

ME POSOP, THE RICE MOTHER

by

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Old people, especially country folk, used to tell their children while taking their meals of rice and condiments to give special consideration to the rice as an act of respect to Me Posop, the Rice Mother. When raising the right hand while carrying a mouthful of rice into the mouth, a person must be careful not to let any rice fall on the floor as such an act is deemed bad manners. To say to a Thai that he has never been trained by his parents is an insult both to him and to his parents. I am told by an Indian friend that the same rule is observed in Southern India. Moreover, one must not step over any grain of boiled rice that has fallen on the floor or on the ground.

Any rice remaining after a meal must not be thrown away, but must be put on the top of new boiled rice in the cooking pot, or, as an alternative, it may be dried in the sun as dried boiled rice (*khao tak*) which may be utilized in the same way as bread crumbs. Such dried boiled rice is commonly used as ready food by country folk while travelling on a long journey. In the old days a soldier on a military expedition carried with him a small bag of such rice. If dried boiled rice is pulverised and mixed with sugar and coconut gratings, it becomes a kind of sweetmeat called *khao tu*.

Before beginning a meal, the father of the household will make a ball out of some of the rice and place it somewhere on the open ground to feed crows or ants as an act of kindness to all living things. Such an act may have been meant as an oblation to the manes like the Hindu *srauddha* to the dead, although it probably received a new interpretation through the influence of Buddhism. After finishing a meal, the children usually raise their hands palm to palm in salutation to the Rice Mother in the same spirit as saying grace after a meal.

The above traditional observances in relation to the taking of meals are seldom observed nowadays, especially in Bangkok, except among young children who sometimes salute the Rice Mother after their meals. Enquiries in outlying districts as to such observances and beliefs elicit some interesting facts. Here is one from Chaiya in one of the southern provinces down the Malay Peninsula.

The people there believe that there is a Rice Goddess named Me Posop, or Mother Posop, who is the guardian deity of mankind. Whoever tills and cultivates the soil ought to worship the Mother, for she will endow him with health and wealth. Whoever does not worship her will suffer as a consequence. He will be emaciated by hunger and sickness, and harassed by poverty. A man who is careful, whether in reaping, threshing or pounding paddy, not to allow any grains to be scattered over the ground, will be happy and wealthy. If no care is taken and the paddy is allowed to be trodden over, or disturbed by animals, or left over in a damp place, the Mother will be angry and leave the careless owner. He will then be unlucky in his occupation.

When referring to the Mother or to the paddy and rice, no impolite and obscene words are to be used. Any rice which is found wanting in boiling and deficient in quality may not be criticised unless a pardon from the Mother has been obtained beforehand. If one is to make a remark that the boiled rice has a musty, disagreeable smell, he ought to say "I beg the Mother's pardon. The rice is hard and unpalatable". or "the rice is smelly".

When feeding animals either with paddy or rice, whether in a raw state or boiled, it must not be heaped or poured on the ground but be placed properly in a vessel. Failure to do so or allowing the paddy and rice to be scattered and strewn on the ground is an act of disrespect to the Mother. She will be angry and leave the man who is such a disrespectful person. Stealing rice or paddy is deemed a very unlucky act of the thief, which nobody unless he is an indecent man dares to do. Even when allotting paddy or rice

among themselves, the people will ask pardon of the Mother for any excess or deficit in quantity as allotted. Every time when a quantity of paddy is taken out of the barn, a pardon is also begged of the Mother. After pounding rice, the pestle must not be placed on the mouth of the mortar. If the pestle which is a heavy one falls down from the mortar, the Mother will be frightened. Here I may be allowed to insert parenthetically that among the Thai, when begging pardon, the hands, palm to palm, are always raised in salutation.

The above traditions in relation to Me Posop, or the Rice Mother, are essentially similar in other parts of the country. They still linger on among the older generations, but may die out soon when the new generation take the field. The traditions are becoming weaker even in outlying districts; in fact, the Rice Mother is often known only in name, not by the observances described above.

In Central Thailand Me Posop is also a well-known name but the customs in connection with her are losing their importance even among the peasants. To what extent the Me Posop cult is now a living force cannot be said with certainty, but the following practices have been observed in connection with rice cultivation.

When rice plants begin to seed we say "the rice begins to be pregnant". At that time the peasants perform the ceremony of *tham khwan* to the rice in the field. *Tham khwan* means to strengthen the *khwan*, *Khwan* is the "vital spirit" which every animate being, whether man, animal or tree, has inherently in his or its body. When a man is badly frightened or becomes ill, the people say that the *khwan* has fled. If the man dies, this means that the *khwan* does not come back. If the man becomes his normal self again after a great fright or a sudden illness, we say that the *khwan* has returned. In every crisis of life, such as birth, puberty, marriage or on other special occasions, a ceremony of *tham khwan* is performed to strengthen the *khwan*; it is, in fact, a sort of mystic confirmation.

Thus when the rice "begins to be pregnant", it is the time of crisis in the life of the plant. A ceremony of *tham khwan* to give strength to the plant is therefore necessary. An auspicious or lucky day is accordingly selected for the performance of this ceremony. The day is usually a Friday which in Thai is *Wan suk*. The latter word *suk* is different in spelling and meaning from the Thai word for happiness but both words are identical in sound. Hence, Friday is usually selected for any auspicious undertaking. The time for performing *tham khwan* is usually from three to five o'clock in the afternoon. A ripe banana cut in small pieces, an orange or whatever citrous fruit one may have, and a few small pieces of sugar cane are placed in a small leaf cup called *krathong*. This leaf cup is put in a *chalom*, a kind of coarse, open-meshed bamboo basket tied at the neck, similar to those we so often see carried by people at railway stations. There is also a tray where a comb and a quantity of toilet powder and some perfumed ointment like hair pomade are placed. Such trays form the toilet tables of country folk. The peasant will hang the leaf cup at the end of a small flag post in the field as an offering to Me Posop. He then takes a small quantity of toilet powder and perfumed ointment, smears them on a certain leaf of the rice plant, then combs it as if he were dressing the hair of the Rice Mother. The peasant then makes a wish that by his offerings of banana, citrous fruit and sugar cane, the enciente Rice Mother will thrive and be free from every danger. A *chaleaw* is set up at the place as a warning that the rice plants are going to run in seed and care must be taken by other people not to allow their buffaloes and cows or other domestic animals to get into the field.

Why is citrous fruit used as an offering to the enciente Rice Mother? A Thai woman in early pregnancy has a strange appetite; citrous fruits are especially craved. This condition of a woman in early pregnancy is called in Thai *phae thong*, or morning sickness.

A *chaleaw* is made of small strips of bamboo interlaced in such a manner as to form a certain pattern, usually a six-pointed figure having open spaces between the slats. A *chaleaw* is obviously

an abbreviated ritualistic fence similiar to those seen in certain ceremonies. *Chaleau* is thus used as a charm to keep off evil spirits. Perhaps it is a sort of *yantra*, or mystic design or diagram. It may be used also in a practical way as a boundary marker, or as a sign of tabu, as it is still used by hill tribes and some illiterate people. A pot in which a decoction of medicine is boiled has a miniature *chaleau* stuck upright on the covering of the pot. The covering is made of banana leaves wrapped around the mouth of the pot, with a small opening for pouring out a quantity of the medicinal decoction as desired, or adding additional water to the decoction when it dries up. The *chaleau* can, therefore, be stuck into the covering of the pot very easily. If the *chaleau* is on the covering of a pot, it is a sign that on no account must the lid be taken off or tampered with. In the past *chaleau* also served other purposes. If stuck somewhere on a boat or other object, such as a cart, for instance, the *chaleau* was equal to a "For Sale" advertisement. A *chaleau* in front of a revenue station served as a notice to warn boats or carts to stop for inspection.

To continue the story of the Rice Mother. After harvesting there may be a few ears of rice left over in the field. These few ears are specially gathered as the spirit of the Rice Mother. The gathering is called "The Invitation of Me Posop". Before picking such ears of rice the gatherer says "O! Me Posop, please come and stay in the barn. Don't stay in the field to be gnawed by mice or pecked by birds. Please go to a happy place to nourish your children. Please come, dear Me Posop, kooh!"

After the harvested rice is threshed, a ceremony of invitation to Me Posop is performed with offerings of boiled rice, boiled duck eggs, sweets and fruits. No meat or fish is offered to her, however. The food prepared for Me Posop is called *kraya buat*, that is, food for a holy or ordained person, not necessarily a Buddhist monk. No doubt it is an echo of a Hindu vegetarianism if we omit the boiled egg. After the above offering, all the paddy of whatever kinds which remain over on the threshing floor are picked up and kept in a bag or a basket. This paddy is called Me Posop's rice,

or the spirit or essence of rice for propagative purposes. A doll is made from rice straw mixed with the ears of paddy which have been gathered from the field as already mentioned. The doll is not clad. It is supposed to be Me Posop herself and is kept carefully with Me Posop's rice in the family barn.

In some parts of the country the offering also includes two pieces of cloth, one to be used as a nether garment for the lower part of the body and another as a scarf for wrapping the upper part. These two pieces of cloth are spread on the threshing floor and the doll is placed on the cloth to signify that Me Posop has now donned her new clothing. In some places a piece of cloth is spread in one corner of the barn as a residence for Me Posop. The doll is placed on the cloth and a set of clothing on a tray is placed before the doll as an offering.

When the paddy is stored in the barn none of it is to be taken out either for sale or for consumption except on certain auspicious days and with the observation of proper ceremonies. Usually the farmer has allotted a certain quantity of paddy for his own consumption before the paddy is stored in the barn. If paddy is to be removed from the barn, a few cups of paddy are first measured out before it can be consumed or sold. The person who measures the paddy in cupfuls must not be a man born in the Year of the Rat or the year of other animals which eat paddy, such as the horse, pig or cow. In Thailand and other parts of the Far East, the years of birth are counted in a traditional cycle of twelve years, each having the name of an animal, that is, rat, cow, tiger, rabbit, big snake, small snake, horse, goat, monkey, cock, dog and pig. "The animals named above are believed to exercise an influence, according to the attributes ascribed to each, over the hour, day, or year to which, through the duodenary cycle of symbols, they respectively appertain". (Mayer, *The Chinese Reader's Manual*, p. 372.) To this popular belief of the Chinese, the Thai have also subscribed. The fortune of a man is bound up, therefore, with the animal of the year of his birth, and calculations in Thai astrology are based on the assumption of this animal year.



Me Posop (front view)



Me Posop (side view)

Me Posop (side view)



When the sowing of rice in the coming rainy season begins, Me Posop in the shape of the doll together with Me Posop's special rice is taken out of the barn. The doll is ceremoniously destroyed; the rice from the ears of paddy in the doll and Me Posop's rice are mixed nominally with the other paddy to be sown. By preparing such a mixture, it is believed that the seeds sown will thrive well. The destruction of the doll is no doubt "the killing of the corn spirit", when in the old days human beings were sacrificed for the crops, and their blood mixed with the soil to ensure fertility before sowing the grain. (See Frazer's *Golden Bough*, Chapter XLVII, Lityerses, and the accounts of the Corn-Mother in other lands, and Chapter XLVI of the same work).

There is a vague and confused folk story of Me Posop, the gist of which is as follows. The gods received an order from the All-High God to go and invite Me Posop to return. Where she had been before she went away and for what reason she had left her former residence, the story does not tell. Nevertheless, this tale bears a resemblance to that of Persephone, the daughter of the Goddess Ceres. The gods sought to find Me Posop by the aid of fish, crossing the Seven Seas and the Seven Mountain Ranges until they came to the Diamond Mountain where the gods found the Mother residing with her attendants. After much coaxing she consented to return to what was no doubt the land of rice fields. The Seven Seas and the Seven Ranges of Mountains were the mythological seas and mountains surrounding the Golden Mount Meru, the abode of the gods of Buddhist cosmology. When the Mother returned, she was followed by a large number of fish. Rice and fish are, of course, the staple foods of the people of Central Thailand. "To prepare rice and fish" and "to take rice and fish" are Thai idioms which mean to prepare food and to take a meal. Pictures of Me Posop represent her as a young woman with long hair set with a diadem. She wears old-style Thai dress like a *lakhon* dancer with a scarf wrapped in the traditional style around her breast with one end overlapping the left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder bare. She holds in her hand a sheaf of rice, but she is seated on a dais the sides of which usually have pictures of fish, rice plants and lotus in water, as shown in the accompanying illustrations.

