

THE CEREMONY OF THAM KHWAN OF A MONTH OLD CHILD

Phya Anuman Rajadhon

It has been a custom among the Siamese in the past, and to a certain extent it is still, for a month-old baby to go through a domestic ceremony of *tham khwañ* which literally means the making of the *khwañ*. *Khwañ* originally meant the soul, but through a development, the *khwañ* has now a vague meaning as something mysteriously abiding in the body which gives health and prosperity to its owner.* The *khwañ* has a fickle nature; if frightened it will leave its residence in the body. The person whose *khwañ* is not with him will be ill, and if the *khwañ* does not come back, the person will die. Hence in every stage of a person's life, a ceremony of *tham khwañ* is usually performed. Here we will concern ourselves only with the ceremony of *tham khwañ* of a child.

Among the common people the baby will receive its customary first shaving a month after its birth. This shaving is peculiar to the Siamese of Central Siam. An offering in the form of food with candles, joss sticks and flowers is made to the guardian spirit of the place on a tray made of banana stems. The guardian spirit has his residence in a small shrine perched on a single post which may be frequently seen in the compounds of Siamese houses. During the first shaving the head is not completely shaved, for the hair on the crown of the head is left in order to protect its tender part during childhood. No doubt this tender spot on the head is to the primitive mind the spot through which the *khwañ* or soul goes out, In India this tender spot in the crown of the head is called *brahmarandhara* which is an aperture through which the soul is supposed to escape. During childhood this hair is allowed to grow while the hair on other parts of the head is cleanly shaven thus allowing the hair to grow long and form a top-knot. This top-knot

* It has been rather aptly called an *esprit vital* by Mme E. Porée-Maspéro in her article on a similar belief in Cambodia BEFEO XLV, 1, pp. 145-184
Ed.

is ceremoniously cut when its owner reaches the supposed age of puberty, between 11 and 13 years.

The hair, after having been shaved off, is placed in a cup made of leaf, which is again placed either on a lotus or a caladium leaf. Sometimes flowers are also placed in the leaf cup, and in some cases the lotus or caladium leaf with the leaf cup is placed respectfully on a metal tray. The shaven hair is floated away along a running stream. While releasing it, a wish is expressed in such terms as the following: "May you be as cool and happy as the water" or, literally, "like the Mother Gangā." One can compare the ceremony to that of the Indian domestic rite to be found in the Indian treatise of *Grihya Sutra*.

The baby is washed after its shaving if possible with lustral water, as a purification and a ceremony of *binding the khwañ* is performed by the relatives of the family. A piece of sacred thread such as one often sees monks holding while making certain recitations, is bound to each wrist and ankle of the baby by all the relatives present. Each one will pronounce a blessing upon the child.

Thus ends the ceremony as it is geneally performed by the common people; but it is otherwise with the well-to-do or the upper class. Here professional astrologers and native brahmins are sought to conduct the ceremony of *tham khwañ* on a grand and elaborate scale. Such a rite is combined with a Buddhist ceremony in which monks are invited to recite certain auspicious passages from the sacred texts. Thus animism, Brahmanism and Buddhism find their way into the life of the people, influencing one another to a certain degree.

In some cases the placenta or after-birth of a baby, which is kept in a receptacle, is placed in an appropriate place within the ceremonial ground. There are also silver and gold coconuts. These precious looking coconuts are simply ordinary ones with silver or gold leaf pasted on them. There are certain rules to be observed when burying the placenta. After the placenta has been buried, the

coconuts are also planted on the spot. In certain cases the child is given its name during this ceremony. The rule to be observed in connection with the burying of the placenta is to be found, if I remember rightly, among the Malays and other races of Oceania. In short, the ceremony of *tham khwañ* in relation to the baby after it is one month old is obviously a traditional ceremony of receiving the child into the family and is observed in different forms among the various races. A baby of less than a month is not yet considered as a member of the family for it may easily die during the time of its birth or after. When it is one month old, it becomes a *he* or a *she* when a ceremony of confirmation can be assuredly performed.

After the afore-said ceremony the child is placed in a cradle for the first time. Before that it lies in a loosely made mattress placed in a wide, flat, shallow, bamboo basket within a small tent or wigwam. Before placing the child in the cradle, a tom-cat and certain articles are placed in the cradle. The articles consist of a stone roller for pulverizing native medicine, a kind of gourd smeared with white toilet powder, small bags containing paddy, sesame seeds and peas, and sometimes also cotton seeds. These articles including the tom cat also form parts of the paraphernalia of house-warmings and weddings. They are included also in the royal ceremony of the assumption of the royal chamber after the King's coronation. As the cat hates water and does not like to wash itself, it is imperative to wash it before the ceremony. It is then sprinkled with scented water and sometimes adorned with a small gold neck chain and anklets. Sometimes on this occasion, besides the cat and other things already mentioned, if the child is a male, a book and a pencil are also placed in the cradle; or if the child is a female, a needle and sewing thread are placed instead.

When everything, including the cat is placed in the cradle, it is pulled thrice, then the cat and other objects are taken out and the child is placed in it and the cradle is also pulled forwards and backwards thrice. The person pulling gives a customary blessing to the child. Sometimes the name of the child, written on small piece of paper, is placed also in the cradle.

The Siamese baby cradle is not a rocking one but is pulled to and fro by a long cord like a swing. Above the cradle there hangs an oblong piece of white cloth like a flapper. On one side of this flapper there is drawn in black outline a figure of a giant standing with knees widely separated. He holds a formidable club in a vertical position with both hands. There are two well-known mystic diagrams on either side of the upper part of the flapper, and around it as a frame there are mystic sentences written in Cambodian script, the sacred alphabetical characters among the Siamese in the old days. On the other side of the flapper is a picture of a female supernatural being with the mythical head of a lion. In her right hand she holds a palmleaf fan and in her left hand a bow. There are also mystic diagrams and mystic sentences round the figure (vide illustrations). A royal baby cradle with such a cloth flapper may be seen in the National Museum in Bangkok. It is seldom seen nowadays among the common people and I do not know whether the tradition is still carried on with reference to royal babies.

The giant in the drawing above mentioned is named Vessuwan in Siamese. He is the same person as the Hindu deity Vaisravana, the God of Wealth, Regent of the East, and chief of yakshas or giants and other evil spirits. His mount in one version is a man.

Why is his picture used in connection with a new born baby? Here we must make a conjecture as there is no explanation on the subject. He is no doubt a guardian or protector of the baby for the human being is his mount which required his protection of course. He may perhaps bestow riches on his "mount" too for he is named also as Nararaj or King of men in allusion to the power of riches. The Chinese call this deity To-Wên and the Japanese Bishamon.

The female supernatural being is called in Siamese *Mae Sü* a purely Thai word which means Purchasing Mother. When a baby is born, after the necessary things have been done, the baby is laid on a kind of flat basket. The midwife then raises the basket and sways it round and round thrice, saying the while, "Three days a

spirit child, four days a human child. Whose child is this? Take it." Some woman sitting near will answer, "It is my child." The midwife passes the basket and the child to that person. The receiver will give a nominal sum of money to the midwife and lay the baby down.

There is no special name in Siamese for the woman receiving the baby from the midwife, but I think she is the *Mae sü* or Purching Mother of that baby. She is therefore in a sense a god-mother. No doubt in the old days a baby born often died within three days after its birth while beyond this period the baby had a chance to survive. Hence "three days a spirit child, four days a human child." It was a popular belief that a man born was through the agency of the *phi*, which meant originally a god or a spirit. When a baby was born the *phi* would come to take the baby within three days after its birth if the baby is a fair one. Perhaps by this reason the *phi* was deceived into believing that someone had already purchased it and the purchaser was one of the *Mae Sü* or Purching Mother.

One may wonder why the names of some person, especially the common folk, sound queer, such as Mr. Buffalo, Mr. Frog, Miss Bad Smell and so on. These are survivals of the good old days when people wanted to deceive the *phi* that the child was only a nobody, a mere buffalo, a frog, or a bad smell being. Naturally, as it was thought, the *phi* would believe this easily. Of course there is usually an actual proper name given to the child, but sometimes the name used to deceive the *phi* stuck on and became his proper name. Any person who knows and understands the common folk will not dare to express his approbation of any baby by saying that he is a beautiful child or a plump and healthy one. He should make a remark that the child is ugly or sickly in order to deceive the *phi*, lest by chance, on hearing that the child is a good and fair one, the *phi* will take the child away, i.e. that the child will die. Such a remark of calling a good thing bad or evil is known as *cacophemism*.

Now the rôle of *Mae Sü* or Purchasing Mother is not confined to a single person. There are a number of *Maë Sü* each with her peculiar position in relation to the baby. There may be a *Mae Sü* peculiar to each day or the week; the *Maë Sü* of heaven, of the sky, of the human world, and some of them reside in the baby's stomach and so on. There is a treatise on these *Mae Sü* to be found in many slabs of stone inscriptions at Wat Phra Jetubon or Wat Po. The story of *Mae Sü* however requires an article by itself.

