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## The Wai Khruu - ไหว้ครู : A ceremony to honor teachers

By Assunta Hunter

The front of the lecture hall in the grounds of a hospital in Chiang Mai is adorned by a long table laden with offerings of all kinds. An otherwise utilitarian space large enough to hold some 200 people has been transformed by the table bearing offerings on the raised dais at the front of the hall. There are garlands of gardenia, Indian marigolds strewn loosely and in piles, and lotus flowers are poking out of small brass urns; the perfume is overwhelming. Pyramids of limes, bananas and hot-pink dragon fruit are piled on the offering plates. There are coconut and sago desserts, pumpkin and coconut balls, and rice flour cakes all beautifully presented on plates in patterns and decorated with carved flowers. Incense sprouts from every possible flower arrangement and yellow temple candles stand among the many brightly colored floral arrangements and sweet-meats. There are fresh herbs such as ginger (khing ขิง *Zingiber officinalis*), cassumar ginger (phlaih ไพล *Zingiber cassumar*) and decorative glass jars of dried and powdered herbs, including cinnamon (opchoei อบเชย *Cinnamomum zeylandicum*). On a raised altar, there is an image of the Buddha (head and shoulders above all others as is usual: this is a way of expressing his pre-eminent status), the hermit (*ruesi* ฤๅษี the ascetic figure closely associated with healing and wisdom) and *Jivaka Komarpaj*, (จีวักโกมารภัจจ) the Buddha's physician and the head of the Thai healing pantheon.

The devotions begin with an offering by the association president to the officiating monk. The monk then leads 15 minutes of prayers (invocation and response in style) in which the whole group; some 200 students and staff in all are part of the ceremonies. As we sit with hands in a *wai* (ไหว้) a gesture of respect and thanks in which the palms are pressed together and raised before the heart), the monk embarks on a long address to the audience about their moral duties and responsibilities both as healers and as good Buddhists. Then as a group we students are blessed by a sprinkling of lustral water. We kneel before the faculty, and present flower and fruit offerings to our teachers. Our brows are anointed with Sanskrit letters 'to open our way' and to offer the spiritual gift of a path to knowledge. Each teacher offers a particular prayer to each of their students for the coming year. My blessing from the association president was to '...wish me luck with what was to come and to open my eyes'.

The teachers lead the way in making offerings and incense to the image of *Shivaka Komarpaj*. With bare feet and lowered heads the teachers kneel and place incense at the feet of the statue, followed by a long line of students. Thus begins the new teaching year for the school run by the professional association of traditional medicine practitioners.

The sudden appearance of a student who begins to speak as a medium at the end of the formal addresses marking the *wai kruu* (ไหว้ครู) while the individual students are presenting themselves to their lecturers causes a slight disruption in the proceedings. The student, a middle-aged woman suddenly shrieks, slumps and then begins speaking at high volume. She is assisted by the people around her. At the time I wonder if she has had a fit. Afterwards Mo Wan explained to me that this woman had been 'taken by the spirit of *Shivaka*'. As I watched she is draped by 'an assistant' (for want of a better word) with a white robe and a tied head-cloth, given a large cheroot to smoke and a chair. A crowd gathered around her asking guidance. She is 'speaking in tongues' one of the students told me. People around her are making offerings and asking questions. She is shaking and mouthing and indicating she wants some more of the sacred cigars. She smokes two at a time at one point.

When I asked Mo Wan (who is one of the faculty and who I had accompanied to the ritual) about the appearance of this woman she is almost dismissive saying 'she wondered if it was prepared'. It was apparently the first time in the association's history that a medium has emerged at *wai khruu*. Mo Wan was clearly not impressed. The appearance of a medium and her performance were absorbed into the proceedings with minimal fuss. I was surprised, but other students encouraged me to take photographs and were unperturbed and some students were keen to seek guidance from the medium.

I introduce the appearance of a medium in a Northern Thai traditional medicine school not because it is uncommon, rather, mediumship has become a common sign of the re-emergence of local traditions in Northern Thailand. Morris suggests the increasing number of mediums in Northern Thailand in the late 1990s is symptomatic of the social and cultural disruption experienced in Thai society as a consequence of the boom years of development and globalization. The emergence of a medium in this venue may be seen as part of the struggle to maintain the links between traditional medicine and ritual. The rupture between traditional medicine as it has been taught until the 1980s and the increasingly formal teaching of traditional medicine in tertiary institutions is recent. The sudden legitimacy of modernized forms of traditional medicine, and the emergence of university-based traditional medicine has produced a schism between formal and informal education. The last 30 years have been characterized by shifts in how traditional medicine practitioners are taught, how they practice and in the knowledge base of traditional medicine. The secularization of traditional medicine and in particular the exclusion of ritual and magic from modernized traditional medicine practice is cause for concern among many practitioners. In this context the eruption of a medium during *wai khruu*, a day which is devoted to offering respect to teachers past and present, may be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of ritual and magic in traditional practice.

### **Mediums, traditional medicine and modernity**

Mediumship is a particularly Northern Thai manifestation of the healing rituals which exist all over Thailand. The increase in mediumship in Northern Thailand in the 1990s (which was dramatic) has been attributed to changes in Thai identity posed by the dramatic rate of cultural and social change. Like many religious practices mediumship has become increasingly commercialized and this revival of Lanna rituals and the transformation of their meaning, leads Tanabe to argue that mediumship has been reconstructed as a consequence of the rapid changes in Thai society. Some argue that this return to ritual and the 're-mystification' of everyday life has been a counter to the secularism of modernity, that

the instability of rapid change and globalisation has encouraged the kind of charismatic leadership described by Weber. The increased acceptance of supernatural phenomena and the use of mediums in an attempt to restore control and balance in an increasingly unpredictable world of rapid capitalist development, has also been framed as a form of traditionalism, a nostalgia for the past is evident in other rapidly developing economies such as Korea.

There are a number of ways to interpret the emergence of mediumship in the traditional medicine community that I witnessed at *wai khruu*. The speed and intensity of changes in traditional medicine education and practice in the last 20 years has led to disruption in rituals such as *wai khruu*, that have been signifiers of knowledge acquisition and of the importance of lineage and the oral tradition. University education has created friction within the traditional medicine community about what is authentic traditional medicine knowledge. The appearance of a medium in the ceremonies associated with this traditional medicine association school, may signal a desire for re-establishing some of the rituals associated with learning because ritual and religion are no longer central to traditional medicine as taught in the universities. It may be an attempt to return to the blurring of magical and medical knowledge that was formerly a part of learning traditional medicine as an apprentice. Mediumship as a manifestation of ‘traditionalism’ (a return to traditions) in Northern Thai culture is a reaction to the increasingly secularized approach to traditional medicine in Thailand.

The narrative of ‘traditional wisdom’ which has entered into the Thai lexicon in advertising, public discourse, government documents and the media is a potent way of shaping ‘new traditions’. The Thai state has taken on the role of the gate-keeper in reconfiguring what counts for ‘authentic knowledge’ in traditional medicine. The emergence of a medium in a private traditional medicine school may indicate how traditionalism now finds its place in community based organizations rather than in modern educational settings, such as the university.

### ***Wai khruu* and becoming a student**

I was fortunate that one of my first ‘outings’ with the traditional medicine community was to join in the *wai khruu* ritual (the honouring of teachers on teacher’s day) at the school run by the Association of Thai Traditional Healers (Chiang Mai). The *wai khruu* ritual is performed by the school annually and is the formal occasion at which students of Thai traditional medicine pay their respects to their teachers (กฐ์ *khruu*). It marks the beginning of the teaching year and is a demonstration of the bonds between teachers and students. The ritual renews what is considered an archetypal sacred bond between *khruu* (กฐ์ teacher) and *luuk sit* (ลูกศิษย์ disciple/student). The teacher/student relationship in Thailand is considered a lifelong bond, in which the student incurs a debt of gratitude and respect that can never be repaid (Brun, 1990). This form of apprenticeship emphasizes lineage and it has the overlay of religious dimensions found in other Asian medical systems, especially Tibetan medicine (Craig, 2007; Pordie, 2008) but not found in many apprenticeship relationships outside of medicine (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Singleton, 1998). Giving respect and thanks to teachers (and to the lineage of teachers who precede your teacher) is considered an obligation for the traditional medicine student and a pathway to success and to good luck in the profession. It is also an ongoing spiritual and professional obligation, one which is carried out yearly for as long as the teacher is alive (and after the teacher’s death). It is a reminder of the gift of learning, and the responsibilities it engenders.

*Wai khruu*, the ritual which pays respect to *Shivaka Komarpaj* (ชีวกโกมารภัจจ์), the figure who is known as the founder of the healing tradition is perhaps the most direct illustration of the continuing entwinement of Buddhism and medicine in Thailand. *Shivaka Komarpaj Buddha's Doctor, the Father Doctor* figure is everywhere visible in the images which cluster on traditional healers' altars. Every traditional healer and traditional medicine practice I visited had an altar and *Shivaka Komarpaj* was visible on all of them. The legends and healing stories which are centred on *Shivaka Komarpaj* are derived from the Pali canons (the *Vinaya*) which detail Buddhist medical knowledge and describe him as the Buddha's physician. These healing stories support *Shivaka's* status as the titular head of the healing pantheon in Thai medicine despite the fact that *Shivaka* is a figure from the Hindu pantheon and the stories derive from Sanskrit writings[2].

Respect and devotion to the legendary *Shivaka* figure and to the sacred nature of healing is revived in the formalised practice of the *wai khruu* as a marker in the life of students and of practitioners. For some traditional medicine practitioners *wai khruu* is a devotion performed at the beginning and end of each day. For some practitioners it is the prelude to seeing the first patient, for others this prayer and ritual precedes *reusi dat ton* (ฤๅษีตัดตน), the therapeutic exercises used to prepare massage practitioners for treating patients[3]. The depiction of medical knowledge as passed down since the origins of Buddhism in India is a narrative used in most official histories of Thai traditional medicine (see Vichai Chokevivat and Anchalee Chutaputthi, 2005a). As Catichai Muksong and Komatra Chuengsatiansap (2012) point out the use of Buddhism to legitimize traditional medicine is a part of a specific period of state sponsored ideology in Thailand which existed until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The centrality of Buddhism to Thai culture and its continuing role in traditional medicine is one of the many fault lines visible in the evolving traditional medicine practices of Thailand and in Thai culture more generally. While modern professional practice has emerged (and a modern Thai culture has developed) there has been a growth in new forms of religiosity which Jackson suggests represent the intersection of the pre-modern with global capital (Jackson, 1999, 260-261). The incongruity of elements present in the *wai khruu* ceremony described at the opening of the chapter, indicates the cross currents operating in Thai culture and in the traditional medicine profession.

*Wai khruu* is a ritual linking traditional medicine to a Buddhist mythology which continues to be a significant focus for students of Thai traditional medicine. The presence of a monk at this ritual and his extended sermon confirm the enduring links between religion and healing. The surprising appearance of the medium in this ceremony highlights the connection of traditional medicine to pre-Buddhist religious practices. The current development of modern traditional medicine practitioners in Thailand can be seen in the context of state-based rationality; this carries with it the impetus to create a secularised practice of traditional medicine. Traditional medicine education based in universities and integrated into the public health system, is only one part of an exceedingly variegated medical landscape in Thailand. Such are the radical discontinuities which beset traditional medicine in 21<sup>st</sup> century Thailand.

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[1] The Association of Thai Traditional Healers (Chiang Mai) runs a traditional medicine school which teaches traditional medicine (including Thai massage) to Thai students in Chiang Mai. It was one of two private traditional medicine schools in Chiang Mai where I spent time as a participant observer

interviewing students, interviewing lecturers and joining classes. The other school where I spent some time interviewing and observing was the Old Medicine Hospital, a centre for the study of Thai traditional medicine run by the Shivagakomarpaj Foundation. It teaches traditional medicine (including traditional herbal medicine, traditional pharmacy and traditional massage) to Thai students and it also teaches Thai massage to foreigners.

[2] As McDaniel (2013) points out there is a wealth of religious and cultural hybridity in this one figure although he is claimed as the Buddha's doctor. McDaniel (2008) argues that Buddhism in Northern Thailand is notably syncretic and despite attempts to systematize practice and liturgy it is eclectic and resistant to such centralizing tendencies.

[3] The practice of *ruesi dat ton* is traditionally used to strengthen and prepare the practitioner for the practice of massage. It is conceptualized by some western commentators as a form of yoga that strengthens the body and clears energy blockages and moves energy through the body. Each morning that I studied Thai massage we would meet as a class in the teaching *sala* and practice *reusi dat ton* for an hour before breakfast. We began with the Pali chanting of the prayers to *Shivaka Komarpaj*.

