

On the Believability of Northern Thai Spirit Mediums

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The notion of belief in a proposition seems to have two components: 1. Saying that one believes, with apparent sincerity, and 2. How a rational person, with known values, would behave if he took the proposition to be true. Thais seem to recognize these two components. The Thai term *chûa* means not only "to believe," but also "to obey," thus recognizing the link between belief and behavior. More than one Thai has said to me, "I don't believe in spirits, but I'm afraid of them all the same." This phrase indicates the recognition of both a connection and a disjunction between their stated belief on the one hand, and their emotional states and behavior on the other. They seem to take belief, as perhaps Westerners do too, as a mental state that is generally, but not always, indexed by behavior. There are instances when behavior may not, because of the introduction of irrational elements, be consistent with belief. From the point of view of a second party, our informant's claim of non-belief in spirits may not be credible. "He says he doesn't believe, but deep down he does." I do not propose here to clarify the question of what a belief is, or what Northern Thais really believe. For my present purposes, what a person says he believes, with an appearance of sincerity, is what he believes.

Thais have a word, *withayaasàat*, for science, and another, *sàatsanāa*, for religion. However, by *sàatsanāa*, they refer only to Buddhism and perhaps to certain other closely associated Brahministic notions. There is a diverse set of beliefs, including faith in magic, divination, and spirits, which appears to have no general cover term in Thai. Sometimes they will use the word *sāyyaasàat* (black magic) in a synecdochical way to talk about the occult in general. I will adopt this usage. Thais see no conflict between *sàatsanāa* and science, but many educated Thais accept that *sāyyaasàat* is inconsistent with science. Although these educated Thais will grant that science is right and *sāyyaasàat* must be wrong, many of them admit that *sāyyaasàat* still has a grip on them. They go to diviners, seek the help of spirit mediums, and fear evil spirits. I expect that they express themselves in this way more frequently in conversations with Westerners, but they seem quite willing to do so in the presence of other Thais.

In this paper, I want to examine the interplay of belief and scepticism in a particular sort of spirit mediumship. Spirit mediums play an important role in Northern Thai life. In the villages, mediums are possessed by one of the village guardian spirits. All the possessing spirits that I heard about were male, whereas the great majority of the mediums are female. In Sang Ton Village, Chiang Mai Province, where I worked, there were four guardian spirits, with shrines on the outskirts of the village. The spirits resided in these shrines. It is supposed, in accordance with Buddhist doctrine, that these spirits will someday be reincarnated when they have worked off their *karma*. However, for practical purposes, they are permanent. The spirit world is conceived to be very much like the human world. The spirits have physiognomies, although they can only be seen by other spirits or by mediums in their dreams. They want to be fed, and some apparently have use, or at least desire, for money. Four times each lunar month, on the Buddhist holy days, the spirits of Chiang Mai Province, or perhaps of the entire Northern region, congregate in a cave in the district of Chiangdaw for a meeting, at which they discuss their problems and activities. Consequently, mediums cannot become possessed on these days. Spirit society is hierarchically organized along the same lines as the Thai government, with head spirits for local areas, for districts, and for provinces.

San Ton Village had two active and two retired mediums, all women. People become mediums only by being called by the spirit. All the village mediums told the same story. They suffered from persistent illness. Eventually they went to see a spirit medium, who told them that a spirit wanted them as his "horse". Once they became mediums, their health improved, though they might have had to observe certain restrictions on their diet, travel, or other aspects of behavior such as attendance at funerals. One of the village mediums was well known and got clients from many other villages, and even from Lamphun Province. She has become quite prosperous by village standards from the proceeds of her vocation. Each medium has a one room structure that is used solely for spirit possession. The possessions that I saw were not at all spectacular. The medium would usually sit quietly for a bit, and then put on, over her regular clothes, a shirt, a sash, and a headband. She would turn her back on her clients for a few seconds, perhaps to do something with her ritual apparatus on a shelf on the back wall, and when she turned around again, she was possessed. One of the mediums that I observed changed dialects when she was possessed. Another drank quantities of whiskey, although she did not drink in her ordinary life. But Suni, the well known medium of Sang Ton, did not give such obvious signs of possession, although some claimed to notice subtle changes in her physical appearance. She herself claimed that her skin became cool, and on one occasion, in response perhaps to the presence of my wife and myself, had

people touch her arm to verify that it was indeed cooler than normal. The major change was that she became talkative and authoritative—something of a raconteur.

While she was possessed, she was addressed as *câaw phâa*, ("Lord Father"), or rather the spirit who possessed her was so addressed. Clients would usually kowtow to the spirit. She appeared to get somewhere between fifteen and thirty clients each week. The spirit was not available on holy days nor on *wan si'ā* (inauspicious days), which in that year happened to fall on Wednesdays. In addition, the spirit was occasionally unavailable because he was "away on business," for example: trying to find someone's husband who had gone to Saudi Arabia to work and had not been heard from in some time. When she was not possessed, Suni was considered a very ordinary village woman, and no one came to her for special help or advice. People came to the spirit, however, with a great range of problems, some quite personal. Most of the problems were health related, but people also came to request help with domestic or occupational problems; to find missing persons and objects; to ask for protective amulets; and even to ask for lottery numbers. I saw three different mediums suggest winning lottery numbers, they were all losers, but people did not seem to expect much, and were not visibly disillusioned. Of all the mysteries of the Northern Thai universe, the lottery is perhaps the most mysterious, beyond even the comprehension of the spirits.

It appeared that almost all the villagers believed in mediums, and it was commonly believed that all mediums were genuine, that no one faked it. They said that if someone faked it people could tell, and that anyway no one would dare to fake for fear of retaliation from the spirits. However, although all mediums were genuinely possessed by spirits, the spirits themselves were not equal in ability, responsibility, or perhaps good will, which explained why some mediums were more popular than others.

One thing that a medium could do, through the mediation of her regular spirit, was to become possessed by the spirits of recently deceased persons. This type of possession, as I understand it, was only requested in the case of persons who had died violently or accidentally. Although I never had the opportunity to witness this type of possession, I have had first-hand accounts of two such possessions. In one case, a villager's ten year old son had died by drowning. At the funeral, the boy's uncle marked the boy's left ankle with soot and told him to come back to his family. About three months after the boy's death, his father, Tip, went to a well known medium in a neighboring district to ask to speak with his son's spirit. The medium, a male, became possessed by his regular spirit, who then sought the spirit of Tip's son. The medium thereupon was possessed by the boy's spirit. According to Tip's account, he showed the spirit a photo of

his son with some school friends, and the spirit was able to identify himself (i.e., Tip's deceased son) and others in the photo. This sort of testing is standard when a deceased person's spirit is brought back by a medium. The boy's uncle, who was present, told me that the spirit was not successful on another test, involving identification of clothing, but Tip did not mention this in his account to me.

Tip and his son's spirit had some mundane conversation about matters such as what the spirit would like to eat and for a year after Tip set out dinner for his son regularly. The fact that the food never disappeared meant nothing, since spirits eat only the immaterial essence of the food. The scene, as Tip described it, was tearful. The son said that he would be reborn to Tip's eldest daughter. That daughter had a son about a year later. The boy is now raised largely by his grandparents, whom he calls "father" and "mother." The boy has a slight discoloration on his left leg, though not in the precise spot where the uncle marked the dead boy's leg.

Tip apparently had no doubts about any aspect of this experience. The boy's uncle, however, was more equivocal when he spoke to me. It was clear that he had not been entirely convinced by the spirit. As far as I could tell, he was not questioning the authenticity of the possession, but rather whether the spirit that appeared was actually the spirit of the boy. I asked him whether he believed that Tip's grandson was actually his reincarnated son. He said that he supposed so, although the mark on his leg was not really in the right place. The event that had finally convinced him was when the boy, according to Tip's account, had spontaneously called Tip "father."

I asked Tip why he had not gone to Suni instead of to a medium from another district. He told me that he had not gone to Suni because Suni and the village spirit knew his son. He felt that the tests would not be convincing proof in a case like this. Both this reply and the general need for tests might seem to qualify the villagers' general professions of belief in spirit mediums. That is, they seem to hold that, in some specific instances, the authenticity of the possession must be demonstrated with convincing evidence. In fact, though, the villagers would tell one that it was not the authenticity of the possession but the authenticity of the spirit that is being tested. This will be made clear in my description of the second case. It seems to me, though, that the practice of going to a medium does evidence some suspicion that the medium, or perhaps her regular spirit, that is, the Lord Father (the *câaw phâa*), might try to trick them, or at least might somehow taint the test, perhaps by telling the purported spirit of the deceased something that might help it pass the test.

Because I was unable to give Suni more than occasional attention during my time in the village, toward the end of my stay I assigned an assistant, named Aw, to observe her capacity as a medium all day, every day, for two weeks. Aw was

a young man who had completed high school. He was one of those who professed doubts in the existence of spirits while at the same time admitting fear of them. In fact, he was, if anything, more fearful than most. One day, a group of seven people, four adults and three children, came from another village to see Suni. They wanted her to *song khorn kradang* i.e., to bring back the spirit of a recently deceased relative. Aw observed the proceedings, took notes, and reported back to me verbally and in writing. At first, Suni said that she was afraid to grant their request, because the spirit might not want to leave, and those who suffered unnatural death could be dangerous, but if the Lord Father was willing to go and find the spirit, she would agree to be the medium. When the Lord Father possessed her, they must ask him. When the Lord Father came, they explained that this person had gone to a distant place, and they were not even sure he was dead—it was only rumors. They wanted the Lord Father to bring his spirit here so they could be sure he was dead. The Lord Father asked further questions concerning the man, his recent activities, and the rumors they had heard. They showed the Lord Father the man's picture and mentioned his name.

The Lord Father said he would try to find the spirit but it might not be the right one. He said sometimes the spirits lie about who they are because they want to come and be fed, but when he brings them they cannot answer any questions. They asked him nonetheless to find the spirit, and it took him about an hour to do so. When he returned and possessed Suni once again, he said that he had found two spirits; one short and dark, with short hair, the other tall and fair, with longer hair. They said the short, dark one might be the one and asked whether he had any scars. The Lord Father said there was a tattoo. They asked what else he had, and the Lord Father said he seemed something of a delinquent. They showed him the picture again, which had several persons in it, and asked which was the one in the picture. He pointed at a person in the picture and said the one he had met had shorter hair and looked younger. They told him that he pointed to the wrong one in the picture. He asked to look at the picture again and pointed to the same person, but not in a "normal" way. (Apparently, the gesture was ambiguous.) This time they agreed that was the one and said "At first, we thought you pointed to another one." They asked to have him bring the spirit.

The Lord Father left again to get the spirit, and Suni gave them instructions on what to do when the spirit came and when it left, so that she would not be injured. About ten minutes later, she was possessed by the *khorn kradang*. They asked the spirit about the circumstances of his death. He complained about the food they had brought for him, and they explained that they hadn't had time to prepare any and so had purchased the food. He asked them for money, which they gave him. After further conversation, they put one of the children on his lap

and asked if he recognized the child. He said it was his nephew. They asked him if he knew who they were, and he said, "You think I can't remember you?" They asked him how many brothers and sisters he had, he replied "Yes, I have." They asked him to name them, and he turned toward the place where the Lord Father had been sitting, made a reverential gesture, and said "No, Lord Father, I won't tell them," as if he had been ordered not to mention names. He asked them to do a ritual for him and to build a small spirit house. They then asked him to choose his clothes from a pile. He began to comment on one of the garments, but they persisted. He finally chose one piece and put it in a sack, saying, "Okay, are you satisfied?" After a bit more talk about his needs, he left.

After Suni recovered, she brought back the Lord Father. He asked if it was the right one. They said yes, but he had not been able to recognize his own child, saying it was his nephew. The Lord Father said the spirit was teasing them because they had asked a silly question. They asked why the spirit had not asked about various people that he knew, and the Lord Father explained that he had forbidden the spirit to mention names because it would be dangerous for those mentioned. The Lord Father returned to them the money and cigarettes that they had given to the spirit (since spirit have no use for actual physical items).

These are some of the highlights of Aw's description of the event. When he gave me this report, I asked him to comment on the proceedings, to tell me what he thought about them. He pointed out that Suni, both as herself and as the Lord Father, collects a lot of relevant information before she brings back the spirit of the dead person, and the spirit tries to stick to the information that has already been gathered. She (or the Lord Father) is a talented and convincing speaker. The people who come to see her believe in her from the beginning. Most of what she says is correct or unprovable. When she is dealing with a patient, she will get the history of the disease and its treatment. If it is a simple ailment, she prescribes herbal medicine which she gets from ancient and standard recipes. If the patient has been unsuccessfully treated at other places, or if the ailment is recurrent, she will blame spirits. What she says cannot be proven. She will ask if the patient has done something unusual, e.g., going to a new place, or doing something improper. She may give examples. If the patient says yes, she will say the spirit is angry. If no, then a spirit has bothered this person at random. Some of her predictions or pronouncements are common knowledge. Some are unprovable. Sometimes the *khorn kradang* will show uncertainty or hesitation when asked about something that has not been previously discussed. When pressed, she (he) will avoid answering and try to get answers from the questioners. She uses an ingenious psychological technique. She tries to stick to topics that she already knows about, and then to end the session quickly.

Aw, who had already indicated some disbelief in spirits, made some detailed observations of the event that seemed to me to support his doubts, and had given what seemed to me to be a rather acute analysis of Suni's techniques that warranted further scepticism. Although it seemed fairly certain what his answer must be, I pressed him further. Did he believe that Suni had really been possessed by the spirit of a dead person? He said that he had indeed been doubtful of her powers, but some things that she did were hard to explain. Her memory and her ability to deal with problems seemed beyond mere human ability. Also, she was able to divine and tell about remote incidents that others there knew nothing about. He concluded that he had come to believe in the Lord Father and in the reality of Suni's power as a medium. He believed, he said, that she had in fact been possessed by the spirit of that dead man.

This denouement was, I confess, startling to me. I must conclude with a few perhaps feeble speculations on how villagers reason about such matters. For the Western sceptic, the evidence of trickery or artifice are sufficient to discredit the entire phenomenon. That which has not yet been specifically discredited is no doubt explainable in the same way. For Aw, the unexplained elements in a sense discredited the trickery. Either it was not really artifice, or the fact that it was, is inconsequential. Furthermore, there are explanations that we have at hand, through our theories of the unconscious, that the villagers do not have. Villagers do not see it as possible that a person might think she was possessed but not really be possessed. They do not seem to have much notion of the unconscious, or of the possibly extraordinary capabilities of the unconscious mind. Suni's abilities when possessed had to be explained either as the extraordinary abilities of an incredibly deceitful person, or as the supernatural abilities of a spirit.

This brings up a final, crucial point. A medium's performance as a medium is only one part of her total performance. In using the word "performance," I do not mean to imply that the medium is consciously pretending to be other than she is; merely that, by design or otherwise, she is presenting an organized, coherent image of who she is at the moment. The other part is her performance as an ordinary village woman. On one occasion, I went to another village to see the medium who represented the head spirit for the region. I was accompanied by a villager who had used the services of this medium several times in past years. After we left, he pointed out to me that, when not possessed, not only had she spoken a different dialect but she had not recognized him. The Lord Father, on the other hand, had recognized him. If Suni had shown in her daily life any extraordinary intelligence, sharpness, or fluency and proficiency in conversation, she might have compromised her credibility as a medium. In one conversation with the Sang Ton Lord Father, we asked him why he chosen Suni as his "horse."

He said that he chose her in part because she was not knowledgeable or well-spoken. The people must be able to see that it was he who spoke through Suni.

Indeed, it sometimes seemed that the villagers credited Suni with extraordinary ignorance. Once a villager reminded me of an occasion, at which we had both been present, when the Lord Father said he had been to America. I was struck by the fact that the Lord Father had nothing to say about America except that when it was day in Thailand, it was night in America. The Lord Father was a gregarious sort and was telling the story largely for the benefit of my wife and myself. It seemed to me, and I thought perhaps that it would seem to the villagers present, that having visited such an exotic place, one would have more to say than that. The time difference between Thailand and America was already fairly common knowledge in the village. In short, I found the performance singularly unconvincing. But this villager found the story worth mentioning as evidence of Suni's authenticity as a medium. He said that this matter of the time difference was surely one that Suni would know nothing of. It was Suni's performance as an ignorant and untalented village woman that supported her apparent authenticity as a medium.

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