

SUPERNATURAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN CHIENGMAI

by

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(Translation from ประเทศไทย และ วัฒนธรรมของเมืองเหนือ and Introduction
by Gehan Wijeyewardene)¹

Introduction

Mr. Sanguan Chotisukharat is a distinguished religious scholar, historian and journalist, well known to everyone in Chiangmai. He has written extensively on the culture of North Thailand and these five papers are offered in translation so that his work may be brought to the notice of those who either read no Thai or have no easy access to his writing. The five papers have in common the fact that they have to do with the supernatural—even the paper on courtship. The belief in supernatural beings and powers is a subject of great interest in Thailand, and in Chiangmai no less than elsewhere. As in other parts of Asia the profusion of beliefs and practices, their complexity and apparent confusion is a matter of great puzzlement to the foreign anthropologist, and to him the work of a scholar describing the culture of his own region is an invaluable guide through the intricate maze of practice and belief. Though Mr. Sanguan is not an anthropologist the way in which he sees the relevance of these customs for the on-going solidarity of the political unit, the family and society as a whole, will be very familiar to the anthropologist. Following his comments, it seems to me that any analysis of Northern Thai supernatural beliefs and practices has to begin with the territorial distribution of shrines and cults. As in many other, if not all, provinces, the focus is the *lak myang*, central city post. In Chiangmai its natural position appears to have been at the centre of the old walled city. This

1) The original Thai versions appear in *Praphe. ni. lae wathana. thany khaung myang nya* published in พ.ศ. 2505 in Bangkok at the Odeon Store. Thai words are transliterated according to the Mary R. Haas system, with a few exceptions. Some phonetic symbols have been replaced by combinations of letters and tones are not identified.

was the guardian shrine for the entire province. Outside the wall, on the northeast, is the shrine *sya myang*. This appears to be the protective shrine for the city itself. Outside the city the framework of the system, if system it is, appears to be given by the village shrines (*sya baan*) and the monastery shrines (*sya wat*). Finally, at the domestic level we find an intriguing reflection of the city. Within the bedroom is the shrine which guards the extended family in the female line. To the north or east of the house is the outside shrine which could, primarily, be the shrine of the house itself. The evidence on this, however, is not clear. Within this framework is an almost infinite proliferation of shrines and spirits.

Mr. Sanguan also raises questions about historical origins. One question we could ask concerns the *lak myang*. It is easy to assume that it is Shaivite in origin, but both the name and similar institutions are reported from the Black and White Tai. Though not impossible, it is unlikely that these are of Hindu origin. Of course seeing the phallic symbolism of a pillar is not the prerogative of India, and generally, following the work of Shorto on the origin of Burmese rituals, we may have to reconsider the historical bases of Southeast Asian popular culture. However that may be, it is clear that popular culture of this kind retains great interest for historians as well as anthropologists.

Gehan Wijeyewardene

I. The Customs of Saw Inthakhin

Before describing the customs, I beg leave to explain *saw inthakhin* itself. First, *saw inthakhin* means the central post of the city, in this case the central post (*lak myang*) of Chiangmai. It is now situated within the precincts of Wat Cheddi Luang, which was built during the reign of Prince Saen Myang in the year B.E. 1955 (1421 A.D.). But originally the post is said to have been in the compound of Wat Inthakhin which is now abandoned. It is situated beside the present Provincial Office, on the southern side. The *saw inthakhin* was moved to Wat Cheddi Luang during the reign of Prince Kavila. It is made of large bricks, and stands about 1 metre high from its pedestal. It stands in the hall of the "four mouths", at the eastern gate of Wat Cheddi Luang. Prince Kavila moved the stone in B.E. 2343 (1800 A.D.), according to the chronicles. The post is the work of ancient Lanna (*the old kingdom or independent principedom of Chiangmai. Trans.*) craftsmen, and is venerated as an object of great power, of prime importance, which has been inherited from ancient times.

In the past propitiatory offerings were made regularly each year. The ceremony was as follows. It was performed at the end of the 8th (northern) lunar month. On the first day of the ceremony, townsmen, including old men and women, youths and young girls went together to the *wat* carrying trays with flowers, incense and candles, and silver bowls of water perfumed with flowers. These are propitiatory offerings. This ceremony must be performed between the 13th day of the waning moon of the 8th (northern) lunar month, and the 8th day of the waxing moon of the 9th month. This is regular, every year; therefore it is said to "enter in the 8th month and come out in the 9th". This is the practice today, but in ancient times there used to be native entertainments, such as *sau*, sword and other native dances. These too, were propitiatory offerings to the guardian deity who protected the city. When these ceremonies were held, *sau* singers who lived in the city, as well as those who lived close by, were bound to come together at *saw inthakhin* and take turns at singing as an offering for the increase of merit. If a singer failed

to come, the Prince of Chiangmai might forbid him or her to practise his (her) art for the rest of his (her) life.

Before the first day of the ceremony, some persons take large baskets and solicit contributions of vegetables, fish and other food from the townfolk, from shops and markets and every house in the city. Everyone should contribute willingly. The food which is collected is offered to the protective deity, the guardian spirit (s) of the city and to the statues of the two demons who guard the *saw inthakhin*. What is left is eaten by the people who come to the ceremony, as those who come from outside the city must stay at the *wat*. Besides the offering of food there used to be animal sacrifices, of buffaloes, oxen and pigs.

Besides these sacrifices there are ceremonies of spirit possession when the spirits of the city are invited to enter mediums. Leaders and officials of the city ask questions about the future fortune of the city and its inhabitants, whether dangers may be expected, whether will be enough rain, if rice, fish and food in general will be plentiful, and what rituals should be performed. When the fate of the city is known, if the future is bad, rituals of a magical kind are likely to be held, to exorcise the evil influences and make them less dangerous. During the time that the rites of *saw inthakhin* are held, rain is likely to fall continuously—in the past it was very powerful. Besides this there is the ritual of prolonging the life of the city (*syb chataa*). In former times this was a very big annual ceremony. It was abandoned after the last war. About two or three years ago the Chiangmai Municipal Council arranged to revive the ceremony. The traditional ceremonies of *saw inthakhin* must be considered a means of increasing and demonstrating the solidarity of the citizens of Chiangmai, for everyone attends to perform the rituals together each day, until the end of the ceremonies.

The history of the erection of *saw inthakhin* is given in the Chronicle of the Late Very Reverend Myyn Wuthijanoo of *wat Cheddi Luang*:

Long ago, the site of the City of Chiengmai was the site of a city of the Lawa. The Lawa who lived here were disturbed by fierce spirits, until the whole city was in an uproar. The god Indra heard the complaints of the inhabitants and decided to help them. He told the inhabitants that they should follow the sacred precepts and pursue the truth, and the city would surely be free of danger. When Indra saw that the Lawa were leading devout lives he created a well of silver, a well of gold and a well of crystal within the city, and let the inhabitants take from them as they desired. At that time there were nine clans among the Lawa. When Indra created the three wells he divided the nine clans into three groups, each of which had the task of looking after one of the wells. These nine clans were virtually the first set of multi-millionaires of Lannathai, and they gave their city the name of Nopburi. Later on the Lawa built the city of Suandauk, and lived in that city in peace and happiness. The news that the city of Nopburi had wells of silver, gold and crystal was rumoured in different cities. The cities that heard the rumours raised armies and marched against Nopburi. The citizens of Nopburi were fearful, and went to a holy man (rishi) and asked him to help them defend themselves against the danger. The rishi informed Indra of the situation. Indra called on the two Kumphan demons to dig up the central *saw inthakhin*. There were many *saw inthakhin*, but the one in Chiengmai is the central one. He ordered the demons to place the post in the city of Nopburi. Through the power of the *saw inthakhin* the warriors of the foreign cities who came to seize the three wells were transformed into traders. The Lawa divided the silver, gold and crystal, and of their own free will gave the traders a share. The traders at first followed the rituals of the Lawa in asking permission before taking any of the precious materials. But later on they behaved uncleanly, and did not follow the rituals of propitiation to the *saw inthakhin* and the demons who guarded it. The demons then took the *saw inthakhin* and returned with it to the heavens. The wells of silver, gold and crystal dried up. Even begging for it did not help, and since then the citizens have been deprived of this wealth. A Lawa elder, grieved by the knowledge

that the post had been taken back to the heavens, became a rishi and lived in the forest. He obeyed the holy precepts and meditated for two years. One day a monk came out of the forest Himaparn and prophesied that the city would fall on evil times, as they no longer had a *saw inthakhin* to worship. The Lawa, in their numbers, called on the monk to help them. He agreed and went to Indra, who said that the citizens of Nopburi should cast a large cauldron, with a thickness of 8 inches, two metres (4 *sauk*) in diameter. A hole 4 metres in depth should be dug in which the cauldron was to be placed. The images of all the animals in the world, a pair of each were to be sculpted, as well as the images of men speaking 117 languages. The images of a pair of elephants, and a pair of horses were also to be sculpted. All these images were to be put in the cauldron, the cauldron closed, and the hole covered with earth. A *saw inthakhin* was then to be placed on top of it. Offerings should be made, just as for the true *saw inthakhin*. The city would then prosper throughout the future. The inhabitants followed the instructions, and since then the city increased in prosperity and the inhabitants lived in happiness and comfort. Since then propitiatory offerings are made to *saw inthakhin*.

In relating this story I have followed the local chronicles. As to their accuracy in every respect, it is up to the reader to investigate for himself, for in the writing of chronicles, the supernatural is always mixed in.

Later on, during the reign of Prince Kavila in Chiangmai, it is likely that the original *saw inthakhin* was in a dilapidated condition, suffering the effects of age. His Highness therefore had the statue of the giants Kumphan and the rishi made and placed together with the *saw inthakhin*. These statues of the demons were said, in the past, to have great power. If anyone defecated near them, he was sure to suffer serious harm. Later on the teacher Bathoem Wad-waenfang felt that the statues were too dangerous and performed a magical rite to remove their heads and replace them again. After this their magical powers disappeared.

This is about as much as is known concerning the *saw inthakhin*.

2. Courting and the placation of Spirits

Courting and the placation of spirits are customs of the Northern Thai. Today, in the city and in the more developed regions, these customs are no longer popular. They are found, however, in the country, outside the city limits in various communes (*tambon*). There, these are still respected customs. Courting usually takes place at dusk, when it is cool, after the evening meal.

Youths (*num* in Thai, *baan* in Northern Thai) dress up, powder their faces, comb their hair, and when they are ready go visiting the houses of young girls. The girls too, beautify themselves and sit working in their houses. The work they do is for example, rolling cigarettes, sewing, cutting and stringing betel nut, and weaving, depending on the occupation of the particular village or district. They sit, killing time until the youths come courting and "talk them up". Some girls may pound rice in the yard, but nowadays pounding rice is very rare in most districts; the small mechanical rice mills have taken its place.

When the youths come to the house of the young girl, they will go up the steps and sit chatting. The parents of the girl will usually allow them to talk freely. What is important is that no disrespect should be shown, nor should the youths' behavior infringe on the rights of the girl. If this is not respected, such behaviour will certainly not escape retribution. If you speak and behave politely, when the parents of the girl are pleased, they will allow you to talk for as long as you like. But sometimes, if it get too late, the sound of the clearing of throats and coughing will be heard from the bedroom of the parents who have been lying down and listening. If this should happen, it is a sign that it is time to leave. If you don't, worse will follow, and it is impossible to prophesy if the result will be a cold or a hot war.

Chatting to girls is usually done in flowery language which is called *kham khrya*.

(Sanguan gives an example at this point, first in Northern Thai and then in Central Thai. Curiously, the translation is different from the original.

In Northern Thai the verse has the following sense: 'You are so beautiful, you put the looking glass to shame. If you were any more beautiful you would be like the mother of the Lord Buddha.' The Thai translation, however, says, 'You are the beautiful daughter of a beautiful mother. If you were any more beautiful you would be a goddess.' Trans.)

The young girl will deprecate herself in reply: "The appearance of your 'younger sister' is not beautiful. She looks like the creation of a ghost, or like the chestnut bittern² which has alighted in the rice fields."

Young village boys and girls are highly skilled in using this kind of language, but city boys and girls have lost this skill, for they are all very 'civilized' now. If you wish to see courting in its traditional form you must 'invest' in a trip to the 'outback' where you will see these customs which are full of interest. In addition to *kham khrya*, long songs known as *Khaaw* are sung. But for this the couple must be in love with each other and call each other *tua pau* and *tua mae*, for at this time when they are in love *phid phii* or *sia phii* may arise. For if the girl is agreeable and 'petting' or more takes place, they will 'offend the spirits' (*phid phii* or *sia phii*). They should go slow about this, as they should know each other's feelings and intentions. A young man who sees a pretty girl, and talks to her for the space of a single watch (three hours) cannot *phid phii* in that short space of time. Behaving in that manner is held to be very disparaging and very insulting. Such behaviour will bring dire consequences on the offender, and there will be no protection for the one guilty of such offensiveness. The relatives of the girl are likely to 'teach him a good lesson'.

Phid phii or *sia phii* cannot be interpreted as bringing about a marriage; it is only a preliminary. After *phid phii* and *sia phii* are completed according to custom, there still must be a wedding ceremony (*kaan tengngaan*) or as the Northerners say, the 'feeding of the guests' (*kin khaek*). But if the parties are very poor, they may only perform the ritual of *sia phii*; this is sufficient.

2) นกเขน

There are two forms of *phid phii*. When the youth 'offends the spirits' i.e. touches any part of the girl's body—even holding hands or touching her arm are considered an 'offence'—if the girl is willing 'to share her joy and sorrow with the youth', she will have her father or mother, or relatives go and 'promise', that is, tell the boy's father or mother or head of his family, that the boy has 'offended' the girl's spirits, and arrange for the customary payment to the spirits, and for the marriage. This is known as *saj aw*,—i.e. payment leading to marriage.

The other form is known as *saj maj aw*, i.e., payment without marriage. It means that either the youth or the girl is not willing to join their lives together. *Sia phii* of this type calls for a larger payment than the other, for it is very shameful. The greater the intimacy the greater the shame, and fellow villagers will abuse and gossip about them throughout the village. Therefore before there is any offence to the spirits, the young couple should understand each other very well, so that no misfortune or disgrace may come of it. A girl who has been rejected by a youth after *phid phii*, or who is not looked after properly as a daughter or wife is censured as being easily moved and easily fooled. Many girls have been deceived by youths in this way and have had to leave their homes and live elsewhere.

The ceremony of *sia phii* or *saj phii* requires boiled pig's head, cakes, rice, porridge, flowers, candles and incense, and liquor—sometimes also chicken soup. This depends on the "owner" of the spirits (*caw phii*) i.e. the father and mother of the girl. Money, the cost of placating the spirits, is also usually paid. There is no specific amount—it depends on the family of the girl. It may be anything from 6 to 1000 Baht. These are the payments made by the man's family to the girl's. On the girl's side too there may be offerings made to the spirits—at the spirit house, which may be in the compound of the house. If not, there may be a shelf in the house, in line with the house post on the side the head is laid when sleeping. The offerings are made at one of these two places. When the ceremony is finished the boy's relatives have the right to enter the house of the girl. It means that they are now united with the girl's family.

After the ceremony of *sia phii* there is the ceremony of "crossing" the spirits (*khwai phii*), i.e. the girl's family takes candles and incense to the spirits of the boy, to inform them that they are now united.

The customs of *phid phii* and *sia phii* must arise from the understanding and mutual regard between the two families involved in a marriage—so that the two families must be of one mind. If people have to use threats or use force through complaints at the District Office, then there cannot be good will. Another thing, *phid phii* does not only involve the touching of a girl as related above. Going into private and forbidden places such as the bedroom, is also believed to be an offence against the spirits. Therefore those of you who go visiting girls in the countryside, beware that you do not do anything disrespectful by going into places which are forbidden, as you will have to propitiate the spirits according to custom, even without having had the opportunity of touching the girl.

These practices probably differ from place to place. What has been described are the customs of *phid phii* and courting in some districts and communes of Chiangmai province only.

3. The Dance of the "Ant"³ Ghosts

The dance of the ant (*mod*) ghosts is a dance performed as a propitiatory offering to the ancestor spirits. The origin of the dance, to what race of people it belongs, is unknown. There is only speculation, and the oral evidence of old people still alive. There are two varieties of the dance—the first is the dance of the *mod* ghosts itself, the other is the dance of the *meng* ghosts. They differ only in very minor details, e.g. in the *mod* dance there is no pot of *plaa raa* (slightly decomposed pickled fish), while in the *meng* dance a pot of *plaa raa* is offered to the spirits. I do not know if this offering of fish has any meaning, for the old people who were asked merely say that it is a custom that has come down to them since the beginning (of the dance). It may be that these people enjoy *plaa raa*. This is merely speculation—in any case it is not the Northern Thai nor the Central

3) I have misgivings about the use of the word "ant". It is likely that ๓ in this context has nothing at all to do with "ant".

Thai, but the Northeasterners who like to eat *plaa raa*. Even so it is not every household (in the Northeast), but one sees *plaa raa* on sale everywhere. Because of this it is better not to worry too much about this problem—it can only give one a headache.

The dance of the *mod* ghosts must be performed during the months of May and June. The dancers must be of one family (lineage). When they have completed the necessary period—in some families it is three years, in others once a year, and some do not have a specified period—the ceremony may be held. In the case of the third category, they hold the celebration in any year in which they feel they have enough money. Sometimes when someone in the family is ill, they must “inform” the ancestor spirits, and they must perform the ceremony at the same time. When the ceremony is held money must be spent on feeding and entertaining the relatives who come to perform the ceremony together.

For the dance it is necessary to prepare a pavilion (called *phaam* in the North) in the compound of the house. Sometimes a tent may be borrowed. In the pavilion will be various offerings—a pig’s head, drink, chicken and liquor, flowers, incense and candles, cakes and rice porridge—in vessels placed on a ledge, like a wall shelf but about a metre high, in the middle of the pavilion. A white cloth is hung in the middle of the pavilion, reaching the floor. On the day of the ceremony an old woman, the head of the family (lineage), leads all her children, nephews, nieces and grandchildren—the whole lineage—makes sacrifices to the ancestors, and prays for happiness and good fortune in the future for the whole family, that they may be blessed in their occupations. She lights incense and candles. This worship must be done at the spirit house. Those who worship the *mod* spirits must build a spirit house. This may be built anywhere in the compound, but in the direction in which the head is placed while sleeping. After the offerings are made, the spirit is invoked; the spirit is likely to be referred to as *caw phau*. For invoking the spirit there must be a medium (*tii nang* in N. Thai, *khon song* in Thai) to perform the rites. When invoking the spirit a tray of flowers is offered, as is obligatory in all such rituals. When

the spirit enters the medium, her appearance changes, for example her features are distorted. The *caw phau* will take the liquor which is offered and drink till the medium's eyes are bright red. Questions will be asked of the spirit by the relatives. The medium refers to the relatives as *len nauj*, little great-grandchildren. When the questions are over the spirit will be asked to leave the medium. After that there will be dancing; this is an offering to the spirit. Old women, members of the family, must start the dancing. Before dancing the dancers must go behind the white screen in the pavilion and dress themselves up. It is something that makes you dizzy, watching the dancers go in and out to change their clothes all the time—if you close your eyes for a moment they have changed their clothes. This and the rhythm of the drums to which they dance—drums which have been hired—have a hypnotic effect. These loud drums are called *tengthing* in the north. There are also supporting instruments—a two-sided drum, a rhythm drum, a xylophone, flutes, Javanese flutes, alto-cymbals, and small gongs—for beating out the rhythm. For those of you who visit the North and wish to see these instruments, they may be seen in any boxing stadium when there is a fight on, for in the North they are used to encourage the boxers. In Central Thailand a Javanese flute is used for the rhythm when the boxers are fighting, but in the North the drum is used. It is as if this kind of drum provides more inspiration. I do not know its origin. It is used extensively in funeral processions, but the tune is different.

The musicians play on in the section of the pavilion reserved for them. The dancers continue dancing, each one who stops being replaced by another, but all the dancing is in the same manner. While dancing they keep changing their clothes behind the screen in the pavilion. There is one rule, however; those who dance must belong to the same lineage. In the late afternoon young girls are also likely to dance. Men do not dance, but it is said that in the past they used to do various types of sword dance. There are sword dances today as well, but not by men, women dance instead. The dances do not have very much art about them, they merely follow custom.

Oh! In the dancing itself there is a changing of clothes as well. The dancers prepare different clothes before they begin dancing, and place them on the side of the pavilion. There are no trousers among these clothes, only sarongs and scarves in the Burmese or Mon style. I therefore think that these are Mon customs. The Northern Thai call the Mon "Meng". Chronicles refer to them as the Meng-khabudr, or Mon, Raman or Taleng, they are all the same people, I feel therefore that the dances of the *mod* and *meng* spirits must be Mon customs, but I do not know if among the Mon there are dances of this kind.

These dances are not sacrificial dances to dangerous spirits such as are found among the island and sea peoples of the South, dancing round a piled-up fire. The *mod* and *meng* dances, as old people have told me in conversation, are a means by which believers make offerings and pay respects to their ancestors. They are the spirits of their forbears, or even their parents who have died—for they believe that when the members of the family die, their spirits (*winjaan*) will come and live together in one place—that is in the spirit house, and everyone must respect the dead ancestors. Some people with untroubled countenance, the younger relatives of someone recently deceased, will tell you that the dead person is now living with *caw phau* in the spirit house.

At the spirit house, flowers, incense and candles will be offered everyday as a propitiatory offering to the ancestors. This is better than the worship of fierce wild spirits.

These ceremonies are still found, but not among every family in the North—only those who believe in the *mod* and *meng* spirits. Others who simply believe in the spirits of the ancestors worship through the offering of pig's head, duck, chicken and alcohol, there is no dance made as an offering. But this too expresses the same worship and respect for the ancestors, only the ritual is different.

It is from these beliefs that the customs of *phid phii* and *sia phii* have arisen.

The spirit dances are likely to be performed from early morning till dusk. The programme is usually as follows: In the morning there is ordinary dancing. A little later before noon, there is a "cock-fighting dance". In the afternoon there is the dance of *len sabaa* and the fireworks dance, and at dusk the elephant dance. This is the end of the dancing. The spirit is asked to return to the spirit house and the ceremonies are at an end.

4. Building a House

Among the customs of the inhabitants of Lannathai or of the Northern region of our country, are customs concerning the erection of the house posts. First of all I shall describe the erection of the posts which are held to be most important in building the house. There are two of these posts; the first is called the *saw mongkhon* (the post of good fortune), the other is called the *saw naang* (the lady post). Since ancient times it was believed that if the correct rituals are not performed when erecting these posts, the inhabitants of the house will never have peace or good fortune.

Before describing the erection of the *saw mongkhon*, the writer begs leave to say something about the custom of *pok ryan* (the erection of the house posts). In the past the Northern Thai would help each other with great energy and co-operative spirit, in a most praise-worthy manner. Some people were even willing to sacrifice time from their own work, without any thought of payment for their labour, or any other kind of return. They believed that the building of a house necessitated helping each other because it was concerned with the stability and durability of the village. This belief still continues.

The erection of the house posts is usually done at daybreak. Because the air is cool and comfortable, and the sun not strong, the work is no hardship. Before the job is begun the owner must go to a ritual expert and have him choose a propitious time, either through consulting the texts, or through divination. Again, the building of a house should be done during an even-numbered month, e.g. the sixth or eighth month. The tenth month is believed to be unpropitious.

Before the actual erection of the posts the holes for the posts must be prepared. There are rituals connected with the diggings of the holes as well. Before they are dug the owner must consult the diviner or scholar about which hole should be dug first (i.e. at which cardinal point), and where the soil from the hole should be put. According to ancient tradition it is believed that "if a house is built in the sixth month or the eighth month, the pole is placed with its top towards the north, the hole is dug and the earth deposited in the south, during the second and twelfth months, the end of the post is placed pointing to the north, the earth deposited in the south, during the fourth month the top to the south and the earth in the east".

Before the rituals are performed, the owner will go to his neighbours and ask for help, or his intimates will help, because it is believed that it is nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary, if the owner does not inform his neighbours and friends, they will think he has something to hide. Sometimes they will be annoyed and angry. But if someone is busy and cannot come, this is not considered blameworthy in any way. This helping each other is one of the best aspects of Northern culture and had been practised since the beginning.

On the day of the ceremony those who adhere strictly to ancient tradition will make offerings to the Lord of the Place (*caw thii* or *panjanaak*). During ancient times the Northern Thai had the belief that *panjanaak* (called *luang* in the North) was a beast which had great power as the lord of earth and sky, and had the power to bestow good fortune or danger and bad fortune on human beings. Therefore before the building of a house, depending on the owner's beliefs, offerings may be made to the Lord of the Place and the Earth.

The rituals connected with offerings to *panjanaak* or *caw phii* are as follows. The central point of the compound is found by measuring from the four corners. At this spot a hole is dug, about 10 inches deep (1 *khyb*) and 10 inches wide. Into the hole is put a lump of rice and sweet meats, a little bit of each kind. Then the diviner or teacher will recite the following *kathaa* :

com namoo naakkha raachaa mahaa naakkha
 rachaa sawaahung nakkha rachaa imatsaming
 lookee vimat samying nakalee suwanna
 ratchacataa samaniwaa aakasajjaa aakataahi
 phunchantu sawahung⁴

When this has been recited three times *panjanaak* is invited to partake of the food which has been offered. The hole is then covered up, and the ceremony is over.

Apart from this there is the ritual of exorcising evil influences (*khyd*) from the posts which will later be ritually erected. The doctor or diviner will prepare a *satuang* (a rectangular vessel made of banana trunk about 10 inches wide). He will then put in rice, fish, sweet and scented food of different kinds, oranges and other fruit cigarettes betel nut and pickled tea—a little of each. Four of these will be placed at each of the cardinal points by the diviner, and another at the centre of the compound, at the spot where the offering was made to *caw thii* as described above. The diviner will then read propitiatory verses and will use a knife and axe to chip the base of the post. He takes the chippings and then puts them in the *satuang* at the four corners of the house. The *satuang* which was at the centre of the compound he will float down some waterway. With this the ritual is complete.

After this the posts may be erected. The *saw mongkhon* or primary post (*saw ek*) must be erected first. Then the *saw nang* is erected and then as many other posts as are necessary.

It has already been said that the *saw mongkhon* forms a pair with the *saw nang*. The *saw mongkhon* must be chosen from tougher wood than the other posts. It is decorated with coconuts, banana

4) The Sanskrit form of this *mon* (*montra*) is

Om namo Nāgarāja, mahānāgarāja savāhum nāgarāja ! imasmin
 loke vimasa samaṃ nikhile suvarṇa rājatra āmanīvā akasaiya akas-
 sahi phunjantu savāhum

The Sanskritists I consulted are not entirely sure as to the meaning of the last line. Perhaps the gloss should read :

“A *mon* (मन्त्र) derived from Sanskrit, which invokes the blessing of Nagaraja or *panjanaak*, the Cobra God.”

shoots, bunches of bananas, gold and silver paper. A man's cloth is tied round the *saw mongkhon*. The *saw nang* is also decorated in the same manner, except that a woman's cloth is tied around it. Besides white and red cloth are wound around the posts.

Carpenters (*salaa*) have told the writer that when cutting these two posts, in order that the *saw mongkhon* may be most beneficial and powerful, and that the power may not be lost, they must perform a ritual of cutting and decorating the post. For this ritual a carpenter must be found who is skilled in his craft, in order that he may remove the evil influence in the post. Before cutting the post *tang khan* must be performed according to custom. *Tang khan* is a Northern custom which expresses respect for the person who will perform the ritual; it is similar to the custom of *jok khruu*, paying respects to one's teacher as performed in the central region. *Tang khan* is the same. Things which are put in the *khan* must be prepared. They are a string of dried betel nut (these chains are on sale in Northern markets), white and red cloth, a measure of milled rice, flowers, candles and incense, and one *wing* (12 *satang*) in old Thai one *satang* pieces. Sometimes it may be one rupee, 3 rupees or 6 rupees. This depends on the expert, he is the one who decides it. Besides this there is a bottle of liquor, and sometimes there are chicken soup and boiled eggs as well.

When the offerings have been made the carpenter or the expert (*acaan*) perform the ritual of cutting the post according to the texts. That is, he speaks an incantation over the axe or knife which he will use to cut the post. While cutting the post he also says a *kathaa* to coerce the spirit (lady) of the tree. When the ritual is over the tree is made into the *saw mongkhon* without the fear that there will be any evil influence, but with the knowledge that it will have a beneficial influence on the house and its occupants. In ancient times when the *saw mongkhon* and *saw nang* were being cut, it was necessary to find a villager with a name such as Golden Crystal, Silver, Golden Pledge, Constancy, to help carry the post and to erect it. This was in order to bring good fortune to the owner of the house. Before the post is erected leaves of various kinds are put in and buried in each hole. It is believed that this is a method of fortifying the

house, of bringing prosperity and wealth. These two posts should be in a straight line opposite each other. The *saw mongkhon* is on the side the head is placed while sleeping (the second post on the head side in the bedroom) and the *saw nang* on the feet side, directly opposite.

When erecting the posts the *saw mongkhon* must be erected first, the *saw nang* and the other posts afterwards. Each post is likely to have cabalistic signs attached to the top. These cabalistic signs are drawn on white and red cloth, on zinc or silver sheets, depending on the status of the owner. These are protection against evil influences. When the posts are all erected, they will be tied round with holy thread. After three or seven days, the objects on the posts may be removed.

In ancient times the two posts *mongkhon* and *nang* were greatly respected as things bringing prosperity and protection against evil. They had to be looked after and kept clean. No one should urinate or do anything dirty near them. Some people have a shelf in the bedroom. On the shelf are placed flowers, candles and incense as a form of worship. If the house falls down through age, or if the owner moves the house to another site, the *saw mongkhon* and *saw nang* must be kept apart. They cannot be used for any other purpose. If they are used evil will befall the person or persons concerned.

These customs concerning the two posts are practised by the people of Lannathai since ancient times, and are held to be part of their tradition. Although in the opinion of some modern groups, these practices are nonsensical, they do have a value for the believer. They give him confidence and thereby bring good fortune, and also dispose his mind towards things which are good and beneficial. It is like the collector of holy talismans, whose belief in the power of the Lord Buddha gives him strength, enthusiasm and a good spirit. The practices described here have a similar effect.

5. Rituals of Healing

The practices called *song khrau* are one type of magical ritual of the Northern Thai, which involve propitiatory offerings to ward off misfortune through worship, and to transform bad into good fortune. These rituals are usually performed when someone is sick

or faced with serious trouble. According to belief, the rituals of *song khrau* allow the individual who is ill or in danger to alleviate or escape the misfortune that threatens him. In the past these rituals were extremely popular, but today they are fast disappearing. There are those who still believe and practice them, but they are mostly old and traditionalist folk, and those in the countryside far away from the sights and sounds of city culture.

Moreover not everyone can perform the rituals. The man who performs them must be an old man who has been a monk, has studied, obeyed the precepts of and eaten as a monk. He must be a *naan*, i.e. one who has left the monkhood. They believe that one who has not been initiated into the monkhood cannot be an *acaan*. People perhaps feel that learning alone is not sufficient to achieve that status. This necessity for an *acaan* (learned man) to have the status of *naan* has come down from ancient times. There is an old saying that "it is not good to have a *nauj*⁵ as an *acaan* and a *naan* as a *kae wad*". A *kae wad* is a layman who acts as the agent of the monks. The reason why an ex-monk is not suitable as a *kae wad* is, according to traditional belief, because such men are over-cautious and fearful. The lay agent must be quick-witted and quick-limbed to perform his duties efficiently.

Now that it is understood that the man performing the ritual must have the spiritual power of a *naan*, I shall go on to describe the rituals themselves. When someone is so ill that he has to take to his bed and all treatment has failed to alleviate his condition, or he continues to get worse, the parents, relatives, husband or wife of the patient will consult a diviner about the fate of the sick man—what supernatural being or cause is responsible—and if a ghost or spirit is responsible, from which direction has this evil influence come. The diviner having consulted his books or other equipment, will tell the relatives of the sick man whether the sickness has been caused by a ghost or tree spirit and from where, what propitiatory rituals should be performed and what offerings should be made to lessen the hostility and anger of the spirit. If these things are done the sickness

5) One who has left the novitiate.

may be cured. There are many types of propitiation; there is the *songkhraua naaraa*, *song tua coon*, *song thaen*, *song thaw thang sii*, *song pikajak* and many others. They do not differ very much from each other. Before any of them *tang khan* has to be performed for the *acaan*. The things which are offered to the *acaan* are betel nut and betel leaf, cigarettes, white and red cloth, and the "teacher's fee"—the *acaan* himself will inform the relatives of these. In former times the teacher's fee was from half a *win*, i.e. 6 satang up to 1, 2, 3, or 4 rupees. But now the fee has gone up, 3, 6, 12, Baht and so on in series. Apart from the above the offerings to the *acaan* must include liquor, either a small beer bottle full or a large one. When the ceremony is over the *acaan* will either share it with the others present or he may not. This is his right as it is an offering made for his consumption.

When the *tang khan* has been prepared, the offerings for the ritual itself must be prepared. Again, the *acaan* will give directions as to what should be included, usually these include small triangular flags, about two inches wide, made of paper of different colours—usually white, red, black and yellow. The number and colours necessary will be prescribed by the *acaan*, but they are usually multiples of three, 3, 6, 9, 12 etc. Why this should be I do not know, and when asked the only answer people give is that the text-books prescribe it thus.

Besides this, clay figures of humans and animals are used. The animals are, for example, ox, buffalo, tiger, snake, chicken and elephant. Also bananas, sugar cane, betel nut, chillies, cigarettes, pickled tea, and cooked rice. Other kinds of food used are curries of raw and cooked meat, and sweetmeats—a little of each. When it is *song pikajak*, i.e. an offering to a demon, there must be raw meat cut into little pieces as well. The *acaan* will then ask for banana bark out of which a *krathong* of size 10 by 24 inches—this is about the largest—is made. The offerings are put in the *krathong* or *sataung* as it is called in the North. When it is ready the *acaan* will take the *satuang* to a fork or crossroads, or to one of the cardinal points, depending on where the evil influence comes from. He will spread a loin cloth, light candles and incense and worship the ghost or spirit

concerned, according to custom. He will raise the *satuang* above his head and invite or entreat the ghost or protective spirit to receive the offering. He then places the *satuang* on the ground and recites propitiatory verses from his text book in a loud voice. In this invocation there is likely to be included the name of the sick man, an offering on his behalf and an entreaty to allow him to get well again. Sometimes if it is a greedy or dangerous spirit, it will be abused and told that when it eats the offering it should get out and go somewhere else, and not bother them again. It should take away the bad influence which it has brought on the sick man and not intrude again in the future. Sometimes forgiveness for any wrong the sick man may have done is asked—intentional or unintentional. When the ritual is over the *satuang* is left on the spot for the birds, dogs and monkeys to divide among themselves. The *acaan* returns to the patient's house for his fee and other offerings. Sometimes he may bind the wrists of the sick man—it is a means of increasing his strength.

This method of *songkhrau* is more powerful than others. The ritual of *song thaen* comes from the word *thien* which means "sky". The "ancients" believed that the ancestors of all men lived in the heavens and were called *puuthaen jaa thaen*. These beings have the power to cause sickness and various misfortunes. Offerings and sacrifices to them are ways of asking forgiveness, of beseeching *puuthaen jaathaen* to remove or lighten punishment. If they do not consent this could mean the death of the sufferer. In my experience *song thaen* does not imply that the sufferer is freed of all his misfortunes. In some serious cases the *acaan* can hardly finish the ritual before the man is dead. Suffering is more a consequence of fate or merit (or demerit). Whatever the case may be there are in the countryside people who place faith in the rituals of *song khrau*, and their numbers are not small either.

