

SACRIFICE AND THE UNDERWORLD: DEATH AND FERTILITY IN SIAMESE MYTH AND RITUAL

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Looking at Siamese myth and ritual in a shallow way, as I once did, it would seem poor in content of True Myth as defined by Robert Graves.¹ The surface finds seem to consist of some pretty tales and convivial folkloric practices that celebrate fertility rather than bring it about by the fatal rituals practised or recorded in myth by other agricultural peoples.

It would be easy to suppose that rational and compassionate Buddhism had completely converted and replaced the old, dark ways:- the bloody sacrifice to the Earth Goddess at the Door of the Underworld, an ancient tree, a termite mound, a cave, a ring of stones. This supposition would be wholly incorrect, for Buddhism has destroyed little here (or anywhere else). It may have suppressed (which is not the same as destroying) the bloody sacrifice, except in a few instances such as the annual sacrifice of a buffalo in the North, but it has adapted and preserved the pre-Buddhist earth religion to a large extent, in art and in architecture, in ritual and in story.

This is not to imply that Siamese Buddhism is corrupt. On the contrary, Siamese Buddhism always remains distinct from the pre-Buddhist earth religion, yet it preserves the earth religion in tandem with truly Buddhist beliefs and practices. The ignorant villager or townsman, and even the ignorant monk, may approach the Buddha as a source of fertility (for instance in the lottery number rituals, which are a sort of cargo-cult), but the true teaching and practice are always there for those who seek them.

The pre-Buddhist earth religion is preserved in Siam more completely and more clearly (if one has the key to it) than in many other parts of the world where it has been identified and described only after laborious research, comparisons and deduction. In order to support this assertion I might do worse than to describe to the reader how I acquired the key.

For me the trail was very complex and confusing, and I made many false starts. It began with a Roman Catholic upbringing in England by which I was familiarised (indeed over-

familiarised) with bloody sacrifice: the death of Christ on the cross repeated ever since in the ritual cannibalism of the Mass.

This was followed by over twenty years during which I admired the rationality and compassion of Siamese Theravada Buddhism. From time to time I became vaguely aware of alien beliefs and practices, like the villagers' propensity for discovering strange trees that bled sap, or unusually large termite mounds, and worshipping them for lottery numbers, cures and good fortune. This sort of thing I dismissed as a falling-away from Buddhism, superstition, gross ignorance.

A seminal event occurred some five years ago when Fr. Ray Brennan of the Redemptorist Order kindly took me on a tour of the chapel of his orphanage in Pattaya. He built it in the style of a Buddhist Vihara in the reign of Rama III. Nagas are everywhere, although the style of Rama III does not require this element as an architectural decoration. The chapel has many other interesting features. For instance, it is rectangular in plan, with the high altar at one end of the rectangle. The entrance is in the middle of one long side, and the altar to Our Lady is directly opposite the entrance, so low that one must approach it on one's knees and feels that one is nearing the earth.

The high altar is on a dais, carries none of the paraphernalia of primitive worship (like votive lamps) and is backed by a cross that bears a mirror instead of a corpus. Thus the two cults-of the Earth Mother and the Sky Father-are isolated from one another.

The murals are even more interesting. The Resurrection depicted on the wall behind the high altar shows the risen Christ triumphant as Suriya in a chariot driven by the Horses of the Sun.

Fr. Ray Brennan's chapel is important in that it is a small step towards an ecumenism between Christianity and Buddhism, between Christianity and primitive religion.

It poses problems and asks questions that demand to be answered. Spanish Christianity fused easily with the native

Central American cult of the Sun and his thirst for blood. But how can Southeast Asians and Christians understand each other? Let me pass over these questions and turn to the mural that shocked me to the core.

That was the passion and death of Christ treated as a Siamese execution, which brought home to me the sheer horror of the event as no European image ever could, as I had been inured to them since childhood. Who was this man or god? Why did he die in this way? What was the historical background and the position of Jesus himself? And how had the early Christians arrived at their mythology of Christ and His mother, so different from what any Jew (like Christ himself) could possibly admit? No answers were forthcoming.

The next stage of the initiation took me to South India, where Hinduism is very earth-oriented and takes on an aspect easily available to Southeast Asian understanding.

The North Indians, speaking Indo-European languages, are presumably descendants of Aryan invaders and preserve something of the nomadic, Vedic religion with its sky-walking, deathless, wifeless, wassailing gods. (Kali worship in the North seems to be a throwback arising when the native earth cult was awarded a degree of respectability). Temples are conceived as mountains which the pilgrim ascends, and Shiva has a blue neck because he drank the world poison that arose from the churning of the Sea of Milk; a heroic tale, but odd considering that milk is conceived as the absolute opposite of poison.

In the South a very different situation pertains. Though the Southerners have accepted the Brahmins and their Vedas, the Mother never loses her primacy. Though Shiva rules at each shrine, it is only as husband of the local Goddess. The temples are dominated by huge gate towers that give entrance to a relatively insignificant central shrine, and there is a much more sinister explanation for Shiva's wounded throat.

Of course at the time I had no understanding of this complex and majestic civilization which seems to have made little impression on the British. Being British myself I had been aware only of the standard, Sanskritic mythology of the North. but I came away from South India determined to find a key to its mysteries for many reasons, in particular because of its 'earthiness' that so closely resembled Southeast Asia. North India's mythology is heroic and takes place in ideal places: the sky, the Himalaya, the battlefield; but South Indian mythology is human (and animal and vegetal) and painstakingly localized: this tree, this termite mound, that pool, that hill. It is as localized as the cult of Bhadresvara at Wat Phu in Southern Laos, or Mount Batur in Bali, or Pagan's Mount Popa, or Bangkok's City Pillar.

As though it were in response to my determination, three keys fell into my lap within a year of leaving South India. These were Robert Graves (*The White Goddess*), Joseph Campbell

(his *Masks of God* series), and David Shulman (*Tamil Temple Myths*), in that order.

1. Robert Graves' *White Goddess* has been faulted by anthropologists because of the author's acceptance of a historical, political matriarchy that mainline anthropologists now reject. However, Graves has never been seriously faulted as a mythologist, and even without matriarchy, his description of the White Goddess of prehistoric agriculturalists remains unsurpassed:- the virgin and seductress, mother and murderer, nature supreme who fills the world with grain, flowers and fruit in exchange for the blood of her beloved. This is passionate but relentless nature portrayed by a true believer, a poet who recognized the significance of the phases of the moon, the turning of the seasons, the months of the year, and the reciprocal relationship between life and death.
2. Joseph Campbell (*The Masks of God*) produced the definitive description of the difference between the mythologies of nomadic and gardening civilizations:- the nomads with their sky-interest, shamanism, animal sacrifice; the agriculturalists whose bargaining was with the dark and fecund Earth whose priestess dispatched brave young men into the Underworld to father a new crop on the Goddess. Campbell reveals the cycle of life and death in all its complexity:- sex and birth, violence and food, decay and fertility.
3. Shulman (*Tamil Temple Myths*) shows how the South Indians, Dravidian agriculturalists, reconciled their native religion of ever-dying, ever-reborn nature with their adoption of the unblinking, everliving sky gods of the Vedas; how Shiva survives his marriage to the murderous local Goddess, and how the virginity of the Goddess (the source of her life-giving power) survives marriage and maternity.

With these keys I gained an insight into some of the mysteries of South Indian mythology that I had experienced during my tour there: how the gigantic Gopurams encompass a schematically subterranean shrine, womb of the Goddess into which the Lingam thrusts, and into which the worshiper descends to die and be reborn with the mark of the God and Goddess on his brow; though Shiva is an immortal god, the South Indians identify him with the prehistoric human husband and victim of the Goddess, and his neck is therefore blue, the scar of the sacrifice.

When these realizations crystallized I wrote them up in Thai, in part as a labour of love, in part to relieve my obsession. Mistakenly, I supposed that this matter would have little or no appeal to Siamese, who by and large show little enthusiasm for Hinduism and who, since the reign of Rama VI, have known it only through English translations of the standard Sanskrit texts of North India.

The reaction to my papers in *Silpawathanatham* ("Why Does Shiva Dance?" January 1989, and "Ganesha, Remover of

Obstacles, a Child with a Problem," July 1989) was a very pleasant surprise. Siamese scholars reacted enthusiastically and provided further insights; the reactions of the less-educated were equally rewarding and informative:- "We know all about that. My mother was a spirit medium," and "Why does Shiva wear a jimson weed flower in his hair?" "My elder brother used to smoke it and he'd go mad."

Having arrived at an understanding of the mythology by such time-consuming and laborious means myself, I had thought that the matter was of difficult access. I had failed to realize that the Siamese, like other Southeast Asians and South Indians, remain very close to Mother Earth and know better than most Occidental scholars that the price of life is death, and that the world of man and the Underworld meet at certain sites, the tree, the termite mound, the pool, the ring of stones, and other fatal places.

Siamese Myth and Ritual

One tries to distinguish between that which is native to Southeast Asia and that which was imported from India. But the task is very difficult because ancient peoples produced similar rites and myths under similar circumstances. Southeast Asia and India seem to have shared a common Neolithic culture, while the Hinduism and Buddhism imported here had already been contaminated to some extent by Indian earth-religion.

A case in point is the Kala Face or Kirtimukha. The Siamese art evidence indicates that it is an import from India, but according to mythologists it is none other than the head of the sacrifice with the lower jaw removed, an image found in prehistoric Europe, the Middle East, Indianized Asia, China (the Shang bronzes), Melanesia and Central America.

Then there is the story of the Buddha's enlightenment:- the Man (Gautama) and the Lady (Dharani), the Tree of Knowledge and the Serpent (Mucalinda), an exact repeat of the dramatic personae of the Adam and Eve story.

This is not to suggest that Jews borrowed from India or Buddhists borrowed from Jews, but that both were employing an earlier myth for their own purposes:- the serpent Lord of the Underworld, the Tree of Life, door to the Underworld, and the priestess of the Goddess and her lover/victim.

Though Southeast Asia and India shared a common body of Neolithic earth religion, and though Hinduism and Buddhism both result from an amalgamation of the nomadic sky religion of the Aryans and the earth religion of the local gardeners, Siam possesses striking evidence of a local earth cult of its own. This is the Buddhist ordination ceremony and its site, the Uposatha hall surrounded by a ring of stones.

The Sima Boundary and the Ring of Stones

Around a Siamese Ordination Hall (Uposatha) stand eight monoliths, called Sima. The term Sima occurs first in the Vinaya Pitaka as boundary markers of the monastery as a whole, in order to prevent legal squabbles as to the extent of the monastic lands. "From this point to that" was how "Sima" was defined. According to the Mahavamsa, in the second century B.C. King Devanampiya Tissa ploughed a furrow around the Maha Vihara and that furrow became its Sima. In the ancient literature there is no mention of the erection of monoliths.

No boundaries of Sima stones (as understood in Siam) have been found in India. Nor have they been found at Anuradhapura. They first occur in Sri Lanka at the 12th century Badasima Pasada of Parakramabahu I at Polonnaruwa, founded, it would seem, after he (or his predecessor Vijayabahu I) had brought in monks from Southeast Asia, the Lankan Sangha having been dispersed by the Colas in the 11th century.

There is no evidence that these stones were developed from anything in India or Lanka, whereas scholars² have proposed an affinity with prehistoric circles of rough-hewn stones found in the Northeast.

It would be premature at this point to propose that the stone markers surrounding a Siamese Buddhist ordination hall were descendants of a prehistoric cult of monoliths, or that such stone circles had to do with human sacrifice. We should first examine the current ceremony with which a Sima boundary is established.

The Planting of the Signs (Luk Nimit)

At the consecration of a new Buddhist ordination hall (Uposatha) in Siam a strange ceremony is performed, which, as far as I know, has never been written about either in Siamese or in English.

A pit is dug several feet deep in the centre of the ordination hall, in front of the presiding Buddha image. Over the pit a spherical stone about the size of a human head is suspended from a beam by rattans. The performer of the ceremony (always a lay person, often a member of the royal family) slashes the rattan that passes over the beam with a machete and the stone falls into the pit which is then filled in.

The stone sphere is called Luk Nimit (the Sign), but it is buried from all human view and the floor is laid without any mark of where it lies. Thus it does not function as a "sign" in any obvious sense.

The study of this subject is difficult because no excavations have been performed in order to reveal Luk Nimit, which are buried rather deeper than the foundations of ordination halls. Thus there are no reports of Luk Nimit being found at Ayutthaya, Sukhothai, Nakhon Si Thammarat or elsewhere, so we know nothing of their history, whether they are something very old, or very recent.

Several informants tell me that they remember seeing when they were young a single Luk Nimit planted in the middle of the ordination hall. Today the same ceremony with pit and stone is performed for each Sima stone, making nine in all.

The point is that none of this is supported by a shred of Buddhist scriptural evidence, nor is anything like it to be found in Lanka. On the contrary, the violence implied by the machete blow to the rattan, and the fall of something into a deep pit, recalls irresistibly a sacrificial rite.

But at this point it would still be premature to propose that the Buddhist ordination ceremony and ordination hall preserved pre-Buddhist elements of a violent prehistoric sacrifice. We must therefore study the ordination ceremony itself.

Buddhist Ordination and the Serpent Postulant

Siamese Buddhists, educated and otherwise, all refer to a postulant to the Sangha as Naga or Serpent, from the time it is decided that he will seek ordination until the moment he leaves the hands of the laity and enters the Uposatha hall, despite the well-known scriptural incident in which the Buddha himself excludes the Naga race from entry into the Order.

The term Naga is not used in ignorance, as the Siamese frequently query the usage among themselves with a number of interesting explanations:-

- We know him to be human; we just call him Naga.
- It is for safety's sake, just as we call a pretty child ugly.
- We do it in honour of the Naga whom the Buddha denied ordination.
- We do it in honour of the Buddha who denied the Naga ordination. (!)

The questions of who or what the Buddha's Naga was and why the Buddha denied him ordination are also matters discussed at ordinations and other occasions.

The usual explanation is that Nagas were primitive tribespeople outside the realm of what was considered human in the Ganges region during the time of the Buddha.

This reasoning sounds modern, based on knowledge of the Naga tribe of the Northeast Indian hill tracts. Furthermore it ignores the Buddha's liberal policy on admission to the Order (Angulimala for instance) and the frequent occurrence in the scriptures of Nagas as intelligent, semi-serpent/semi-human shape-changers, lords of the Underworld.

The shape-changing serpent Lord of the Underworld (like the serpent in the Tree of Knowledge or Mucalinda Nagaraja) is the husband of the Earth Goddess (Eve, mother of all, and Dharani). The young men sacrificed to her entered the Underworld to become the fertilizing Serpent.

Thus I should like to propose that though the Naga who was denied ordination may indeed have been a primitive tribal, he was excluded from ordination precisely because he had been chosen for sacrifice and was called, in anticipation, a Naga.

This reasoning may not please pious Buddhists who emphasise the Buddha's compassion, but the Buddha was a man of his times who had little or nothing to say against current rituals and beliefs. I should like to liken him to the good king referred to by Mencius who "pitied the ox but loved the rite." (He had heard the bellowing of a bull led to the slaughter to consecrate a newly cast bell and ordered the bull reprieved, to be replaced by a sheep, for which he was accused of stinginess, whereas the fact was that despite his pity he refused to oppose a popular custom.)

Thus it seems to me that in calling the postulant Naga, the Siamese Buddhists are anticipating a human sacrifice, a sacrifice which never actually takes place any more because of the intervention of Buddhism which in later times managed to substitute the ordination in place of bloody sacrifice.

But the ancient rite is still recalled, in the ring of stones, the slashing of the rattan to drop the Sign into the pit, and the use of the term Naga, Serpent, oldest of names for the Lord of the Dead and the source of new life.

These views are born out by the ritual to which the postulant is subject prior to his being delivered to the Sangha, who perform purely Buddhist rites.

The postulant or Naga is first subject to the ceremony called "Tham Khwan," for which I can find no adequate translation. It has been described by Phya Anuman Rajadhon³ and consists largely in soothing and encouraging the spirit or morale. The ceremony has no Buddhist antecedents but closely resembles the Hindu Puja in which the recipient is anointed on the forehead (another sign of sacrifice) and fed sacred food that has been offered to the gods or ancestors.

This ceremony is very rarely performed in circumstances other than the ordination. It otherwise occurs when someone has undergone or is about to undergo great trauma—an illness, a dangerous journey, or execution like Nai Man and

Nai Khong (Mr. Strong and Mr. Firm) who in pre-modern times were sent into the Underworld to provide spirit guardians for the city gates.

The performance of the Tham Khwan ceremony for a healthy young postulant suggests that some form of sacrifice is to be undergone.

The Naga is led to the temple in a procession that is not accompanied by the Buddhist ejaculation "Sadhu" (It is good). On the contrary, it is accompanied by the native orgiastic cry "Hoi Hiu," and by dancing by aged ladies, the village transvestites and drunken young men, with plenty of barnyard humour.

On arrival the Naga has to prostrate in worship of the Sima stone in front of the Uposatha hall (an act for which there is no support in Buddhist scripture). Thereafter the postulant enters the ring of stones and is carried, pushed and pulled with considerable violence into the Uposatha hall.

At this point he ceases to be a Naga. When the postulant enters the ring of stones the Sangha takes over and the postulant is made into Something Other.

When the wholly canonical ministrations of the Sangha are complete the newly ordained monk emerges, at whose feet his parents prostrate. This is a triumph of Buddhism. It is also a triumphal survival of the old earth-religion in which the murdered young man becomes a god, the deathless serpent that makes flowers bloom, rice to form ears (in Thai it becomes "pregnant"), and trees to become heavy with fruit. And the Siamese get the best of both worlds, Buddhist and Animist.

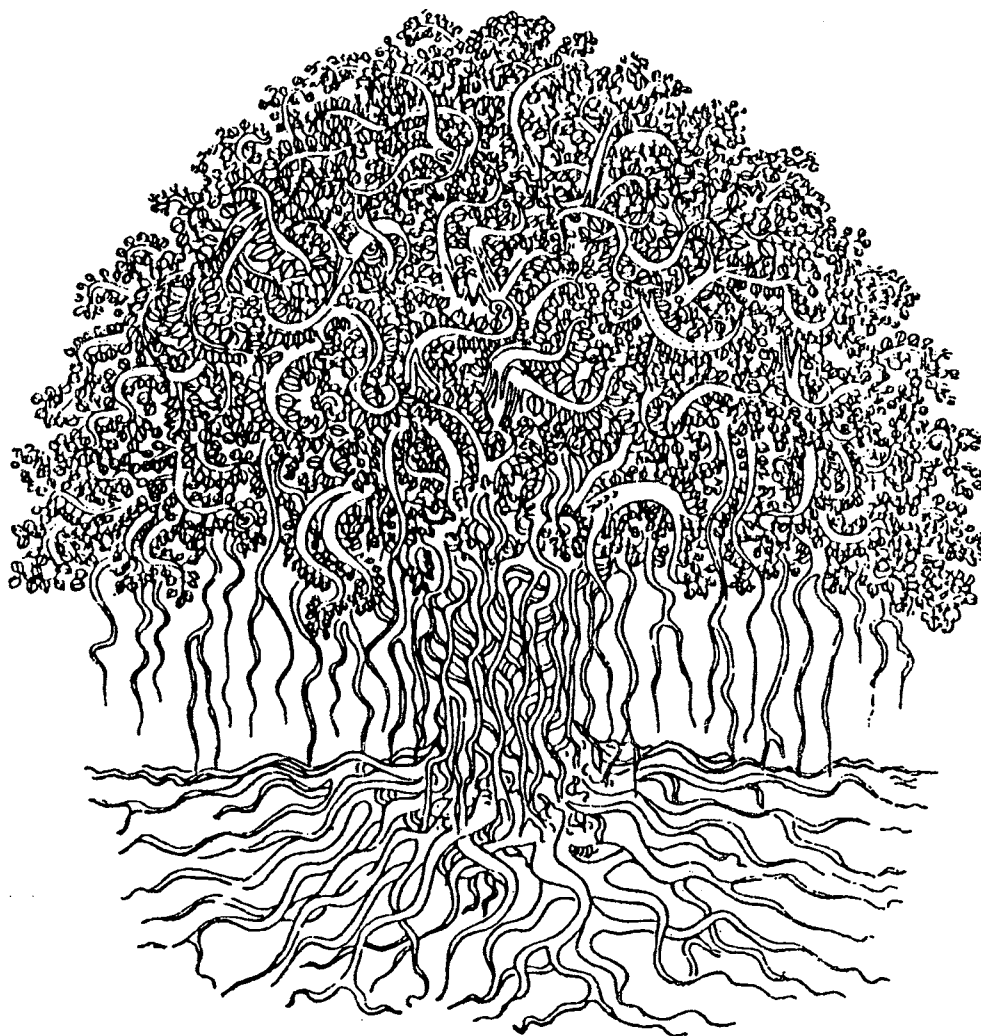
The Door to the Underworld

The local press frequently reports that villagers have discovered a magic tree which they wrap with coloured chiffon and worship with flowers, joss-sticks and candles in exchange for panaceas, winning lottery numbers and other desirables.

A Westerner might at first dismiss this behaviour as a manifestation of ignorance, superstition and a degradation of Buddhist rationalism.



Villagers identify a Door to the Underworld, source of health and plenty. *Thai Rath Newspaper*, 14 September 1989.



Tree of Life, linking the world of men with the Underworld.

However, in view of the mythic content of the Adam and Eve story with its Tree of Knowledge and the Buddha's enlightenment with another Tree of Knowledge, one perceives an underlying Tree of Life with its roots in the Underworld and its trunk and branches, flowers and fruit, in the World of Men.

Thus the 'ignorant' villagers are in fact exhibiting an ancient wisdom, a living mythology sensitive to the realities of life and death on earth in which the Door of the Underworld has to be identified and its potential exploited to the full, for despite its deathly connections it is still a well-spring of life.

In Siam the favoured door is a huge Takhian tree (genus *Hopea*), inhabited by a female ghost, perhaps a shadow of Eve and the Earth Goddess. But there are many others, some of them obvious, like the termite mound with its hollows

haunted by serpents, caves where Buddhists meditate though the Buddha never recommended them, mountain peaks where temples are often established, junctures of rivers, dangerous curves on highways where the Mother and her Serpent Husband often receive unplanned gifts of fresh blood, and the homely household spirit shrine (San Phra Phum) where man and nature seem to have come to terms with one another.

The pool or spring, so popular as a sacred site in Ireland, has made little impression here, which is strange considering how hungry for water Siam can be.

But in Siam there are other, less obvious, Doors to the Underworld. We have already examined the prehistoric South-east Asian ring of stones that later became the boundary markers of the Uposatha hall. The Bodhi tree must also join the ranks of ancient Doors, though the worship of the Bodhi tree has

fallen into abeyance here today and the tree's roots are used as a depository for disused Chinese shrines.

Another Door to the Underworld, the Stupa, has similarly been debased, having become a depository for anyone's bones, and multiplied in number at each temple until it has lost its earlier significance as Axis Mundi and Underworld in little, which entombed relics in a womb (Garbha) where the relics were thought to float in a miniature boat upon a subterranean pool, like a foetus in amniotic fluid. This legend of the floating relic occurs both in Burma and Siam. The legend may be of recent origin but it seems to come from folk sources, and should therefore be worth listening to.

This legend does not occur in Sri Lanka, but each of the ancient Stupas excavated there has revealed a relic chamber containing miniature bronze cobras and other symbols of the Underworld, thus indicating that Buddhism had become contaminated with Earth Religion long before it reached Southeast Asia, making identification of native and imported elements that much more difficult.

In Southeast Asia the Buddha image itself has become Lord of the Underworld like some Christian icons in the West. Some Buddha images in Siam have developed personalities of their own, like the Jinaraja of Phitsanulok who has been known to weep tears of blood and has a taste for pigs' heads. Then there is Bangkok's Emerald Buddha who likes duck eggs and fermented fish, and is known to break the necks of those who swear falsely before him. The Sihala Buddharupa brings rain, and Luang Pho Sothon of Chachoengsao Province answers all his supplicants' prayers like the Lord Venkatesvara of Tirupati.

These are some examples of how the old Earth Religion persists in Siam, in symbiosis with Buddhism but without subverting or perverting it. However, there are other instances in which the Earth Religion persists, red in tooth and nail, without the prop of Buddhism.

The Mother Manifest

Human sacrifices of ancient date are recorded in the literature to do with Phra That Phanom, Nakhon Phanom Province, and Wat Phu in Southern Laos. These appear to have been replaced by animal sacrifices at a later date. An annual buffalo sacrifice still takes place in Chiang Mai, and a pig sacrifice in Lampang.

Human sacrifices are also hinted at in the literature of Central Siam, on the foundation of a city and on setting out for war. However this evidence seems to have been hushed up and little of substance remains.

The big evidence for the persistence of the Goddess occurs in a modern folk tale that appears (in its present form) to date from the turn of the century. This is the tale of Nang

Nak Phrakhanong—The Naga Lady of Phrakhanong District in Southeastern Bangkok.

A handsome young man, Bunmak ("Much Merit," but perhaps originally just "Mak" or "Plenty"), marries a beautiful girl named Nak (Naga). He is called away to the wars and during his absence she dies in childbirth.

On his return the hero finds his bride alive and well, but something is terribly wrong. She possesses supernatural powers and feeds him delicious curries that turn out to consist of hideous corruption. She wants to take him with her into the world of the dead.

The villagers thereabouts and the local abbot know the truth, but cannot break the spell of love that exists between hero and heroine. The hero will not believe the truth, and their efforts to imprison the spirit of the dead and float it down the river are frustrated by curious people downriver who open the pot and release the spirit to return more virulent than before (just like Kali imprisoned and floated on the Kaveri only to come back in more vindictive form).

In the end (if there is an end to this story) a small Samanera teaches the villagers and Mr. Plenty to make merit for the Naga Lady. The spell is broken; the hero returns to life in this world; the Naga Lady goes on to rebirth; and the balance of nature is reestablished.

Siam does not lack ghosts or ghost stories, but this particular story is repeated again and again, in books, film and television. It is watched, again and again, by old and young, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. Early in this century Prince Damrong remarked that more Siamese knew of the Lady Naga than knew the name of the Sangharaja.

I find it difficult to believe that this is a new tale. On the contrary it has all the characteristics of something ancient, indeed prehistoric.

There is the Virgin/Mother/Lover/Murderess who seeks the life of a handsome young man. The threat is death; the promise is new life.

But the drama is cut short and fate changed by the action of the little Samanera who represents the coming of Buddhism which introduced merit-making to replace the human sacrifice, and gradually transformed the ancient system of exchange between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Contemporary Artists

At almost any exhibition of contemporary Siamese art (for instance the annual National Exhibition of Silpakorn University, or Bangkok Bank's Bua Luang annual competition) the viewer (perhaps the Western viewer in particular) may be stuck

by the preponderance of the weird, the eerie, the sinister in almost all categories of entries.

The Occidental is particularly surprised because he tends to view the Siamese as a cheerful, unthinking people, little concerned with the darker side of life, unlike, for instance, Central Americans, Indians or the ancient Egyptians.

The viewer sees again, in many forms, the fatal images—cats and moons, horns and bones, nature fecund and murderous, bodies with heads transposed, the Axis Mundi, the Door to the Underworld.

The weirdness occurs in all categories but it is particularly prevalent in the "Traditional" entries, which is not surprising because traditional Siamese art is largely devoted to the depiction of the Triple World of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology with its heaven, earth and hell, and how they interact, Nagas and Asuras, Meru the Axis Mundi, and the Buddha's victory over Mara beneath the Bodhi Tree, Door to the Underworld, the unconscious.

It might also be proposed (it already has been) that modern Siamese artists lack originality and are merely churning out variations on old themes. A more serious accusation is that they are cashing in on the success of a few original masters like Thawan Dachani whose weird works have proved a financial goldmine.

I cannot accept or respect these arguments. Artists have always used old themes. The "old themes" are archetypes from which there is no escape; they demand to be expressed again and again as long as humans are born to die. Furthermore, in pre-modern times all artist followed "masters" and produced masterpieces in turn. The demand for "originality" is a modern, bourgeois phenomenon that arose when the painter aspired to become something other than craftsman and spokesman for the unconscious.

Within the confines of "old themes" and saleability modern Siamese painters are superb craftsmen and original interpreters of unconscious themes to an extraordinary degree.

However, I have found no evidence that any of these artists or craftsmen are learned in mythology, in the sense of being widely read in comparative myth or Jungian psychology. On the contrary, all seem to be sons of the soil who produce their weird works direct from their unconscious. Thus they are of universal appeal, and if they sell well, who are we to accuse them of being "commercial?"

Examples are very numerous, and I shall try to give a few. However the reader must be warned that though the paintings themselves come from the unconscious, their titles are afterthoughts, contrived after the painting is completed in order to sound impressive at an exhibition. Coming from the conscious mind these titles are irrelevant and frequently hide or distort the real meaning of the painting.

"Nature" by Phayat Cheunyen won 2nd prize in Bangkok Bank's Bua Luang contest in 1981. Nature is devouring

itself, being born, eating and dying endlessly, fecund and murderous. In the centre is the Door to the Underworld in the form of a vegetal Cross, and at its foot the Serpent Lord.

This is a deeply insightful view of nature and its processes as experienced by the ancient agriculturalist, but I doubt if the painter could have told us so in so many words.

"Lotus at the Centre of the Universe" by Prasat Seri won 3rd prize in 1986. The picture is divided horizontally into three: heaven, earth and the underworld. In the centre is the Axis Mundi in the form of a lotus from which lines of men and women proceed, falling back into the Underworld at extreme left and right.

In this picture the process of nature is repeated. As with vegetation, men come and go in an endless cycle, a pre-conscious awareness of reality that pre-dates verbalized philosophies, though this picture is much more Buddhist than the prior picture, as the Underworld is depicted as hell.

"Dhamma in a Sima" by Alongkon Lowathana won 3rd prize in 1985.

I am not sure how to interpret this picture, but if the title given by the painter can be taken seriously, then the Sima has become a door, a Door to the Underworld presided over by its Serpent Lord.

"Heaven's Decree" by Prasong Luemuang won 1st prize in 1987.

This extraordinary picture by a young man from Lampang (who can hardly have read *The Golden Bough*) tells almost all that there is to be told about the age-old religion of agriculturalists.

The theme is fertility, and as is appropriate to Siam, fertility comes in the form of a huge catch of fish.

The central figure is of doubtful gender, dancing madly like Shiva, but the face is that of a corpse with protruding tongue. The red sash is a gush of blood. The yoke carried on the shoulders resembles the cross-bar of the crucifix. He has one shoe on and one shoe off, recalling all the lamed gods of antiquity. In his right hand he bears a weapon, a sling-shot, odd substitute for Shiva's axe of stone, and in the bag suspended from the left shoulder is a flute, shades of Krishna.

To the dancer's left is an Axis Mundi around which a phallic serpent twines, and to his right is another Axis presided over by birds like the owl, and flowers, symbols of the Goddess.

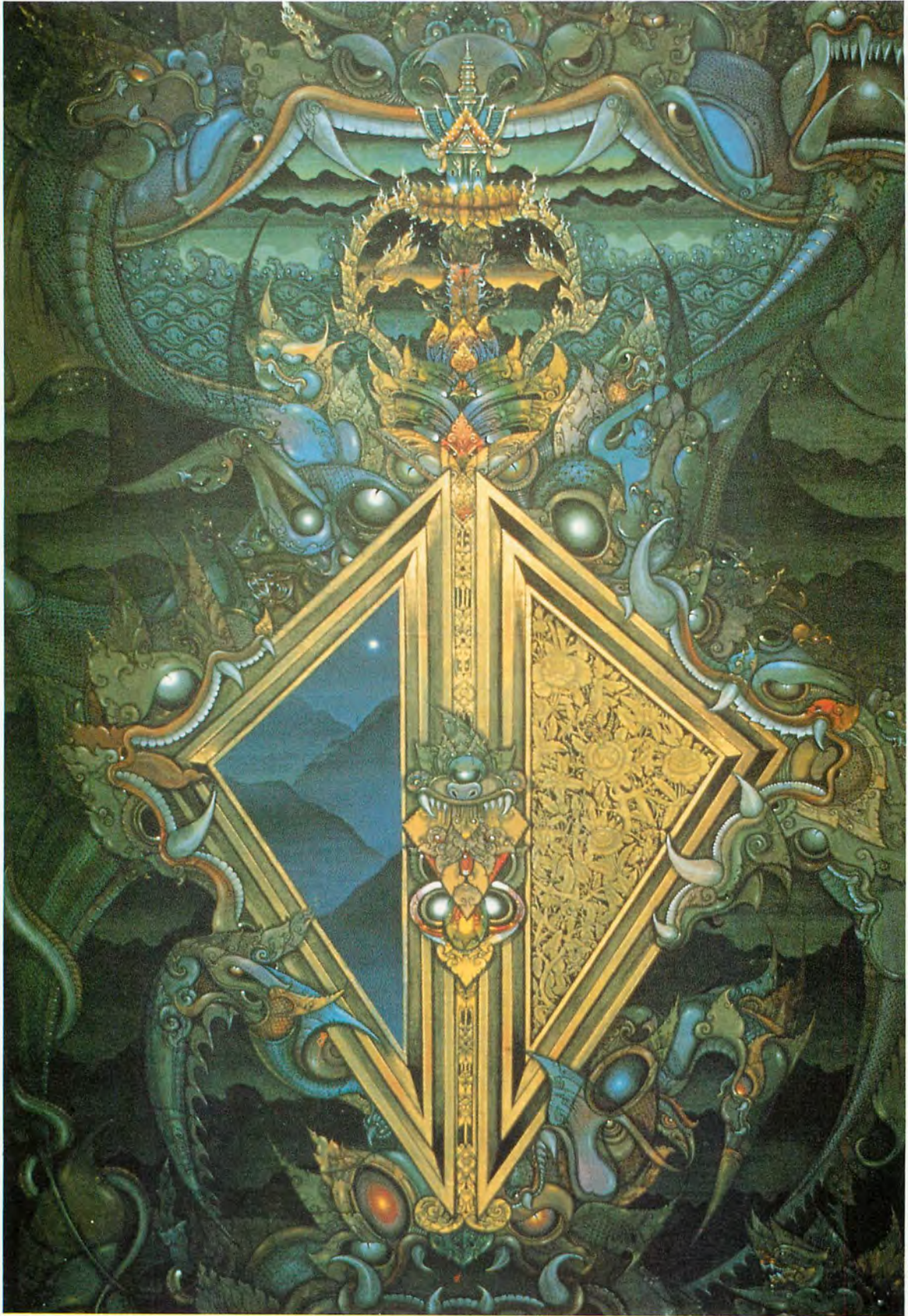
I believe that these works, whatever their motives or origins, indicate that the Siamese, even in this late day when full industrialization is almost upon them, enjoy an innate sensitivity towards, and awareness of, the ancient, universal archetypes which most Westerners meet only in dreams and neuroses, and understand only through laborious study.



"Nature," by Payat Cheunyen. Nature is endlessly devouring itself and being reborn, fecund and murderous (p. 50).



"Lotus at the Centre of the Universe," by Prasat Seri. Heaven, Earth and the Underworld (p. 50).



"Dhamma in a Sima," by Alongkon Lowathana. A Door to the Underworld presided over by its Serpent Lord (p. 50).



"Heaven's Decree," by Prasong Luemuang. The theme is fertility, symbolized by the fish. A corpse-like figure, gushing blood, dances like Shiva with an Axis Mundi to left and right (p. 50).

Conclusions

This paper attempts to consider some aspects of Siamese religion and to identify indigenous elements that escape the confines of Buddhism as traditionally defined.

This is a huge field that has hardly been touched, so I hope that better scholars both local and foreign will attack it boldly, and begin to define the native, ecstatic Earth Religion devoted to the Mother, in contrast to Buddhist rationalism.

In short, the whole body of Siamese culture, its folk-lors and customs, literature and rites, deserves to be rigorously reexamined in terms of scientific mythology and Jungian psychology.

ENDNOTES

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