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The Ancestral Spirit Forest (*Don Pu Ta*)² and the Role Behavior of Elders (*Thao Cham*) in Northeastern Thailand

Introduction

For the centuries that human beings have lived closely with nature, despite changing conditions and the increasing role played in daily life by technological advances, forest resources and produce have had continued value. This has been true regardless of whether the produce is wild greens, herbs, dyestuffs, items of apparel, or objects that could be used as agricultural tools. The value of these products from the forest has served to evoke within the peoples of different communities the desire to preserve the balance of nature and protect watershed sources, soil quality, and the rich diversity of wildlife.

According to northeastern Thai tradition, when a village was established, the villagers built a small bamboo shrine or hut of some sort for the local benevolent spirits. Put up close to where the spirit resided, this was the place to propitiate this spirit, for worship and for creating emotional unity. The shrine was placed on high ground such as a knoll beyond the reach of floodwaters. The site should be tranquil, in the midst of tall trees with diverse wildlife. The calls of the wild animals here mingle with the rustling of the trees and shrubs creating a feeling of awe in this sacred place known as *Pu Ta*, *Ton Pu Ta* or *Dong Pu Ta*.³

The structure built as the residence for the *Pu Ta* spirits is known variously as the *Ho Pu Ta*, *San Pu Ta*, *Tup Pu Ta*, or *Hong Pu Ta*.⁴ There are two types of structures. The first is a small house placed atop a single pillar similar in form to a *San Phra Phum* (spirit house). The second is built using four pillars. There are both large and small structures. Generally there is a single room in the house to make it easy to place offerings or figurines of human beings which it is believed the spirits desire. One such figurine, made of sculpted wood in the shape of a servant or retainer providing utensils to the spirit, is placed at the front of the room. On another side may be a kind of balcony on which offerings can be placed.

Individuals selected to represent the community in communicating with or receiving the orders of the *Pu Ta* for the people, and who play a role in propitiatory rites, are known variously as *Thao Cham* (or *Kracham*, *Khacham*, *Tao Pracham*, *Chao Cham*, or *Cham*) in different areas.

Additionally, *Thao Cham* are responsible for caring for and protecting the area around the *Pu Ta* forest. They maintain the state of the trees and wildlife, as well as the forest produce in the normal condition as desired by the *Pu Ta*.

They see these things as belonging to the *Pu Ta* spirits and that no one can misuse. If it is necessary to make use of something in the *Pu Ta* forest, such as mushrooms, insects, firewood, greens, or herbs, permission must be requested from the *Pu Ta* spirits through the *Thao Cham*. Failure to do so will bring punishment on the malefactors that might result in their death.

Through their role of being closely linked with the *Pu Ta* spirits, the *Thao Cham* symbolize all sacred institutions in the community including the *Pu Ta* Forest, spirits of the place, other ordinary celestial beings (*thewada*), the city pillar, *mahesak*,⁵ and village pillars. *Thao Cham* are selected from members of the community who are well-behaved, respected, and widely accepted by the local people. The actual method used in each community varies. For example, in some places after 5–10 appropriate individuals are identified, they produce a stick or bamboo joint equal to the length of one *wa*⁶ for each individual. These sticks are measured again in front of the *Pu Ta* shrine and the village elders. If any stick is measured as longer than one *wa*, this is a sign that the *Pu Ta* wish that person to be a *Thao Cham*. Other communities might select the *Thao Cham* from the descendants of a particular clan. But no matter how the *Thao Cham* is selected, those holding this position are respected and revered by the community and are seen as being well-accepted by the *Pu Ta*.

The villagers believe that actions seen as inappropriate by the *Pu Ta* anger the spirits. The *Pu Ta* will punish everyone in the village and even the domesticated animals. The villagers have from time immemorial regarded the *Pu Ta* forest as the village's sacred space. This place represents, in addition to the village's Buddhist monastery, a place binding the people together spiritually. Taboos specific to each village can be established according to the will of the people. Or the *Thao Cham* can identify (while in a trance) taboos according to the dictates of the *Pu Ta*. The area of the *Pu Ta* shrine is lushly vegetated, full of trees and wild animals. The *Pu Ta* forest has become a way for effectively managing community resources.

These were the reasons why I studied *Pu Ta* forests, their role, the behavior of the *Thao Cham*, and the unity of the people in the community. I also examined the rituals, the

community's attitudes and beliefs about the *Pu Ta* forests and the *Thao Cham*. Finally, I examined the impact of the *Pu Ta* forests and shrines on the mental health of the people in the communities where they existed.

Methodology

1. Literature survey and review.
2. Field work:
 - 2.1 Non-participant and participant observation
 - 2.2 Structured and unstructured interviews
3. Study population: 385 individuals, as follows:
 - Community leaders: elders and monks: 72 individuals
 - *Thao Cham*: 12 individuals
 - Other villagers: males, females, children: 301 individuals
4. Area of Study: 9 provinces:
 - 4.1 Upper Northeast: three provinces:
 - Nong Muat Miang Village, Kham Ta Kla Tambon, Kham Ta Kla District, Sakon Nakhon Province.
 - Pha Nok Khao Village, Pha Nok Kha Tambon, Phu Kradung District, Loei Province
 - Non Sombun Village, Bung Kan Tambon, Pung Kan District, Nong Khai Province
 - 4.2 Central Northeast: three provinces:
 - Nong No Village, Nong No Tambon, Kranuan District, Khon Kaen Province
 - Nong Chik Village, Ku Santarat Tambon, Na Dun District, Maha Sarakham Province
 - Hong San Village, Bung Wai Tambon, Warin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani Province
 - 4.3 Lower Northeast: three Provinces:
 - Thanon Hak Village, Sida Tambon, Bua Yai District, Nakhon Ratchasima Province
 - Boi Village, Phra Khru Yai Tambon, Muang District, Buriram Province
 - Nong No Village, Ban Khon Mang Ngoi Tambon, Khon Sawan District, Chaiyaphum Province

Findings

A review of the *Pu Ta* forests found them in good condition with lush growth. In all the sites, there were ample resources that could be used by the villagers for food or other purposes, as well as be sold throughout the year. The amount of these resources varied according to the size of the *Pu Ta* forest.

In all the communities studied, the villagers respected the *Thao Cham*. The villagers believed that the ancestral spirits accepted the *Thao Cham* as coordinators between them and the *Pu Ta*. The villagers stated that the *Thao Cham* had to have good personalities, high morals, be honest, and self-sacrificing. Whenever a *Thao Cham* dies, a new *Thao Cham* must be selected according to one of three criteria.

- i. A descendant of a previous *Thao Cham*.
- ii. Selected by a drawing before the *Pu Ta* shrine with the villagers present as witnesses
- iii. Proposed by villagers as an appropriate person for the position who might then be elected

The *Thao Cham* is responsible for the upkeep of the *Pu Ta* shrine and be strict in conserving the resources in the *Pu Ta* forest. The *Thao Cham* also must penalize offenders according to regulations established by the community⁷ The *Thao Cham* also is the ritual leader for all rites at the *Pu Ta* shrine including *bonban* and *kaebon* ceremonies⁸.

The villagers revere the *Pu Ta* shrine which they recognize as a sacred place. Anyone who offends has to accept the consequences set down in the village agreement. If not, the *Pu Ta* spirits would punish them. The villagers and the *Pu Ta* spirits jointly conduct rituals such as propitiation, divination, making vows, and giving thanks for vows fulfilled. Propitiatory and divination rites are held on the Wednesday of the sixth lunar month of the northeastern calendar. In some places, these rituals are also held in the third lunar month. No specific time exists for the *bonban* rituals which depend on the desires of the individual villagers.

Regarding the links between the mental health of the villagers and the *Pu Ta* forests, it was found there were many conflicts between the local communities and governmental

agencies or private enterprises that wanted to use the *Pu Ta* forest for other purposes. These have included building government facilities, using area for agriculture, or building construction working which have inevitably reduced the size of the *Pu Ta* forest. The natural resources have been visibly reduced through these actions, upsetting the balance of nature in the area. Even though members of younger generation have been party to the conflicts, it has also been observed that they have preserved and passed on the traditions inherited from older generations. They still believe in the *Pu Ta* forests as well as deeply respect the *Thao Cham*. Although the way of life in northeast Thailand has changed due to external influences, the belief in ancestral spirits including the performance of the rituals in making an agricultural living makes the institution of the *Pu Ta* forests a necessity for northeastern communities.

Discussion and Analysis

The villagers believe in the power of, propitiate, and act in regard to the ancestral spirits and of the *Pu Ta* forest. No villagers cut down trees or go hunting—in particular for hard and soft shelled turtles or lizards—in this area. Some *Pu Ta* forests have prohibitions on all forms of inappropriate behavior such as romancing by young people or using the area as a latrine. When walking through the forest villagers are supposed to show proper respect. If the villagers fail to do this or act unacceptably, the *Pu Ta* spirits punish them by causing accidents, headaches, stomachaches, fevers, aching limbs, or constant vomiting. In some instances, the offender dies for no reason discernable by a physician. The villagers believe such phenomena manifest the *Pu Ta* spirits' power.

Taboos can be agreed on by the villagers. Or they might be identified by the *Thao Cham* while in a trance, communicating with the *Pu Ta* spirits. Some taboos are listed below:

- No one can take control of any area in a *Pu Ta* forest or appropriate control or licensing of any resources.
- No one can engage in hunting of any animals in the *Pu Ta* forest; the area is to be considered absolutely as a sanctuary.

- No one can cut trees or destroy the forest without permission from the *Thao Cham* or the villagers, at which point it will be permissible. Some forest rules make it a condition that whoever cuts a tree plants one or more new ones.
- No one shall act inappropriately such as by urinating or defecating in the *Pu Ta* forest.
- No one can engage in inappropriate sexual behavior or take intoxicants.
- No one can treat the *Pu Ta* forest with contempt or demean it.

Because of such prohibitions, the *Pu Ta* forests have remained well covered with greenery. Many big trees and a wide variety of wildlife thrive here. This shows that the *Pu Ta* forests represent a useful way of managing forest resources.

Since the nine communities studied are located in remote rural areas, the values of the *Pu Ta* forests remain rooted in the consciousness of the people. Most of the villagers believe firmly in the institution of the *Pu Ta* forests. Even though some villagers are not strict believers they avoid violating the taboos. As a result, all the villagers respect the common interest in the *Pu Ta* forests and avoid violations. Because of this respect accorded them, one can say that the *Pu Ta* forests can control the behavior of the villagers in an effective way.

Additionally, *Pu Ta* forests are spiritual centers for the community. The *Thao Cham* serve as intermediaries who convey the teachings of the *Pu Ta* spirits to the villagers. The spirits observe and advise the people on how to behave properly. The spirits advocate moral behavior and promote cooperation among the villagers. Because of this, the villagers are united and work together. When there are communal functions, the villagers join in readily. The *Pu Ta* forest can be considered a good example of indigenous wisdom that benefits the local people.

But there are examples of *Pu Ta* forests that have failed. Take for example the case of Thanon Hak Village, Sida Tambon, Bua Yai District, Nakhon Ratchasima Province. In the past, the *Pu Ta* forest there was well protected. There was neither logging nor forest destruction. However, when the population began to increase rapidly, incursions on the forest increased. Trees

were cut for lumber to build houses. In other cases, forest land was used for cultivating field crops. Even though the villagers who cut the trees or used the forest for farming asked permission from the spirits to do these things, the forested area still declined significantly.

The overall approach taken in the rituals in the nine study villagers is similar. The *Pu Ta* spirits are propitiated and are asked for predictions from time to time. The differences between the study sites are mainly in ritual details. Rituals in some areas are more complicated or involved. Three of these include the *bun poek ban*, the *bun liang ban*, and the *bun khao chi*.⁹

Propitiation

Propitiatory rites are most often conducted together with divination rituals. Most frequently they are held on Wednesday evenings (perhaps on the 3rd or 7th day of the waxing or waning moon) in the 3rd or 6th lunar month every year. The day on which this ritual is held is considered auspicious and appropriate for conducting household *Pu Ta* spirit rituals. About three or four days prior to this ritual, the *Thao Cham* tells rituals as well as the villagers to make liquor, find chickens, and prepare the ritual materials for use in the ceremony. Each household bundles up *imperata* leaves, rice straw, or coconut fibers equal in number to the village's human and animal population. This will be used to inform the *Pu Ta* spirits of the number of household members. Some of the rice remaining after the ceremony is placed in the crook of a tree or in some secret place where the villagers believe the ancestral spirits come to eat it. The remainder of the rice is distributed among the villagers who believe that whoever eats any of it will have good luck.

Examples of the Propitiation Process in Different Areas

1. Thanon Hak Village, Nakhon Ratchasima Province: The ritual to propitiate the *Pu Ta* spirits is held every year¹⁰ on a Wednesday in May. The ritual can be performed as many times as deemed necessary. The villagers have made this annual ritual a tradition and use the occasion to divine climatic and soil conditions.

The ritual materials include flowers, candles, liquor (some communities put rice husks in water, drain off the excess and pretend it is liquor), and two local breeds of chickens. The two chickens must be brought, while still alive, for the *Pu Ta* to determine if they are suitable for the ritual or not. The *Thao Cham* asks the *Pu Ta* whether the chickens are appropriate for being used in the ritual. After being kept in the village overnight, if the chickens are not depressed or lethargic this shows the *Pu Ta* spirits approve. If the chickens die, this shows the *Pu Ta* spirits disapprove. New chickens will have to be selected until the test is passed.

When appropriate are found they are slaughtered and boiled in preparation for the ritual. The chin is examined to see its shape. If it is straight or crooked, this shows that the year will be dry and agriculture not productive. But if the chin is nicely curved, this shows that there will be ample rain during the growing season. The rice will sprout and the crop will be satisfactory. If it is a padi field chicken (*kai na*), the agricultural output will be good. If it is a village chicken (*kai ban*), there will be happiness in the village community (whether the chicken is a *kai na* or a *kai ban* is determined during the course of the ritual).

Additionally, during the ritual, the villagers will use a rope made from *imperata* grass, rice straw, lemon grass, or banana leaf to form a protuberance or ring for each human and animal member of the household. This is presented to the *Pu Ta* so that the spirits will protect them all. All the members, even those who did not participate in the ritual, must wear this as a sign of what happened in the ritual.

Sometimes members of the Buddhist *sangha* are invited to participate in the ritual. Normally all members of the village community will participate. If anyone is called away on urgent business, replacements must be found to participate. At least one person is required to represent a single family.

2. Nong No Village, Khon Kaen Province: Here the *Pu Ta* spirits are propitiated on the first of May each year. The ritual materials include at least one hard boiled egg from each house, one boiled chicken (the whole animal, innards and all) for each *khum* (group of households)¹¹, pieces of sacred thread equal to

the number of household members and *imperata* knotted in a number equal to the human and animal household members. If there is no *imperata*, coconut leaf might be used as a substitute. Other ritual materials include flowers, candles, and rice liquor (either store bought or homemade).

The ritual begins at 8 a.m. when the *Thao Cham* lights a candle to invite the *Pu Ta* spirits to come and eat the ritual materials. When the propitiatory ritual is completed, the season's rainfall will be divined. The *Thao Cham* will conduct the divination by examining a chicken's chin. If the chin is nicely curved, there will be ample rainfall that year and there will be sufficient water. If the chin is crooked, the forecast for rain will be poor and there will be drought. The future happiness of the village can also be divined. If the chin of the chicken points inwards the village will enjoy a happy year. But if the chin is crooked or pointing in opposite directions, the villagers will have many troubles and will stop cooperating with each other. For a divination of the harvest for rice and other agricultural harvests, a curving chin shows that rice will be bountiful. A straight chin shows the rice harvest will be low. There will not be enough rain.

3. Nong Chik Village, Maha Sarakham Province. This village performs the ritual once annually, on the first Wednesday in the sixth lunar month. Ritual materials include one *hai* (a large container perhaps half a meter in height) of liquor made from rice husks, two chickens (one rooster, one hen), flowers, and candles. Each family will send at least one representative to participate. They must take *imperata* grass, lemon grass, or banana leaves that are supposed to represent the other family members. In addition, small rockets are brought which are shot in the air to request rain. In conducting the ritual, the *Thao Cham* recites an invocation asking that the villagers will be happy and content. The *Thao Cham* will invite the *Pu Ta* spirits to eat the ritual materials. After the ceremony, the villagers sing and feast together.

4. Boi Village, Buri Ram Province: Here the village performs the ritual in the second lunar month of the year. The ritual is performed on a Thursday morning that is also a Buddhist holy day (*wan phra*). The ceremony must be



Fig. 1 Preparing for the ceremony (Tha Khon Yang village, Kantharawichai, Maha Sarakham)



Fig. 2 Person already possessed (Tha Khon Yang village, Kantharawichai, Maha Sarakham)



Fig. 3 Sala (Tha Khon Yang village, Kantharawichai, Maha Sarakham)



Fig. 4 Shrine (Tha Khon Yang village, Kantharawichai, Maha Sarakham)



Fig. 5 Ban Phu Sai (Khun Ham, Sisaket)



Fig. 6 Non Sa-at, Maha Sarakham

held before noon because the *Pu Ta* spirits do not eat the ritual materials after 12 p.m. The ritual materials are prepared in the form of five *khan* or eight *khan*,¹² banana leaf containers, rice liquor, and bouquets of flowers. The villagers usually prepare boiled chicken but grilled or barbecued chicken can be used too. The chicken is cut up and put on four plates, the liquor put in four glasses, tobacco rolled into four cheroots, and the water put in four glasses. Villagers play the *khaen* (reed mouth organ) to accompany dancing as other offerings are brought forward, including small mirrors, perfume, betel containers, as well as the five or eight *khan*. After placing the items in the shrine, the *Thao Cham* light candles in the shrine to invite the *Pu Ta* spirits to the medium. The medium then gets up and dances. After the *Pu Ta* spirits have partaken of the offerings, the candles are extinguished. Then the chicken will be distributed among the villagers. Short segments of sacred string are tied around the wrists of the younger generations as a sign of auspiciousness and to signify that the ritual has been completed.

5. Non Sombun Village, Nong Khai Province: This village conducts the ritual on a Wednesday (that is not a *Wan Phra* — Buddhist holy day) in the third and sixth lunar months. They call this ritual *liang khun* (rising ritual)¹³ and *liang long* (lowering ritual).¹⁴ The *Thao Cham* collects money from the villagers to purchase the ritual materials. These include four chickens, four bottles of rice liquor, five offering trays, betel, and four bundles of tobacco as well as flowers and candles. Some times villagers bring Chinese silk or homespun northeastern embroidered cloth. When the time for the ritual comes all the villagers participate. The *Thao Cham* lights the candles to invite the *Pu Ta* spirits to come. The *Thao Cham* also recites the following: "Today is a good day for all of us to make this offering to propitiate the shrine. We little ones represent the village of Non Sombun, Bung Kan District. We invite *Luang Pu* (great grandfather) and all the deities to come down and receive all these offerings." When the ritual has been completed, the offerings are distributed among the villagers for them to take home and eat.

6. Hong San, Ubon Ratchathani Province: The villagers prepare food and sweets, grilled

red or black sticky rice, as well as betel and its accompanying items, a glass of water and five serving trays. The offerings include chickens, tobacco and other items requested by the *Thao Cham*. When all of these have been assembled at the ritual place, the *Thao Cham* presents them to the *Pu Ta* spirits. Then the *Thao Cham* recites incantations and prayers to invite the *Pu Ta* spirits, as well as other deities and spirits to eat the food offered by the villagers. The *Thao Cham* recites the following:

The season of the year for the honored grandfather to come has arrived. These hands are the genuine hands for this good day. Your children and grandchildren are assembled here before with the food and liquor. The sweets and main course food they have brought are most suitable for you to receive. Together, may your children and grandchildren prosper and be strong. May the village and the country not be short of rice, fish and other food. May there be prosperity the entire year.

When it is determined that the *Pu Ta* have eaten the food (estimated at 20–30 minutes), the *Thao Cham* will perform the closing rite. He separates the chin from the chicken. He uses his fingers to squeeze the chin in order to determine its characteristics based on which the divination can be made. When the ceremony is over the villagers will shoot off two or three small rockets. Then the *Thao Cham* divides the food and other offerings. The villagers eat the food while near the shrine. In the past, they also danced, sang and played games. At present, however, they have to rush back to carry out activities to engage in the business of earning a living so these final activities are no longer conducted.

7. Nong No Village, Chaiyaphum Village: The ritual is held on a Wednesday in the 3rd and the 6th lunar month. The *Thao Cham* consults with the village headman or with the village committee and each family is told to bring a chicken, a bottle of liquor, food and sweets to the ritual. Particularly devout villagers or those playing a special role in the ceremony also bring flowers and candles.

8. Nong Muat Miang Village, Sakon Nakhon Province: The villagers conduct the ceremony in the 6th lunar month which they believe is when the rainy season begins and

leads directly into the time for padi farming. The offering materials include boiled chicken, one bottle of rice liquor, a pack of cigarettes, a northeastern style sarong, flowers and candles. At the ritual they conduct the dance for the spirit of the sky (*ram phi fa*) and also engage in playing the *khaen*.

Divination Ritual

The propitiation and divination rituals are conducted at the same time. Usually divination is done by examining a chicken's chin and by firing rockets. The ritual is conducted at the *Pu Ta* forest but in some areas there is also a ceremony involving Buddhist monks.

For divination with the chicken's chin, it is necessary to distinguish between the chicken used for divination regarding farming from that used for divination regarding the village. For the former, the chicken is examined to see whether the chin is pretty or not. If it is, this shows that that seasonal rainfall will be ample and the rice harvest will be bountiful. A pretty chin also means the village will be happy and harmonious. But if the chin is not pretty, the villagers will be unhappy as well as fall sick and die. The village buffaloes and cattle will suffer from rapidly spreading diseases.

In preparing for the ceremony, the villages make two small rockets which will serve as the *bangfai na* (padi field rocket) and the *bangfai ban* (village rocket), the propitiatory rockets. The *Thao Cham* and the entire village bring both rockets to the spirit shrine on the 14th day of the 5th waning moon or else on a Wednesday in the 6th lunar month, according to omens detected beforehand. The *Thao Cham* brings the flowers and the candles to inform the spirits by lighting the rockets. The spirits are then invited according to the customary ritual. When it is finished the people ignite the rockets. Benefits from the ritual could take many forms, a number of which are noted below:

If the *bangfai na* reaches a high altitude this indicates that rainfall will be according to the season and that they will be able to engage in padi farming and other types of agriculture including shifting cultivation and gardening. If the rocket does not go high this means that there will be drought, rice paddy farming will

be unproductive and trouble could befall the village.

If the *bangfai ban* reaches a high altitude this is an indication that no serious ailments or illness will befall the villagers and that they will be happy together. However, if the rocket fails to take off this is a prediction that the villagers will have cause for anger and also face sickness and death. Then it is the duty of the *Thao Cham* to beg the spirits to save the villagers. Generally this is done by holding another divination ceremony in the 6th lunar month. When this month is reached, the *Thao Cham* announces that the villagers should propitiate the *Pu Ta* spirits again. Then it is the villagers who choose the date. All the village households take a big bottle of liquor, one chicken and two rockets, one of which is placed in scented water such as, perhaps, cumin water. The other rocket is placed in liquor with husks. They also prepare knotted bundles of *imperata* grass to represent the number of people and animals in the village households. Some communities bring three turtles also which the people believe are potent offerings. Others bring (pottery figurines of) elephants, horses, water buffaloes or cattle. These are offered to the *Pu Ta* spirits as conveyances for them to move about.

Vow Making Rituals

The communities surveyed conduct the vow-making rituals in a similar fashion to those described above. The method for doing the ritual, the steps taken and the ritual materials are all similar. The ceremony is conducted when a community member needs one but the ritual can be organized by a group. That is, when any person is troubled, the vow making ritual can be conducted in the *Pu Ta* forest to beg for help from the sacred beings. The *Thao Cham* can also be requested to perform the ritual for the others. The villagers call it *kan ba* (northeastern Thai for requesting). Whenever someone receives what is requested from this ceremony, that person must do whatever was promised. The villagers believe that if they receive something through this ritual but do not fulfill their vow, they will fall sick or meet a dangerous situation.

An example of the most common way to conduct the vow-making ritual was found in

Hong San Village, Ubon Ratchathani Province. The ritual was conducted in two ways. The first was by the *Thao Cham* for the person requesting the ritual, and by the person or persons themselves. The only ritual equipment was a tray Khan 5. Other items such as a boiled chicken, a bottle of liquor, betel, flowers and candles could be offered after the request had been granted and without the assistance of the *Thao Cham*. The second way was to do the ritual without the *Thao Cham*. In this case, the person making the request goes to the *Pu Ta* forest alone, taking flowers and candles.

The villagers in Hong San carried out the vow-making ritual for a sick person to be healed, their personal business to do better, to find something lost, to ask for luck in the lottery, to request not being drafted into the army and good luck or fortune in general. When it was appropriate to bring offerings such as liquor, chicken, personal retainers, elephants, horses, cattle, or buffaloes to offer to the *Pu Ta* spirits, some persons brought five pairs of flowers and

candles to offer along with food and sweets to bribe the *Pu Ta* spirits. They might promise that they will bring many times this amount if they are granted their request.

Suggestions

Future studies of this subject should be carried out in many other areas. These can be conducted to assess how well the *Pu Ta* forests have been conserved and maintained. Studies of *Pu Ta* forests hundreds of *rai*¹⁵ in size and still covered with dense vegetation should also be conducted. Assessments should also be made of the institutions and factors threatening the *Pu Ta* forests that have reduced their size in some areas and eliminated them in others. The legal situation of *Pu Ta* forests should also be studied, including a review of provisions for community forests. The information derived from these studies should encourage the Thai people to preserve their heritage of community forests in an effective manner.

Notes

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² Literally the paternal grandfather (*Pu*) maternal grandfather (*Ta*) forest, which can be called ancestral spirits.

³ The latter two mean the *Pu Ta* Knoll and *Pu Ta* Grove or Forest.

⁴ Meaning, respectively (and approximately), the *Pu Ta* "Hall", *Pu Ta* Shrine, *Pu Ta* Hut, and *Pu Ta* House.

⁵ Spirits that formerly had been high-ranking rulers of states (*chao muang*).

⁶ A *wa* is equal to four *sok*, which means elbow and is also a measure equal to the length from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow joint (that is to say, two spans). The *wa* has been standardized at present as equal to two meters.

⁷ These differ according to each village. Money

earned from fines can be used for such purposes as the upkeep of the shrine, village development in general, or repairs of the village temple.

⁸ *Bonban* is a vow promising a thank you offering if the request (to the spirit) is granted. The thank you offering is the *kaebon*.

⁹ The *bun liang ban* is organized in late April or early May. The ritual begins by observing the chin of a chicken. If it is curved, this shows that the supply of rice and fish in that year will be ample. If the chin is crooked or bent, the food supply that year will be small. Nonetheless, the villagers believe that if they perform this ritual, the act will be meritorious and when they start the padi farming (*haek na*), the crop will be good. The *bun boek ban* ritual is conducted about one week after the *bun liang ban*. All the villagers go to the temple to make merit for the village and, at the same time, for the *Thao Cham*. The *Thao Cham* is given a fee which the villagers call *kha khai*. It depends on the *Thao Cham* how this money is used. The fee could be used for medicine, food or personal expenses. The third ritual, *bun khao chi*, is conducted during the third lunar month of each year. The villagers make roasted rice and then go to make merit at the temple. A portion of the remaining rice is taken to propitiate the *Pu Ta* spirits.

Another portion is distributed to the villagers as a sign that the *Pu Ta* spirits are being generous to the people in the village.

¹⁰ The ceremony must be performed each year. The villagers believe that if they fail to do so something terrible will happen in the village. They believe that if they do not show their respect to the *Pu Ta* spirits, they will cause the villagers to be upset or suffer continual pain.

¹¹ Sometimes all the members of a *khum* belong to the same spirit lineage group.

¹² *Khan* means a kind of container, or as used here a set. The ritual materials of candles and flowers are prepared in sets of either five or eight.

¹³ The third lunar month in the northeast, in about February, is when the villagers store the rice in their silos (which are raised on stilts).

¹⁴ The sixth lunar month in the northeast, in about May, is when the villagers prepare their padi fields. The ritual calls for ample seasonal rainfall to bring a good rice crop and plenty of food.

¹⁵ A *rai* is a traditional unit of measure in Thailand: 2.4 *rai* equal one acre and 6.25 *rai* equal one hectare.

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Table 1 Seasonal use of *Pu Ta* Forests

Use	Rainy Season	Dry Season
1. Forest Produce collected for sale or for consumption		
- times per year	3–6 times	3–4 times
- times used in food making	1–2 times	
- most common items collected	1. mushrooms 2. bamboo shoots 3. neem (<i>Azadirachta indica</i>) 4. <i>Curcuma spp.</i> (a kind of wild ginger used in cooking) 5. Kradon (<i>Careya herbacea</i>) A tree, bark used for tanning & medicine	1. <i>phak wan</i> (<i>Sauropus androgynus</i>) wild green 2. <i>Tiu</i> (<i>Cratoxylon spp.</i>) 3. <i>Khilek</i> (<i>Cassia Siamea</i>) 4. Reeds 5. <i>Khrua man hup</i>
- money earned (baht/time)	100–150 baht	50–80 baht
2. Firewood collected for household use		
- times/week	3 times	4 times
- days used/time	7 days	10 days
- tree species	dead or down wood of all species such as <i>Teng</i> (<i>Shorea obtusa</i>), <i>Rang</i> (<i>Shorea siamensis</i>), <i>Sakae</i> (<i>Combretum quadrangu-lare</i>), <i>Kanuan</i> (<i>Garcinia merguensis</i>), <i>Tako</i> (<i>Dios-pyros spp.</i>), <i>Phanchat</i> , <i>Chat</i> , <i>Namthaeng</i> , <i>Wa</i> (<i>Eugenia cumini</i>), and <i>Muat-ae</i>	dead or down wood of all species such as <i>Teng</i> (<i>Shorea obtusa</i>), <i>Rang</i> (<i>Shorea siamensis</i>), <i>Sakae</i> (<i>Combretum quadrangu-lare</i>), <i>Kanuan</i> (<i>Garcinia merguensis</i>), <i>Tako</i> (<i>Dios-pyros spp.</i>), <i>Phanchat</i> , <i>Chat</i> , <i>Namthaeng</i> , <i>Wa</i> (<i>Eugenia cumini</i>), and <i>Muat-ae</i>
3. Animals and Insects collected for sale or for consumption		
- times per week	5 times	7 times
- money earned baht/time	50–100 baht	60–100 baht
- species collected	1. Malaeng Kin Bun 2. Frogs and toads 3. Snakes 4. Chameleons	1. Wood Lizard (<i>Liolepis belliana</i>) 2. Red ant eggs 3. Chameleons 4. Crickets 5. <i>Ta-ae</i> Toads

Use	Rainy Season	Dry Season
4. Firewood sold or made into charcoal for sale	4 times	6 times
- times/month	50–100 baht	60–100 baht
- price/sack	home, markets	home, markets
- point of sale		

Table 2 Uses of Wood from *Pu Ta* Forests

Use	Species	Times/Year
1. House construction	All hardwoods and some softwoods	3
2. Tools and utensils	<i>Hun</i> reeds, <i>Sawetchat</i> , <i>Namthaeng</i> , <i>Khanchong</i> , bamboo	7
3. Fishing equipment	<i>Mak Mo</i> , <i>Nam Han</i> , <i>Ngiang Pla Tuk</i> , bamboo	10
4. Make pharmaceutical preparations	<i>Nom Ratchasi Ta Kai</i> , <i>Boraphet</i> (<i>Tinospora crispa</i>), <i>Kanuan</i> reeds	6
5. Build animal pens	<i>Yang Don Khafia</i> reeds, tamarind, <i>Khangkhao</i> (<i>Aglaia piri-fera</i>)	7
6. Use for firewood; make charcoal	<i>Nuat Kha</i> , <i>Phanchat</i> , Liam	15