confer. When a person has become a phi phoang through the effect of the potent "wan" he becomes a contagious being. If he spits on anyone, that person will become a phi phoang too. If he dislikes someone he will throw a "mai khan" (ไม้คาน), a stick for carrying loads on the shoulder, belonging to a widow over the roof of the person's house, and that person will be ruined in various ways. The Thai as well as the Chinese and

other races in the Indo-Chinese Peninsula carry their loads on their shoulders with "mai khan" unlike the Indian and other races in the west.

Why a widow's "mai khan" is used, it is hard to understand. When a child is always ill, if an anklet-like bracelet (กำไลคั้น) made from silver belonging to a widow (เงินหมั้น) is presented and worn by the child, he will become well. This is also hard to understand. A cover of a pot for boiling rice is called "fa lami" (ฝาละมี). If the pot is broken, its cover is called a "widow's fa lami", for it has lost its pot. In grinding or mixing household medicine, only such a cover is used in the operation. Here its reason can be surmised. If an ordinary "fa lami" is utilized, it cannot be further used to cover the pot for the odor of medicine would leave its trace on the cover and spoil the rice.

The phi phoang likes to go on the prowl during nights when there has been a continuous drizzling rain. It likes to devour dirty things similar to the phi krasü. It emits a glimmer of light wherever it goes, but others say that it shoots long rays of light out of its nostrils. It usually lurks in human form underneath the floor of the house where there is an opening, during a woman's confinement for childbirth. Here its character is the same as the phi krasü. If someone sees and recognizes it to be in the shape of such and such a person, he casts a spear at it. If the spear sticks fast to its back it will flee away. In the morning when he goes to this person's house, he will be surprised to find the person unharmed; but will see the spear stuck fast to a rootstalk of a certain "wan" plant which grows nearby. The reason is now clear. The rootstalk of that "wan" plant by its powerful inherent properties becomes a phi phoang, taking the human shape of its owner. The phi phoang, though in some respects similar to the phi krasü, never harms people. This is an apparent contradiction of what has been said above. But it is usually thus when one deals with the mysterious and the unseen. Each person will have his own beliefs and a story to tell which always varies in its details.

In old Thai Laws (กฎหมายลักษณเมตตเสว) reference was made to four kinds of phi, namely: "chamop" (จามป), "chakla" (จกนถ) "krasü" and "krahang". Nothing is said of the nature of these phi for they were well-known in those days. The law only referred to procedures in dealing with these phi. It said that if in any province a person was found to be any of these phi, he must not be killed but reported and sent to the capital. A person was guilty of perjury who claimed that anyone was one of the above four phi or who insulted an individual by accusing him of being a phi falsely. If his claim was found to be untrue he was punished. If anyone was ill as a result of a krasü "eating him" or was obsessed by a phi krasü, a phi doctor was called to find out the person who was the phi krasü. He did this by boiling the cloth in a steamer. Anyone who tried to take it out of the steamer or put out the fire was guilty of being a phi krasü. Now of the four kinds of phi as mentioned in the Old Laws, the phi krasü and the phi krahang have already been described. The other two, chamop and phi chakla are unknown to the present generation. Any knowledge of them must have disappeared long ago. There is a Cambodian phi called "thamop" and a phi in Chiangmai region called "phi ka" (ผีกะ) which can perhaps supply clues to these two obsolete Thai phi.

*Phi khamot* (ผีขามต). This phi is probably called "thamop" in Cambodian. The phi khamot is a will-o-the-wisp which is a phi appearing at night in marshy places. It does no direct harm to people but lures them by its luminous lights from place to place until they lose their way. The Cambodian word for phi is khamot. The Thai have taken this word to mean in particular the will-o-the-wisp phi, while the Cambodians name any phi that emits a light "thamop". Compare the word "thamop" with "chamop" in old Thai Laws: plainly they are phonetically the same. But the Thai phi chamop must be of a different nature from the will-o-the-wisp phi which is harmless; for phi chamop as inferred from the old Thai Laws was a malignant spirit.

*Phi ka* (ผี๔). The Chiangmai people say that the phi ka is a phi in human form. A person who is a phi ka has a queer habit different from that of ordinary people and his eyes are always restless with furtive glances. This phi is voracious like the phi krasü, hence its name phi ka. I am told that the word "ka" and "chakla" (๔๓๓) which means voracious or greedy are one and the same word. The former is a shortened form of the latter. A phi ka will get into any person, no doubt to eat the entrails like the phi krasü. The obsessed person will suffer acute pains. In such a case a sorcerer or medicine man called in Thai, "maw phi" (หมอผี) or phi doctor is called in for help. In the Northeast a "maw phi" is called "maw devada" or devada doctor, no doubt to avoid ambiguity of meaning in the word "phi" which means either a god or an evil spirit. A maw phi is also a man who keeps phi for his evil purposes.

The doctor will drive out the phi ka by beating hard on the patient with his magic rod, or he may use a magic knife called "nit maw" (มีดหมอ) or doctor's knife. Or he may use a magic elephant's tooth, pricking in various places on the person's body. Every time he beats on the patient with his magic rod or pricks with his knife or other instrument, the person will cry in the name of the phi ka for quarter. He will say, for instance, "Ouch! Ouch! I fear you and will go out now. Don't whip me further." And in answer to the doctor's question, the phi ka will reply that he is a person named so and so and lives in such and such a village. If the phi ka leaves the body, the obsessed person will regain his normal state and suffer no physical pains from the whipping or pricking by the doctor. Now the person who is the guilty phi ka, if traced be made to his house, will be found to suffer from such whipping or pricking as was administered by the doctor to the obsessed person. As to what punishment is due to the man who is found to be a phi ka, my informant knows nothing as this story comes from a tradition which does not explain the punishment. But the "phi pop" of the Northeast can supply a clue; for the phi pop and the phi ka are clearly the same kind of phi with different names only.

*Phi pop* (ผีปอบ). In character and habit the phi pop is similar to the phi ka. When a person is obsessed by a phi pop, he is dealt with in the same manner. If a person in a village is known to be a phi pop, the villagers will go in a body to drive him away from his house and village. He is not driven alone but also his family too. The person who is supposed to be a phi pop and his family will suffer hardship for he can no longer live among the people. Sometimes many exiled families who are supposed to be phi pop will form a village and live exclusively by themselves. If any of them happens to emigrate to a distant village and if he is found to be a phi pop and obsesses anyone he will be driven out. There are three kinds of people much feared by phi pop, namely a "maw devada", a person who can use powerful incantations with effective results and a monk versed in such lore. If one of these is not present, the phi pop will be obstinate about coming out of the person whom it obsesses. How do the villagers know that anyone is a phi pop? The obsessed person when ill will say something like this: "I get inside this man as a revenge for a wrong he has done me. My name is so and so, my wife and child or children are so and so, and I live in such and such a village" When it is found out that he is a phi pop, the villagers will go to the headman of the village asking him to drive away the person who is supposed to be a phi pop. After he is gone monks are invited to chant certain chapters from the Buddhist scriptures in the middle of the village as a precaution to prevent his coming back. Persons who are phi pop will not harm their own kind nor will they do harm to dignitaries or people from towns for fear that their power as a phi pop will become impotent. These practices in the past often led to difficulty in administration because the people would not permit any tampering with their age-old beliefs.

The phi pop, though peculiar to the Northeast area is unlike the phi ka, for the phi pop is also generally known in Bangkok, especially by the older generation. According to popular belief there are three kinds of phi that obsess people, that is, phi pop, phi tai

hong (ผีตายโหง) and phi tai thang klom (ผีตายทั้งกลม). A person who dies a violent death will become a phi tai hong, and a woman who dies with her child during childbirth will become a phi tai thang klom. These three phi are much feared by the people. Customarily the corpse of any person who dies either a violent death or in childbirth is not cremated like an ordinary corpse but has to be buried only. An uncremated corpse is called a "phi dip" (ผีดิบ) or raw phi. A person practicing magic as a phi doctor will keep such phi for his evil errand. The phi may obsess anyone by its own malice or be sent by the phi doctor. A man wishing to injure his enemy may engage a phi doctor for a certain fee to send one of his phi to obsess the enemy. Women are easily attacked by phi while it is rare for a man to be. The victim will start crying bitterly for no apparent cause and may continue crying throughout the night or day. Symptoms of raving madness follow. With glaring eyes and restlessness the obsessed person will abuse everybody, and sometimes say that she is a phi taking revenge on some wrong done or has been sent by a phi doctor named so-and-so. If anyone goes near or coaxes her she will kick and claw him violently and will not allow anyone to touch her. She develops more than human strength. In fact, every gesture and sign she makes is abnormal, leaving no doubt in the people's mind that she is obsessed by a phi.

In such a case a phi doctor is called for. When he appears before her, she becomes calm and sometimes shows signs of awe. The phi doctor will ask her what phi she is and why the phi came there. If the phi is sent by someone, the name of the sender is asked. If when asked the phi does not answer, a magic rod or other magical instrument is administered severely until the obsessed woman yields and gives the required answers. Then the final question of the phi doctor will be, "Will you come out?" The phi's answer will always be in the negative and it will try to hide itself within the body. The phi doctor by his supposed magical knowledge will know in what part of the obsessed woman's body the phi is hiding. He will apply either his magical rod or knife to that

part of the body. Every time the rod or knife touches that part the phi will shift its hiding place. The magic instrument follows it unerringly. The phi flees further down until it reaches one of the "pratoo lom" (ປຣາຕູລອມ) of either foot. A "pratoo lom" means literally a "wind-door" and is the space between the base of adjacent fingers or toes which is believed to be where the vital wind escapes. The phi while dodging the magical rod or knife reaches this part and tries to escape out of the body temporarily. To prevent its coming back the phi doctor will gather the toe and fingers and by twisting them catch hold of the escaping phi, imaginary of course, and put it in a new unused earthen pot provided for the purpose. He seals the mouth of the pot with a piece of cloth with mystical characters or drawings. He may bury the pot or submerge it like the genie in the *Arabian Nights*. If on the contrary he keeps the phi as his own or as a counter-agent, he may send it to obsess its former owner in retaliation.

*Phi tai thang kham.* This phi has its peculiarity in connection with a potion or charm to excite love. When a woman after dying from childbirth is buried and no preventive measures are taken, those who deal in magic will go to a cemetery in the dead of night, preferably on the third day after the woman's death, to dig up the woman's corpse. Before doing so, a sacred thread is wound about the place and incantations made. This is to prevent the spirit of the dead woman from escaping. When this eerie business is in progress with lighted candles and incantations, there will appear suddenly from the corpse, a weird light shooting up and then down. This is the spirit of the woman trying to escape, but it cannot get away owing to the mystical barrier of the sacred thread. The light is caught by a phi doctor and confined in an earthen pot provided. He seals it with a piece of cloth with mystical characters. The corpse is then made to sit up and a lighted candle is applied to its chin. A small vessel is held underneath to receive the oil from the chin of the corpse trickling down by the heat of the applied candle. It is a matter of popular belief carried by hearsay

that the muscles of the arms of the corpse will contract through the candle's heat and try to embrace the operators. This is a sure sign that the desired result has been produced. This ghoulish oil is stored in the same earthen pot in which the imaginary spirit is kept. If a small portion of this oil is secretly smeared on a girl, the potent oil will have a wonderful effect. It will excite madly her love for the man who has smeared it on her. In fact this ghoulish oil is a well-known love philtre. Its efficacy is never doubted by credulous folk.

*Phi prai* (ผีปราอิ). The spirit of a woman who dies during childbirth is called a phi prai. Her child if also dead becomes a phi prai also. She is a terrible phi much feared by the folk for she harms everybody. Precaution is taken through magic to prevent her coming to harm people. If a newborn babe dies, its corpse is placed in an earthen pot, whose mouth is sealed by mystical characters to prevent its setting out and becoming a phi prai. The pot is then buried or submerged in the river. This is the safest way to deal with a fierce phi, if it is caught to prevent it from coming back. If its mother is still alive and no such precaution is taken, it will come back to take her away. A phi doctor or magician likes to keep such phi, both the spirits of the mother and her child, in his service. How the phi doctor gets hold of the phi prai is fully described in one of the famous works of Thai literature known as the "Khun Chang Khun Phaen", a popular romance of the old days. A phi prai may be used to guard a house from molestations by other phi or men who come into the house with evil designs. The phi prai may assume the form of a woman being. If the intruder is a young man and good looking, the phi prai sometimes falls in love with him, by turning itself into a young girl and flirting. Woe to the young man if he succumbs to the embrace of the phi. The above description is taken from the said romance which gives a romantic idea of the good old days. The oil extracted from the chin of a woman who dies of childbirth as



already mentioned, is called, "prai oil" (**nam man prai**). A banana tree that dies during the budding period is called "tai prai" (ตายนาง), that is one that "died as a prai".

The various kinds of phi already described are all phi either in human form or that originate from the spirit of dead persons with the exception of the phi khamot or will-o-the-wisp phi. They arise from the fantasy and imagination of the people in the past. These beliefs have survived in many instances in customs, language, and literature and, no doubt, the belief still lingers among the more conservative class of people.

*Phi Pret* (ผีเปรต). There is still another kind of phi of the above category which is very well known to all. Its name is phi pret. The word is of Sanskrit origin from "preta" which means a departed spirit or a hungry ghost. According to the belief of the Hindu, a person after death becomes a hungry ghost. If no oblation in the form of a ball of rice and water is offered daily for its nourishment during the first ten days after the person's death, the spirit of the dead man will suffer a great hunger and becomes a wandering and restless phi. The preta has been elaborated in Buddhism into twelve classes of its kind; but in the popular belief of the Thai there is only one kind of preta or pret. The Thai pret is a very tall and very lean phi in human form. "As tall as a pret," "as lean as a pret", and "a neck as long as a pret" are common similes in Thai used in describing tall, thin individuals. With dishevelled hair, long neck, sunken cheeks, deepset eyes, and a very small mouth, the phi pret is ugly in the extreme. It feeds on pus and blood and even that does not satisfy its hunger for its mouth is no bigger than the eye of a needle. It emits a shrill cry like the long drawn-out sound given by an air raid siren, and its arrival is heralded by such a noise. It likes to put out its very long tongue and protrude its eyes. This is

characteristic of most kinds of phi who want to frighten any man in their human form. The phi pret usually inhabits a cemetery or a desolate place, and occasionally appears at night to frighten people.

A person who during his or her life-time has done a great sin will become a phi pret when he dies. Many stories relating to phi pret are current among the people and reinforced by an episode in the above-mentioned romance "Khun Chang Khun Phaen" which is a very well-known story. The heroine Wan Thong died and became a phi pret. She transformed herself into a beautiful girl to inform her son, who commanded an army on a war expedition, of his impending danger.

The phi pret is always in a hungry state. It will be relieved of its hunger only if someone will make merit by offering food to the monks and ritually transfer the merit to the benefit of the pret. When a man asks for something as a pittance, such as a starving man begging for food, it is said he is "asking for a share of merit like the phi pret". If people scramble for something we say they are "grabbing like a phi pret". When accosting someone in a familiar way but vulgarly, or addressing a man as a joke in an insulting manner, he is addressed as "phi pret" but with the word "ai" (อัย) as a prefix. "Ai" in the original Thai means the eldest son, but its meaning has degenerated in Thai to use as a prefix to masculine names when addressing intimately an inferior or addressing a person contemptuously.

In the South down the Malay Peninsula there is an annual feast for phi pret peculiar to that area. The feast is called "ching pret" (ชิงเปรต). It perhaps means literally "contesting of pret". This feast occurs in late September when people in a body present food, fruit, and sweetmeats to monks and leave behind certain quantities of these edibles somewhere for the benefit of poor people who will scramble for them like phi pret. This has an indirect relation to the Autumnal Feast and the Feast of the Dead as observed in India and China.

We now come to a different class of phi which are not in human form and whose forms are difficult to determine. One of the best known of this group is the phi ha.

*Phi ha* (ผีหา). This is the phi of epidemic disease, particularly cholera. They come periodically in a host from nowhere. When widespread death occurs to people without any apparent cause, they take the phi ha to be the author. Precaution is taken in many ways: by making merit to appease them or by floating them away ritually. In my young days people in the district where I lived used to hang an empty sugar pot made of baked clay in front of the house or at the head of the stairway. A rough sketch was drawn on the outside of the pot at its base with lime water showing two small circles placed near each other like eyes, a vertical line under these as the nose and below it a horizontal line as a mouth. At that time I did not know what it meant but had a vague idea that it had to do with keeping the phi ha from getting into a house to kill its inmates. Later on, after a lapse of more than four decades, I was told that the drawing on the sugar pot was called "Tra Khun Phon" (ตราขุนphon) or the seal of Khun Phon. Khun Phon means a generalissimo. He was, as I gathered afterwards, a generalissimo of the host of evil spirits. To hang such a seal at the entrance of the house meant that it was under his protection. The phi ha when seeing the seal would be frightened and never dare to molest the people in the house. Old people used to tell children that the phi ha came by boats, and in the dead of night their shouts of "Yeow, Yeow" urging the paddlers to row in unison might be heard faintly from afar. The best thing for the children to do was to get into bed at once. In imagination, I as one of the children, seemed to hear that foreboding sound. Acquaintance with epidemic disease must have been a well-known thing in the past among the Thai tribes, for the word "ha" is a common word among them but with a variation in its pitch. Like the word "pret" mentioned already, "ha" is a word used vulgarly in every-day speech especially by young men. They address one another very intimately as

"ai ha" or "ai ha kin" (อายहाँกิน), and include it in their speech now and then as a familiar and hearty expression. "May the ha eat" (ให้हाँกิน) you or me, is a word used thoughtlessly in vulgar everyday speech like the English word "damn", without the knowledge that the word "ha" had a dangerous meaning in its primitive days.

*Phi pa* (ผีป่า). *Phi pa* means phi of the forest or jungle. There are many kinds of them and they confine themselves to the forest and rarely come to a village or town. If they come it means there is something wrong in the village or town. They come, usually in the form of epidemic disease. Butterflies which come to a village or town in unusual swarms are much dreaded by the people. They believe that butterflies are harbingers of epidemic disease; for swarms of butterflies come from the jungle which is the seat of such disease, especially malaria, called in its popular form "khai pa" (ไขป่า) or jungle fever. In Thai a butterfly is called *phi sua* (ผีเสื้อ) which means a phi with a lineage or a phi with a germ. The word forms many names of evil spirits. A giantess or ogress is called "phi sua yak" or a "yaksha phi sua"; if it has its habitat in a lake or pond, it is called a "phi sua nam" or a water phi sua. A giant moth is also called a phi sua yak.

The people in towns have had, of course, less experience with phi pa. Out of the many kinds of phi pa, two are perhaps well known through literature. They are the "phi kong koi" (ผีกองค้อ) and "phi poang khang" (ผีโป่งค่าง). I knew these two phi only in name until I happened to meet a friend of mine who had knowledge of forest lore. He sent me an account of his experiences with these two kinds of jungle phi, which descriptions, with his consent, appeared in the journal of the Fine Arts Department. The following is a brief summary.

*Phi kong koi* It is said that the phi kong koi has only one leg and hops along on one foot wherever it goes. It lives in a forest and goes out only at night. People know only by its sounds when it comes, but no one has ever seen its real being. Its cry

sounds something like "kong koi,! kong koi!" from which comes its name. When it approaches a sound of "chu, chu" (ჭუჭუ) is heard from afar and then it comes nearer and nearer. People spending a night in the jungle recognize the sound, and know that if frightened by loud shouting it will go away. When departing it gives a sound like the shaking of leaves on a tree blown by a gust of strong wind. The people believe that this phi comes out at night to suck blood from the toe of a wayfarer during his sleep in the jungle. After the sucking the person will become weak and die. Perhaps the phi kong koi is a sort of vampire bat.

*Phi poang khang.* Poang is an area where the earth is salty; in other words a salt-lick found in a forest. Khang is a langur or longtailed monkey. Phi poang khang is therefore a phi in the shape of the animal dwelling near a salt-lick. It is said that this phi, unlike the khang monkey, has a short tail. Its upper lip is bulging, revealing its upper teeth. At night it comes down from a big tree in which it lives near a salt-lick to suck blood from a sleeping person in the same manner as the phi kong koi. When camping in a forest near a salt-lick, one has to be on guard against this phi.

No doubt the phi poang khang is a kind of monkey, nocturnal in habit like the lemur which originally meant a ghost. There is a belief concerning the khang monkey that when it comes down the tree at night, it gropes about and feels the ground in order to be sure that it is still there, rather than sliding down quickly. It is said that tigers will wait nearby at night to pounce on the khang monkeys while coming down the trees. Whether this is a fact, no one has verified.

The phi, as already mentioned, are numerous. Each area of the country has varieties of them. Some have queer names which are often untranslatable. Of these phi, there is one in the South which to me is particularly interesting. It is the "phi lang kluang".

*Phi lang kluang* (ผีหลังกลาง). Translated, "phi lang kluang" means a hollow-backed phi in human form. One can see through the opening all the entrails inside, and they are full of worms. When people sit around a fire in the open air to warm themselves at night or go out fishing at night, a stranger from nowhere will come up and join the party. It is the phi lang kluang. He harms no one; and if he wants to make a joke, he will ask a boy in the party to scratch his back. Then the stranger is revealed to be the phi lang kluang for there is a hollow in his back full of millepedes. The phi lang kluang live in a community by themselves in a forest. Perhaps they are not phi but aborigines whose characteristic hollow back has been exaggerated. A Chinese book, "Shan Hai Ching" contains a report of many strange peoples residing beyond the borders of the Middle Kingdom. "Among these, few were stranger than those who were said to be provided with a hole through their chests, so that all that was required to transport a person of rank from one place to another was a long bamboo which was passed through the hole and on which he was carried along by bearers in the manner of a sedan-chair."\* Is there any connection between these strange people and the phi lang kluang?

*The phi ruan* (ผีเรือน). The phi ruan is a spirit of the house. In other words, it is synonymous with the ancestral spirit which in Central Thailand is called "phi pu ya ta yai" (ผีปู่ย่าตายาย). This is a particularized word composed of "pu ya", meaning paternal grandfather and grandmother respectively, and "ta yai" meaning the maternal grandparents. It is very interesting to note that in the North this "phi pu ya ta yai" is called "phi pu ya", indicating that only the paternal grandparents are recognized as ancestral spirits. In the Northeast the ancestral spirit is called "phi pu ta". Taking the word as it is "pu ta" means grandfathers only, both paternal and maternal, leaving out the grandmothers, unless "pu ta" can be construed as meaning paternal grandfather only. In the South

\*E.D. Edwards, *The Dragon-Book*, Hodge and Co. Ltd., London, 1946. pp. 141.

the ancestral spirit is called "phi ta yai" which means the phi of maternal grandparents only. Why such differences? Have they something to do with patriarchy and matriachy? I think they do. But there is a complication for the word "ta yai" which means maternal grandfather and grandmother in the Thai language is coincidentally identical in sound with the word "ta yai" in the Cambodian which means grandfather and grandmother, both paternal and maternal. However, the question of kinship will have to remain unsolved until more data is obtained.

The phi ruan is supposed to have its residence in the house. It is a paradox that phi and man should live together. When a person is dead he lives physically no more with the living, but love, fear and other sentiments will make him live still in the house as a reality though invisibly. He is now a phi ruan and is supposed to look after the welfare of the family as hitherto. Perhaps a place in the house is assigned to him by the family, where he is worshipped daily with flowers and perhaps with food when the sentiment is still strong. This place becomes sacred and tabooed; and no person unless he is a member of the family is allowed to enter the place without consent and permission. The family when doing any important things on special occasions, do not fail to worship the phi ruan to ask his permission and blessing for a successful outcome, or to inform him of any significant problem of the family. On New Year's Day and perhaps 'on Mid Year Day also, the phi ruan will not fail to receive his due share of a feast. In short, he is treated in the same manner as he was when alive as the head of the family.

The above description is only an inference from certain practices which have survived in custom and literature and also from the cult of ancestor-worship as observed, though feebly, in certain regions, especially in the North and Northeast. In the North, I am told, there is a shelf perched high above the head in the sleeping room. The shelf is laid with a red cloth. Every morning or evening fresh flowers are laid on the shelf as offerings

by the household to the phi ruan which is supposed to be there. On New Year's Day and on special occasions the phi ruan is feasted. When a young man of the family is marrying he will take a number of dried flowers lying on the shelf with him to be placed later on the spirit shelf of his bride's family, as a sign of now being co-joined by kinship. The taking away of a certain portion of dried flowers from one family to another is called "baeng phi" (แบ่งผี), that is to share out a phi. Note that the phi here is meant as a good spirit. Why do we not change the word phi which later degenerates into the meaning of bad phi, into a devada? I venture to think that the ancestral spirits of kings are called devada, and implicitly the word devada has become tabooed. The ancestral spirits of commoners cannot reverently aspire to that name.

In Bangkok a rite for the propitiation of ancestral spirits is to be seen occasionally as part of a wedding ceremony among orthodox people. Such a rite is called "wai phi" (ไหว้ผี) or worshipping the phi. In the Northeast any contravention of tradition and custom is called "phit phi" (ผิดผี) that is, wrong done to the phi. "Phit phi" has served as a code of law to the people whose outlook is still primitive, by regulating their general conduct.

On New Year's Day, apart from other observances a "bang sukun" (บังสุกุล), a kind of memorial service to the dead is performed by the family before the bones of the departed ones. I have elsewhere described the above ceremony of "bang sukun". This is undoubtedly a development of the feast of the dead fathers on New Year's Day as practiced in the past. The change is due to the adoption of Buddhism by the people. It is the practice of some of the people to keep a certain portion of the charred bones of their dead in the house after their bodies have been burnt. The bones are kept in a gold or silver urn and sometimes a jewelled one, according to the wealth of the owner. This is placed in a low position near an altar of a Buddha image in



the house. Every time there is a "tham bun" (ต้มบุญ) or merit-making in connection with the dead, the people do not fail to have a memorial service or "bang sukun" performed on the occasion.

You will wonder perhaps as to the disposal of the remains of the calcinated bones and ashes of the dead which have not been taken from the funeral pyre. There is a custom among the poor of gathering and placing these in a receptacle, usually a small earthen pot, and burying it at the root of a "ton pho" (ต้นไม้โพธิ์) or sacred fig tree in a monastery, or they are wrapped in a bundle with white cloth and placed near the pedestal of a Buddha image or under a pulpit and whatever things are deemed sacred in a monastery. There is an old law, dated 1805 A.D., prohibiting the practice of placing bones and ashes in such places as did not befit the decency of the monastery; but the people in outlying districts are still doing it. The well-to-do build a "pra chedi" (พระเจดีย์) or stupa and have the bones and ashes placed in it. A pra chedi was originally a funeral mound from which it has evolved. If possible, the bones are placed in a vault within a large pra chedi of the monastery or inserted in its niche or under the altar and sealed. The people are desirous of having the bones of their dead kept in such places because they want to have their dear ones, though dead, near the Buddha and his religion; in the same spirit, I think, as a cross is placed at the burial ground in a Christian cemetery.

The practice of keeping a portion of the bones of the departed in the house is a new thing and contrary to former practice. In fact, it is not more than 170 years old. (See my *Siamese Customs in Connection with the Dead*) Again, a Buddha image was, a hundred years or more ago, a sacred thing not to be installed within a human habitation. The proper place for Buddha images was in the temple of a monastery. Later on, devout people in towns and cities, desiring to worship the Lord Buddha as a daily devotion,

found it inconvenient to go every day to the temple which, unlike that of the village was not located nearby. They therefore built an out-house for installation of a Buddha image where they could worship Him as many times as they wished. King Nang Klao, the predecessor of King Mongkut, who was a very devout Buddhist, raised the question with the prelates of the realm as to whether it was proper for a devout Buddhist to have the image of Buddha installed in the house for purposes of worship. The prelates' answer was in the affirmative. Hence the practice has developed of having a Buddha image installed within the house itself, although inconsistent with the old belief that sacred or supernatural beings, including the phi of course, should not be under the same roof with human beings. Here I may add that even masks representing gods and giants in theatrical performances are superstitiously deemed improper to be kept in a house with the living, for they will afflict the inmates with "something hot to the heart and mind", i.e. troubles. Foreigners and some progressive Thai who have Buddha images in their houses as decorations or curiosities are frowned upon by the people as offending their feelings.

The phi ruan or spirit of the house is gradually dying out' especially with the city and town people. No vestige of phi ruan is now to be found in their houses except, perhaps, a vague idea that the phi ruan is somewhere in the house. If they want to ask their ancestral spirit to give help in their difficulties, they light one or two joss sticks and place them somewhere in a convenient place where they worship while asking for help. To the younger generation the phi ruan is a nonentity except in name. The change is due first to Buddhism and second to the encroachment of a newer culture. Nevertheless the old belief of animism is still there disguising and adapting itself to meet its present need with the progress of time.

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