



Reconfiguration of the Role of the Guardian Spirit: Reflection from the Phuan Feasting Ritual

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Introduction

In the context of capitalism and under the influence of globalization, Thai peasant society is currently experiencing changes which are more profound and rapid than it has ever experienced over the past one hundred years. The high rate of economic growth in the late 1980s through most of the 1990s, which ended with the country's worst economic crisis ever, caused rural youth to migrate to towns, cities and foreign countries in search of jobs and a materially better life. Now, rural villages are left with old people and children. Consumerism has spread and young people are no longer happy with their traditional values and ways of life.

The present economic crisis has had a great impact on the lives of villagers. They are faced with various problems, not only of an economic but also of a social nature. An interesting question that can be posed is: how have villagers who lack privileged access to higher powers dealt with these economic crisis-induced problems through traditional means?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the changes in the role and image of *phi puta* (ancestor spirit) and to present these changes as reflections of those occurring in Phuan identity and culture. In particular, I use the *liang phi puta* ceremony (feeding of the village tutelary spirit ceremony) as reflecting the processes and mechanisms of social and cultural transformation occurring among the Phuan. The analysis is based on my fieldwork conducted at Ban Khok



Thai village, Srimahosod district, Prachinburi province in 1978 and in May 1998.

In analyzing the Phuan feasting ritual I employ the concept of ritual from an anthropological point of view, that it is a window on culture, an opening into a culture's central values and persistent contradictions [Grimes 1996: xv]. It is also through ritual that a community identifies itself and depicts itself to all participants and outside observers.

In this paper I examine the way in which a ritual links Phuan villagers to other ethnic groups and to larger political units, and especially how the role and meaning of the village tutelary spirit have changed since I did fieldwork in this district in 1978.

1. The Phuan in Srimahosod District

The native homeland of the Phuan, one of the ethnic groups of Laos, is Muang Phuan in Xieng Kwang located south of Luang Prabang. The Phuan in Thailand are descendants of war prisoners taken to settle different parts of the central plain, particularly in the area of Saraburi and Prachinburi, in AD 1827 during the reign on King Rama III of the Bangkok Dynasty [Vallibhotama 2000: 113].

Although relegated to a subordinate status in the Thai hierarchy of ethnic groups, the Phuan have not lost their pride of race and identity. They have preserved features of their original Phuan tradition for almost 200 years. Most villagers of Phuan origin or of "mixed" Phuan blood still practice their ancestors' culture as seen in their beliefs, rituals, traditions, and food.

In Srimahosod district, Prachinburi province, the Phuan have lived in scattered villages near the Thai and other ethnic groups such as the Lao Vientian, the Lao from the Northeast who also moved to settle down in this district.

Among other people who moved in were the Chinese who brought a great deal of change to the villages. They came first as



traders from Phanomsarakham district and other villages in Chachoengsao province, bringing goods to exchange for rice and tree products, such as firewood and ingredients to make tinder. After they had settled down in Srimahosod, they brought their wives and children to join them; many of the single Chinese men married Phuan women. Most of the Chinese became storekeepers and played a very important role in developing small markets in the Phuan villages [Vallibhotama 2000: 132-133].

Despite the process of acculturation and assimilation occurring among the peoples surrounding the Phuan, i.e., Thai, Chinese, Lao Isan/Northeast, and Cambodian, ever since the Phuan settled down in this region their traditions and customs have been dominant in the district's social life. This fact can be traced to the popularity of the Jataka stories, the annual rituals such as the celebration of the rocket festival, and the proprietor of the village guardian spirit—*phi puta* [Wongthet 1989].

It is important to note that as in other Thai-Lao villages in Thailand, the uxorilocal residence pattern persists among the Phuan thus giving women the important role of maintaining ethnic boundaries. For example, women play an active role in all village activities and social life. It is through women that most traditional village customs are transmitted to the younger generations.

2. The Village

Originally called Khok Mon the village was recently renamed Ban Khok Thai as part of the government's policy of Thai-ization. According to oral tradition the village was named after Mon traders who came along a narrow waterway from Bangkok bringing goods such as coconut, sugar cane, and earthen utensils to sell, and taking back rice and wood products. However, according to official records dating from the reign of King Rama II, the village was named after Mon volunteers who provided the king with wild elephants, abundant



in the district, for the royal army. When war with Cambodia ended the district became the area where Lao and Cambodian prisoners of war were allowed to settle down [Wongthet 1980: 13]. Thus, though officially the village's name is Khok Thai, in practice the villagers in the district still call it Khok Mon.

The village today is inhabited by 1,342 permanent residents in a commune (*tambol*) of Srimahosod district which is about 114 kilometers from Bangkok. There are 818 women and 524 men in 216 households. The majority of villagers cultivate rice. Some villagers also raise chickens and a few are civil servants.

3. Phi Puta

Like other Lao villagers, the Phuan always invite their *phi puta*, the paternal and maternal grandfathers of their ancestor spirit to go with them whenever they move. A shrine is built for *phi puta* to live in and to protect them. Traditionally, *phi puta* is believed to represent the village settlement as a bordered space which contains the resources for the villagers' livelihood. Individual villagers may make offerings either to seek personal favors or to offer thanks for personal favors granted [Tambiah 1970: 269].

The specialist who is able to communicate with *phi puta* is called "*cam*". The *cam* is believed to be the intermediary of the guardian spirit. He is initially chosen by the guardian spirit by being possessed by it [Tambiah 1970: 274].

Traditionally, villagers have had to seek the *cam*'s advice whenever they have wanted to contact *phi puta* or for any ritual concerning spirit propitiation. As a result, the *cam* is highly respected and is often so influential as an informal leader that the administrative village head consults him about village affairs [Hayashi 1998:15].

While many Thai-Lao villagers in the Northeast have expelled their *phi puta* and have not believed in the village guardian



spirit for several decades [*Ibid.*: 3], *phi puta* among the Phuan are still highly regarded and respected as is manifest in the annual rituals. In his article, “Reconfiguration of Village Guardian Spirit Among the Thai-Lao in Northeast Thailand,” Hayashi observed that:

Many villages have abolished the cult of *phi puta*. They have replaced *phi puta* house with small Buddha images enshrined in pillars made of wood or cement located near the meeting hall in the central part of the village [19-20].

Similarly in Phanatnikhom district, Chachoengsao province, several *phi puta* houses were replaced with new shrines of “*chao phau*” near the village cemetery. Villagers said that the *chao phau*’s replacement of *phi puta* was initiated by a spirit medium in the district [Dolarrom 2000: 103].

According to Tambiah *chao phau* in Ban Phraan Muen village of Udon Thani province is *phi* of a pious man who lived in the wat, took the ten precepts and ministered to the needs of the monks [Tambiah 1970: 256]. In Phanatnikhom district the villagers regard *chao phau* more as supernatural beings who can reward them with lucky lottery numbers than as moral agents and disciplinarians or custodians of communal property and community welfare as they expect *phi puta* to be.

4. The Rites of Liang Phi Puta

Liang phi (“offering to take care of spirits”) is used in the cases of both the guardian spirit cult and the rites addressed to malevolent spirits. It is a form of communication and reciprocity between man and supernatural beings [Tambiah 1970:341-342]. In the past, the village was closed to outsiders and other strangers when the ritual was being held (see Hayashi 1998).

It is very interesting to note that the ritual I observed in Ban Khok Mon in 1978 is today open to the public as villagers have no objections to outsiders. On the contrary, they are pleased to know



that their *phi puta* is also respected and highly regarded by non-Phuan, some who even participate in the ceremony.

In the middle of Ban Khok Mon stand three shrines under huge old trees. The big solid cement building in the middle is *phi puta's* shrine with the spirit represented by an image of a male elder gilded with gold leaves. On *phi puta's* right is a small wooden shrine with an image of a woman representing *phi puta's* major wife. A similar shrine on *phi puta's* left represents his minor wife. Villagers believe that their *phi puta* was a buffalo trader named Bunta who came from Vientian with his two wives, Nang Phomhom and Nang Maneechan. *Phi puta* had one son, Luang Kla and one elder brother, Khun Pijit.

These shrines were built by the village committees about fifteen years ago to replace the old one which was a simple wooden house built on piles with a zinc roof. There was nothing inside of it except a small tray containing sand for sticking in joss sticks. After building the new shrine for *phi puta* the village committees decided to build a cement shrine for the Chinese Autochthony God in front of *phi puta's* shrine so that villagers of Chinese descent could perform their rituals at the same place. Therefore, the ritual of offering to *phi puta* which takes place twice a year, in the sixth and twelfth lunar months, are attended by all villagers in the community: Phuan, Thai, Lao Phuan-Chinese, or Thai-Chinese.

After the new shrines were built more villagers came to pay respect and give offerings to *phi puta*. Those who had earlier made vows to *phi puta* will especially return to attend the ceremony and give offerings on the day of *liang ban*, a ceremony described later.

The ceremony I observed on May 7, 1998 took the whole day and included a number of practices and actions which had not been present in 1978 (Wongthet 1980). The ceremony in 1998 consisted of three phases: the *kaebon* or ritual of making a votive offering to *phi puta*, the rite of spirit mediumship, and the *liang ban* ceremony.



a. the ritual of making a votive offering to *phi puta*

On this particular day of the year, villagers will come to make offerings to *phi puta*, bargaining to have personal requests fulfilled or paying for personal requests granted, e.g., getting a job, passing an examination, winning the lottery, or recovering from sickness.

Early in the morning, about six o'clock, villagers start coming to *phi puta* shrine bringing two sets of offerings. The first set is for *phi puta*, consisting mostly of boiled chicken, pig's head, rice, water, boiled eggs, fruits, some sweets, two bottles of liquor, betel nut, cigarettes and *bai-si* (auspicious offering made from banana leaves and flowers). Each villager presents his/her offering according to the vow made to *phi puta*. The offerings are in gratitude for favors they solicited and were granted. The other set of offerings is for the Chinese Autochthony God which consists of boiled chicken, dry squid, boiled three-layer pork, and golden and silvered paper.

Until 7:20, while people are waiting for *phi puta* to come and accept the offerings, members of four village committees walk to the shrine, lift out the images of *phi puta* and his two wives, and place them on a table in front of the shrine so that people can easily put the gold leaves on them.

At 9:30, villagers are still coming to make their offerings to *phi puta*. A group of ten middle-aged women bring a small rocket from a nearby temple to pay respect to *phi puta* and ask him to help them win the rocket competition which will take place a few days hence. The women sing and dance to (Thai) country-style music provided by teenagers with electrical musical instruments.

At 10:30, a group of monks is invited to perform the *thambun* (merit-making) ceremony. Villagers, the district head, other government officers, merchants from the market, and village committee members listen to the monks' chant.



At noon, after the *thambun* ceremony, people take the food offerings from the shrine to share among themselves. Special lunch tables are set up for guests, separate from the villagers.

When lunch is over, the same group of women starts again to dance and sing in front of *phi puta*. They dance and walk around the shrine three times, expressing their respect, before taking a rest.

b. the spirit mediumship ceremony

About 1:30 p.m., preparation for the spirit mediumship starts. The villagers prepare another two sets of offerings to *phi puta* to invite him to the trance. One tray contains food (mostly Chinese dishes) such as beancurd, fried fish, pork, noodles, and rice, as well as water, betel nut and cigarettes. The other tray contains desserts and fruits. While the villagers are preparing the offerings to *phi puta*, four female spirit mediums from other villages show up and change to white clothing.

The first woman is the medium of the King of Vientian's daughter. Her name is Mae Kaew Nang Kwak. The second woman is the medium of a Chinese god. The third is the medium of Khun Han, a hero from Lampang, a northern province in Thailand. The fourth medium is Chao Phau Xieng Kan, the spirit from Vientian. The person who conducts the ceremony is the *cam* who dresses in white. He is addressed by the villagers as "Brahman."

It is interesting to note that before the building of the new shrine, the *cam* was the only person who helped with the ceremony, supporting the medium or inviting the spirit of *phi puta* to speak. He was in charge of all the preparations for the ceremony and solicited rice donations from each household to cover expenses. When rice became increasingly more expensive, and with more villagers having difficulty in contributing rice to support the ritual, the village committee asked the *cam* to stop asking for rice. According to villagers this was the reason village committees replaced



the *cam* as organizer. With the changeover in responsibility for organizing the ceremony the villagers have been asked to contribute money instead of rice. Expenses include hiring the orchestra and buying food to offer *phi puta*. The committee deposits any unspent funds into its bank account. Villagers needing cash can borrow from the committee at a very low interest rate. The only requirement is that borrowers repay the money on *liang phi puta* day. Therefore, the *cam*'s role today is a less active one than it was in the past. (For more details on the role of the *cam*, see Sunthonphesat 1968: 112-115.)

To begin the second phase of the ritual, the *cam* lights the candles and gives them to each medium. Within a few minutes *phi puta*'s spirit enters all the mediums, starting with the Chinese god medium. At this time villagers move closer and offer liquor to all the mediums. The Chinese god's medium starts singing in Chinese while the other three sing in the Lao language. After paying homage to *phi puta*, each medium prepares magical water by lighting candles and letting the melted wax fall like teardrops into a bowl filled with water. At this time the Chinese god's medium puts the lighted candles into her mouth three times before dropping the candle wax into the bowl in front of her. She then puts the joss sticks on the *bai-si*. The medium of Mae Kaew Nang Kwak (King of Vientian's daughter) holds some candles in her hands and walks around *phi puta*'s shrine. Suddenly, another medium speaks furiously, charging that *phi puta* is upset with the surroundings of his house and has ordered it cleaned. Some villagers rise and clean the ground around the shrine.

This phase of the ceremony ends when all the mediums take the *bai-si* with both their hands and walk around the shrine three times, expressing their respect to *phi puta* and also asking for forgiveness in the event that they have behaved improperly. When *phi puta* has left all the mediums, the villagers rush to them and ask for lottery numbers.



c. the *liang ban* ceremony

About 4 p.m., each villager starts bringing another set of offerings consisting of flowers, boiled chicken, bottles of liquor, rice, water, and a bowl of dessert and puts them in front of *phi puta*'s shrine. The *cam* then brings a wooden axe, an arrow, and two wooden sticks (partially painted in red) representing phallic symbols, and places them together with the other offerings. He lights the joss sticks and gives one to each participant who uses it to pay respect to *phi puta* while he invites *phi puta*'s spirit to accept all the offerings. They wait until all the joss sticks are completely burnt; then the *cam* returns the food to the villagers. Everybody shares the food, eating together. When this is done the villagers perform the ritual of tying a length of string around each other's wrist, symbolic of giving a blessing to each other. Before the end of the ceremony, following Chinese belief, a string of firecrackers is set off to ward off all evil spirits. The loud noise also drives all participants home.

5. Concluding Remarks

The symbolism and practices of *phi puta* feasting ritual at Ban Khok Mon today have changed from what they were when I witnessed the ritual two decades ago. In the past *phi puta* ritual consisted of just the *liang ban* led by the *cam* who made an offering of boiled chicken and dessert in the evening only. When the community became more socio-economically complex, especially with the building of a new shrine, villagers included other ritual activities completed in a one-day ceremony for the sake of convenience.

While being an expression of shared identity among the Phuan in the past, *phi puta* ritual today draws many groups of people from outside the Ban Khok Mon community to be participants. They include local politicians, government officials, merchants, and



Chinese-descent individuals related to the villagers and who now work in urban areas such as Chachoengsao, Kabinburi, and Bangkok. Their affluence, success (defined as not having to be peasants), and membership in a network beyond the village are admired by the villagers. These qualities have led them to volunteer or be chosen to sit on village committees which organize *phi puta* ritual in place of the *cam* who had earlier occupied the role of intermediary between the villagers and *phi puta*. It is apparent from the *cam*'s limited and shrunken role as ritual practitioner that it has been unable to deal with the increasingly complicated relationships among the expanding community, the urban dwellers, and the state.

While the Phuan culture has been able to assimilate Chinese-descent people to the extent of having the latter participate in *phi puta* ritual, traditional Phuan practices themselves have simultaneously been influenced by Chinese beliefs. For example, when a new Chinese shrine is built on the initiative of the village committee, the sacred space where *phi puta* shrine is located becomes the center for the performance of Chinese rituals. Interestingly, the adoption of urban Chinese culture's meat-based food consumption practice, seen in the variety of symbolically meaningful food and fruits that villagers offer *phi puta*, reflects a change from the Phuan's simple eating habits to the incorporation of Chinese values of abundance and materialist pursuits. The Chinese custom of burning firecrackers strikingly has become part of *phi puta* ritual even though some villagers who raise chickens have expressed disapproval of the practice since the explosive noise frightens the fowl and interferes with their fertility for several days.

It should be remarked that the atmosphere of the *liang phi puta* ritual which had earlier been characterized by simplicity, participation of kinfolk only, and khaen-music now has been turned into a boisterously enlivened ceremony featuring an electric organ, percussion instruments, and popular melodies amplified by huge



loudspeakers. This is unmistakably aimed at promoting a joyous, rather than sacred, atmosphere.

However, although the village committee has an important role in organizing the ritual, women play a dominant role in obtaining the necessary cash contributions and are still the focus of the ritual itself while men serve only as audience or women's assistants.

Significantly, this communal ritual of asking for *phi puta*'s protection has changed to assume a more individualistic and materialistic aspect. For instance, individual affluence instead of communal fertility is desired from the ritual. We see here that the ritual is a response to the needs of the villagers now engaged in more diverse occupations and faced with complicated life problems that have exceeded the capacities of the ancestral spirit of old, whose power is restricted to a peasant community characterized by a kinship-based social structure. Therefore, a traditional society permeated with increasing consumeristic values is in need of sacred beings whose powers extend beyond the boundaries of the village community.

In conclusion, *phi puta* ritual shows at least three social implications for the Phuan of Srimahosod district.

First, the symbolism of *phi puta* ritual can be viewed as a reflection of capitalism-influenced changes in the social life of the Khok Mon Phuan. We witnessed the altered role of the *cam* and *phi puta* who had earlier been the center of power guarding people's behaviors, their relationships, and ways of making a living, as well as preventing the abusive treatment of the environment. The village committee has taken charge of organizing the patterns of ritual in place of the *cam* whose prior authority has been minimized to that of an order keeper operating at a distance. Because the peasants are burdened by increasingly heavy debts, a result of an open economy, a kind of welfare loan system initiated by the village committee has legitimized its decision-making power concerning village activities—the type of authority earlier exercised by traditional community leaders like village headmen, *cam*, and elders.



Phi puta has been transformed from an imaginary ancestor to an accessible concrete sculpture characterized as a kind-looking elder whom villagers can easily approach to put gold leaves on (see Hayashi 1998: 3 for a similar example). *Phi puta* now has more power than ever before and has been elevated to the status of protector of people of various occupations in addition to the villagers, from protector of Phuan villagers only. No longer a village spirit of a small community as in the past, *phi puta* has become a local spirit or god equipped with more power to help with the more complex problems encountered by people of diverse backgrounds. This is a significant consequence of the transition of social structure from an exclusively kinship-based community to one that is increasingly intertwined with urban life, and the state.

The newly constructed image and meanings of *phi puta* no longer restrict it to the Phuan but have made it available to other groups with more economic and political power and wider networks, namely, the Chinese-descent merchants, government officials, and local politicians.

In a sense, the changing scenario of *phi puta* ritual manifests the politics of symbolic power and interethnic relations. *Phi puta* ritual is a form of symbolic power to the Phuan villagers in dealing with the conflicts with many other ethnic groups. *Phi puta* ritual, “owned” by the Phuan who live among the Thai, Lao (Isan/Northeast), and Chinese, has opened (or been competed for) the sacred space for two newcomer groups; one, the merchants, government officials, and local politicians, and the other, the Chinese and Lao spirit mediums. The latter group, particularly, has come to have contact with *phi puta* by accepting the higher authority of the spirit. This has, in turn, established the legitimacy of their career as spirit mediums and has also enabled them to assimilate into a community in which the Phuan are the majority.

Second, *phi puta* ritual has played a crucial role in dissolving ethnic belief and economic differences and conflicts. It has incorpo-



rated the Buddhist *thambun* ceremony as well as Chinese beliefs. This illustrates the historical development and dynamics of the Phuan who have been living and surviving amid the potential threat of the more politically dominant Thai and economically powerful Sino-Thai by avoiding direct conflicts and confrontations with them.

Lastly, *phi puta* ritual reflects the process of integration of different ethnic beliefs, which is a significant force for the continuing existence of rural community. In a context of globalization, we can see how ritual has reconfigured the political relations of the seemingly inevitable process of a local community being engulfed by a larger politico-economic sphere. In sum, *phi puta* ritual exemplifies the attempt by a community to resolve the complex problems and conflicts resulting from the impact of a globalized economy, the changing structure of village socio-political life, and inter-ethnic relations.



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