

A FUNERAL IN YANG TERNG, CHANGWAT UBOL,
NORTHEAST THAILAND

by

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In the early evening of a hot and clear day toward the middle of the fourth month, the evening before the moon rose full, Nai Pani Jitwong died in his thatched-roof, leaf-walled house in the poorest section of the village behind the Wat. He died a natural death, his family said; he died of old age and heart failure.

Nai Pani's step-son pressed his father's eyelids closed; he put a copper Satang into his father's mouth and closed this, too.

He will need the Satang for the trip to the spirit house. The spirit house is located somewhere in the sky.

I am not sure why this is so, but I think if he does not have the Satang he might lose his way, never finding the house or land of the spirits, returning here to make a crying sound and to shake the walls of the house in anger, perhaps even to make one of us sick.

Yes, sometimes a spirit comes back to visit a family. Sometimes after one or two years. If relatives quarrel, or if the family forgets to feed him. The spirits come back when the people make mistakes.

Tonight we will feed the spirit in the house. The food will be placed near the dead body. Tomorrow the spirit will eat the morning and noon meals in the house, too. After lunch tomorrow, when the body has been taken to the forest and burned, the spirit will be fed in the forest. He will be fed there for three days. Yes, every meal.

After the third day the priests will be fed by the family and some of this merit will be divided with the spirit. Then the feeding of the spirit stops. Sometimes the spirit is fed again when the family has a celebration, or when one of the family enters the priesthood.

All the spirits are always very hungry.

Nai Pu was sent for immediately. At sixty-five with receding hair making a strong line over the top of his head from ear to ear, and tattoos, fading now from his wrinkled brown skin,

covering his body from the shoulders to below the knees, he is the acknowledged leader in all village rituals concerned with death and cremation. He is also the first person to be consulted when someone falls ill and the illness is thought to be caused by a spirit. Nai Pan is consulted first if the illness is not caused by a spirit and the stricken man or woman is most interested in getting one of the home remedies Nai Pan is able to concoct. But then Nai Pan also helps handle the many village spirits.

When Nai Pu arrived at the house he began immediately to direct the activities. Water was boiled and, while two neighbour children held kerosene lamps for light, the body was bathed in the one-room house by the dead man's step-son, a grandson (the son of a daughter by his first wife), the son of a younger sister, and a granddaughter. First the head was washed, then the torso and arms, and then the legs; the feet and toes were washed last.

Sometimes a daughter-in-law or a son-in-law helps, too. Yes, other people may help. Yes, friends may help wash the body. Anybody may help.

After the body had been washed it was smeared with Peeng—the white clay powder mixed with water that Thai villagers everywhere rub on the faces of their children and, sometimes, on their own faces.

The body of a dead person is rubbed all over with Peeng to avoid a bad smell.

Nai Pu and the dead man's wife, Nang Buntawng, and Nang Hawn (a stepdaughter) and Nang Sawang (a granddaughter), helped smear the body with the white paste. The dead man's wife combed his hair.

Together they laid the body on a woven mat and dressed it in trousers and a shirt. Both the shirt and the trousers were put on front to back and a small tear, about an inch in length, was made in each.

Trousers and shirt must be put on front to back; because they are put on a dead body. The buttons must be at the back. Our mothers and fathers taught us it should be done this way.¹

The clothes are torn to inform the spirit of the dead man that the body it once occupied is now dead. Yes, the deliberate tearing tells the dead man this.

But this is also done so that the spirits of those already dead will not be jealous.

If the dead man does not own a shirt and a pair of trousers he is dressed in a sarong, and a Pakhaawma is draped over his shoulders and across his chest.

Taking lengths of cotton thread from an unused skein, Nai Pu tied the big toes together, the knees together, and pressed the hands of the dead man into the Wai-position at the base of his chest. He tied the thumbs together and the wrists, placing flowers, two candles and two joss sticks between the joined palms; then he wrapped several lengths of thread around the chest to secure the elbows. A thread was also tied around the dead man's neck.

The string around his wrists will remind the spirit of the dead man to think of his wife. The string around his neck will remind him of his children. The string around his ankles will remind him of his earthly treasures—his land, his house, his cattle, his gold. These are the things that bind a spirit closely to this world—wife, children, possessions.

The head was then covered with a cloth, and slipping a blanket under the corpse, it was wound and wrapped in this and the ends secured at the legs, the waist, and the shoulders with more lengths of cotton thread. The body lay in state, finally, in the middle of the room, on a mattress and on a mat, the head resting on a dirty pillow and pointing towards the west. Two rough poles, tied to the rafters and fastened at the floor by strips of split bamboo, were set at the head and foot of the covered body, and a string was tied between these poles. This string served as a support for a length of tattered red silk that was

1. Nai Pu's repeated response: "Our fathers and mothers taught us it should be done so" to all "why" questions seemed to indicate that in the village of Yang Terng there was a lot of ritual content but not very much ritual meaning.

wound horizontally around the poles, rolled over the string and secured there by pieces of bamboo split to function as clothes pins. The final effect was that of a long and low pup tent about two feet high and six feet long. For decoration a short length of brightly patterned silk was thrown over the red silk at the head end of the tent.

This protects the body from flies.

Now you wait for one day, two days, or three days. Yes, it is better to wait three days. Four days is the very best. Waiting four days shows respect for the spirit of the dead man.

If you keep a body as long as four days you must have something to absorb the discharges, and the bamboo mat must be smeared with rosin.

If you keep a body four days you put it in the coffin inside the house.

Neighbours and friends had been gathering on the veranda, and when preparations inside had been completed, the young people moved into the single room, to one side of the tent, and began playing the game of Khaaw Cam or Tob Khaaw², a guessing game like "Button, button, who's got the button?", but played with a small grubby wad of glutinous rice instead of a button. The boys formed a team and the girls another. One team covertly circulated the wad of rice from hand to hand and, when they were ready, the other team attempted to guess whose hand contained the rice. In order to guess, an individual team member had to stake a valuable—a watch, a ring a belt, a necklace or chain. If he or she did not correctly guess whose fist held the wad of rice, the valuable was forfeited and the wad of rice recirculated by the same team. If the guess made was correct, the stake was not forfeited and the wad of rice was won for circulation by the other team.

Outside some older men played Sya Kin Mu (Tiger Eats Pig) on a board of sixteen squares indistinctly painted in white on the back of a rice tray. Four tigers and twelve pigs were indicated by two sizes of sticks. The tigers were placed in the

2. There was disagreement in the village about the correct name for this game. Some players said the game was called Khaaw Cam; others said it was called Tob Khaaw.

four corner squares and two pigs were placed in squares chosen by the pig player; the tiger made the first move. A tiger ate a pig by "jumping" it, as in checkers, and, again as in checkers, jumping was only possible when there was an empty square immediately beyond a pig. The game ended either when all the pigs had been eaten or when the pigs had boxed the tigers so that they could not move.

Yes, Tiger-Eats-Pig may be played at other times. No, Khaaw Cam is played only at wakes.

There was conversation out on the veranda, shouting by the game players, some drinking, and a small gathering of people in the compound in front of the house. Children were lying in corners sleeping fitfully. Not far away someone was playing a mandolin. It is the custom in the village to keep the family of the deceased company during the period immediately after death, to play and to chat in their house through the night so that they will not be sad or unhappy—and perhaps, too, so that they will not be terrified by the spirits.

The abbot and two assistants arrived shortly before ten o'clock that first night to chant for a time behind the dead man's red silk tent. Khaaw Cam, being played to the praying priests' immediate right, continued with vigor, and no one outside paid much attention to the recitation either.

Next morning the casket, X-shaped and hollow, was made from rough boards and covered on the outside with two kinds of paper; there were huge pink roses set among very bright green leaves on a white background, and geometric patterns, in violet and dark blue, on a pink background. The upper part of the casket was separated from the lower part by a grill of lashed bamboos on which the body, still wrapped in the blanket and still resting on the mattress and mat, was laid. The casket, now containing the body, was put inside the house at the place where the pup tent had been. A common gable roof frame of split bamboo, consisting of tie beams, principal rafters, a ridge piece, and pole plates, was made and set atop the casket, and this frame was draped with the length of red silk.

Outside on the veranda and in the yard games and conversations continued. Cards had replaced Khaaw Cam, but Tiger-Eats-Pig was still being played with enthusiasm. Chewing betel nut and smoking, those people not playing or conversing squatted on their haunches or sat on the ground killing time until three o'clock in the afternoon, the time when the spirit of the dead man would be ready to come down out of his house and be carried, as his body would be, to the forest to join all the other spirits of the dead.

It doesn't matter who carries the coffin and body from the house.

No, it doesn't matter which end of the coffin is carried out first. But when the dead man is in the coffin and the coffin is on the ox cart being pulled to the forest, his feet must go first.

Early in the afternoon the ox cart that would carry the coffin to the cremation grounds was pushed up to the compound entrance and left there. After lunch the eldest daughter of the dead man had roasted rice in an earthenware pot over an open fire. This would be strewn about the single room when the coffin had been removed from the house to insure that the spirit of the dead man did not linger behind. Nai Pan took care of this ritual as the funeral procession, led by Nai Pu, started for the forest.

As the coffin was being removed from the house and settled firmly on the ox cart, the dead man's wife began a high wailing and keening that the ritual must then have called for. Crouching on the veranda and holding her head in her hands, she rocked and screamed without any emotion and looked about to see that her audible expression of grief was properly appreciated. There were murmurs of approval, smiles and grins and laughter. She had obviously done her bit, and the wailing ceased as abruptly as it had started the moment the procession got underway.

Afternoon is the time for taking the dead to the forest for that is the time the other spirits also come down to the forest. Never in the morning. No, never at noon. Not at one o'clock or two o'clock either. Always after three, yes; when there is soft sunlight. That is when the spirit of the dead man can be in the forest with the spirits of his dead friends and relatives.

Nai Pu, carrying a tin plate that contained a fresh raw egg, eight candles (four twice), rolled banana leaves which held flowers (any kind of flower), and one copper Satang, was out in front with the old men of the village. Behind Nai Pu and the old men came four novices. The novices held a length of cotton rope that was tied to the long rough rope used to pull the cart carrying the coffin. And along the entire length of rough rope (about thirty yards), and on each side, were spread the men of the village interested in attending the cremation. Four men held the cart yoke to keep the cart bed level, and together they pulled the cart along.

On the cart, behind the coffin, and shaded by an umbrella held by his assistant, the Abbot stood reading a text aloud. A few young men pushed the cart from behind. Some old women with baskets of water, a mat, and with little bundles of food for the spirit of the dead man followed in the rear. Nai Saeng was in the rear, too, carrying a coconut. Two men with axes had set out ahead of Nai Pu and the elders to clear the path of any protruding roots or low-hanging branches.

We use candles and flowers and joss sticks at every ceremony.

The copper Satang is an extra one to help pay the dead man's way to the land of the spirits. Maybe this Satang is burned; maybe it is given to the priests.

The procession wound down the narrow track beside the dead man's house, out into the open along the edge of a dried and cracked pond bed adjacent to the Wat, down the road deep in dust which cut across a corner of the village, and into the forest to the west. The forest path led through an arched tunnel formed by the branches of the high Yang trees, through scrub, and through flat open areas where only dry tufts of grass grew.

Two kilometers from the edge of the village was the cremation and burial ground. It was marked by many small mounds of sand that had been piled over bones; some of the mounds had sticks projecting from their centers. Here Nai Pu had already found the exact place desired by the spirit of the dead man for cremation and burial.

As I arrive I look for a good spot. A spot where there are not too many mounds already. When I have found a good spot I throw the egg. If it breaks, that is the place desired by the spirit. If the egg does not break, then I must look for another place and throw the egg again. If the spirit does not like a place the egg will not break, even if the ground is as hard as a stone.

The egg did not break on the first throw and Nai Pu picked it up and threw it again just beyond the place he had first thought the spirit wanted. The egg broke. There four stakes were driven into the ground and the wood, gathered casually by some of the men, was stacked between and about these stakes. Not many people helped with the wood gathering; most of them sat around under the sparse shade of stunted trees or bushes, smoking or chatting.

The wood should be gathered quickly. We could not hurry this afternoon because most of us were tired after being up all night. And it was very hot today.

When enough wood had been gathered for the pyre, the red silk roof was taken from the coffin and the coffin lifted from the ox cart and carried to the pyre. The coffin was rammed against the stack of wood three times and then lifted to the top of this stack.

Anyone may lift the casket from the cart and put it on the pyre; this is a voluntary action. When the casket is pushed against the pyre three times you must not count aloud, I don't know why this is done; no, I don't know why it is done three times. This is the custom. Our fathers and mothers taught us to do it in this way.

Climbing to the top of the pyre Nai Pu and another man, each standing on one side of the open casket, untied the wrappings around the corpse and tossed out the blanket, the mattress, the pillow, and the mat. These were left at the sides of the pyre and eventually burned. Milk of a coconut was poured over the corpse, soaking the clothes and dripping through the bamboo grill onto the wood below. This was followed by a waterproofed

basket of scented water³ that was also poured over the corpse. Before handing the basket to his assistant, Nai Pu used some of this water to rinse his hands. The red cloth that had formed the pup tent and later the roof for the coffin was rolled into a ball and thrown from one side of the pyre to the other, passing over the now open coffin, and caught. This was done three times. On the third throw, however, the thrower misjudged the distance and the bundle of red silk fell into the coffin.

We pour coconut milk and scented water over the body because our mothers and fathers told us this must be done. No, we never question these customs. Yes, we try to follow them as closely as possible.

The red cloth should be caught each time on the opposite side. This action tells the spirit that his body has died and that his relatives have prepared him for burning. Then the cloth is given to the priests who chant a blessing. They keep the cloth until the family redeems it with some money.

Flags made of the same paper that was used to decorate the outside of the coffin, the same flags that had decorated the cart yoke in the procession to the cremation ground, were set on the pyre near the four stakes that had been driven into the ground to brace the fire wood. The eight candles, two at each corner, were placed near the flags and lit. Then the pyre was lit. Most of those present carried a brand -- a stick, a tuft of twisted grass, a section cut from a rosined waterproof basket -- to the pyre to set it aflame. Stepping back and settling themselves comfortably, they watched the blaze.

During the last of these preparations the game of Tii Maphraaw had been started. Using the now empty and discarded coconut shell as a target, and holding a stick about a meter and a half long, the object was to traverse while blindfolded with a Pakhaawma a distance of about ten meters from a starting point

3. Scented water in the village is made by adding any scent to a pot of local water. Scent is bought either at the district center, Muang Samsip, or in the city of Ubol. Available there is "Himalaya Bouquet", "June" by Saville, "Santalia" by K.T. Huang and Son, or "Paradise" by Flora of Switzerland advertised as "the fashion hit for the year 1952" and as "composed of the finest compounds".

to where the coconut had been set on the ground, and, with one swift downward swing of the stick, hit the coconut squarely. The game, played only by the men, continued while the flames consumed the body of the dead man; the game continued until the players got tired or bored and wandered off home. There were five winners among all the participants that afternoon. For hitting the coconut once you were awarded one Satang by the family of the dead man; if you hit the coconut four times you were awarded one Baht. It seemed that you could have as many tries as you liked. Nai Bua won a Baht.

This game is necessary to keep the people happy and amused. If they did not play this game they would become sad sitting watching the fire thinking about death. We always play this game when we cremate.

The amount of money given for prizes depends on how rich a family is.

A few people, Nai Pu among them, stayed to watch the fire to see that the maximum amount of destruction was got out of this first burning. When someone announced that the head was not burning properly and Nai Pu had confirmed this by taking a close look, he sent his assistant with a long pole to poke the head down into the glowing heat of the flames. Shortly after this everyone went home.

That night games were played again and people came to visit all through the night at the dead man's house. This continued for two nights more.

Altogether, four nights. The games are played every night. Both games are necessary. Yes, sometimes we play cards and other games, but these are not necessary.

The next morning, and for a total of three mornings, someone from the dead man's family went to the cremation ground with food for the spirit of the dead man and continued the burning of the body. On the third day a priest went with the family. The bones were collected and put into a new pot. A hole was dug in the burned area and the excavated dirt formed into a mound resembling the shape of a man's body, the head pointing to the east. This they called Uay Hun. The pot was placed on

that part of the mound corresponding to a man's chest and, while the priest chanted, scented water was poured into the pot to wash the bones. Then the top of the pot was covered with the cloth that had been used to cover the man's face while he was lying in state. This had not been burned, but had been hung on a tree near the cremation pyre. It was fastened about the brim with cotton thread and a long tail of thread was left for the priest to hold as he chanted.

Sometimes a spirit does not know he has died. He has not been paying attention. He will stay with the bones for three days.

On the morning of the fourth day a hole was knocked in the bottom of the pot to drain away the scented water; the pot was put into the hole that had been dug in the ground; the dirt figure was broken and used as fill for the hole and for the mound that was made over the hole. No food was brought to the burial ground on this day. Instead, the family asked the spirit to join them for breakfast or lunch at the Wat, for this is Jack Khaaw, the day for distributing food.

Usually one of his sons says, "Oh my father, come back to have some Khaaw Jack at the Wat. Father, when you hear the sound of the drum you should come.

He goes back to the Wat and beats the drum. After the drum has been beaten the family prepares a tray of food. This is given to anyone who can direct the spirit in eating. This person is called Ween.

When the Ween has finished giving these directions, he raises the tray to a priest and asks the priest to sprinkle it with holy water. Holy water is water from our well blessed by the priest. This blessing is called I miina.

Someone must now take the tray from the Ween and bring it to the edge of the Wat compound. No, the Ween cannot do this. A member of the family may do this, but not the Ween.

They let the spirit eat at that place. After the spirit has eaten, the priest will read some scripture. When he has finished a flag is put upright in the ground at the place where the spirit has fed. This flag is made of cloth. The flag pole is short, about the length of a man's forearm.

And after this the priest chants another blessing. This blessing ends the ceremony.

Now the spirit should go.

