Tai Cosmology and the Influence of Buddhism

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Cosmology of the Non-Buddhist Tai

For the Black, White and Red Tai,[1] the universe is composed of three levels: the heavens, the "flat world," inhabited by man, and the "world beneath the waters," upon which the flat world rests and in which the ophidian genies, the *nguok*, live. These ophidians at times transform themselves into men and devour the heart of young girls. The white Tai imagine that the third level is also peopled by dwarves. The soul is multiple, according to the Tai, and its components become distributed *post mortem* among the two upper levels of the ternary world mentioned above. Indeed, some souls of the deceased migrate to an afterlife in the heavens, others take up residence in the altar of ancestors where they become tutelary household spirits, while the remainder, bound to the body of the deceased, reside in the cemetery.

The heavens in turn are made up of two levels: the world of celestial deities and the abode of the souls of the dead. The world of celestial deities is dominated by the figure of Phi Then Luang ("the divine supreme god") to whom mythology confers the status of universal demiurge. It is he who create and sent the primordial gourds to the earth from which humanity emerged and who, through the intermediary of an emanation, directed mankind, itself incapable of self-rule. In short, according to the schema shared by Tai and Chinese cosmologies, Phi Then Luang made the earth inhabitable and taught mankind the arts of subsistence, through the intermediary of divine heroes. When, tired of being bothered, the supreme god cut the vine or wicker bridge that joined the heavens to the earth, the gods governing mankind became the

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ancestors of the Tai chiefs, and those who had tilled the lands protected the human communities in their relationship to nature.

The supreme god is surrounded by subordinates who, according to their gender, are called *phi then* ("gods of the heavens") or *mae bao* ("womb mothers"). These deities act in concert to form the souls of the individual about to be born, and in the case of the "womb mothers," to create the model of the bodies in which these souls will become incarnate. Subsequently, by modifying this model, the *mae bao* will be able to sanction good or evil human behavior, while in turn any physical change of the individual caused by accident, illness or aging process would reemerge in its heavenly double. This idea of a womb mother, common to the Chinese and the Tai, maintains, in spite of the rupture of the original tie, a communication between the heavens and the earth through the activity of the shamans who correct the mistakes of their own species.

The abode of the dead is situated at the juncture of the heavens and the earth, along the horizon line. It includes several localities whose number reproduces the differences of rank in Tai society. Thus, among the Black Tai, the souls of common people settle in one village; those of the eminent, whose hereditary duty consists of serving as the chief's auxiliaries, occupy another; those of the chiefs's lineage a third; and finally, the souls of those who assumed the function of chief live in the fourth and final village. The life within these localities reproduces life on earth and magnifies the privileges of the holders of political power. While, in fact, the souls of the common people must work for a living, those of the eminent are excused from all labor, although they are likewise subject to climatic conditions and must, like the former, be reincarnated into minor forms such as caterpillars or moss before disappearing completely. As for the souls of chiefs and members of their lineage, they are much more fortunate, since they have only to wish for something to get it. Furthermore, the climate in their villages is mild and, moreover, they remain in this paradisiacal universe for eternity,

The heavens, as we see, are of fundamental importance to the non-Buddhist Tai. Indeed, from them flows the physical existence, personality, and status of humans, by virtue of a personalized and

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socially distinctive relationship maintained by each individual with the hierarchical divine beings that people each higher level of the universe.

Below the heavenly deities, there are various supernatural entities that are also designated by the generic term *phi* and which can be divided into two categories. The first includes the tutelary spirits that correspond either to the civilizing heroes from mythic times or to the souls of people who have died normally and joined the altar of the ancestors or the cemetery. These spirits are *a priori* benevolent, but they can punish people who do not respect them or who transgress customs. There are also spirits that are fundamentally malevolent, which are the result of violent deaths, perjurors, or the souls the shaman did not correctly guide toward the villages "to the edge of the horizon" during the funeral rites. Within this second category are also the *phi* who have chosen a particular place (such as a rock, termitary, mountain, forest, tree ...) as well as the errant spirits, all the more feared since they cannot be located. While the classification of malevolent spirits varies greatly from one group to another, that of the tutelary spirits is, on the other hand, very stable and defined by virtue of the different levels of the social space. We are indebted to H. Maspéro for having demonstrated that on each different level we are in the presence of a duality similar to that which characterizes the earth gods in ancient China. On the one hand one finds, in fact, a deity that protects the whole of a community living in a specific place. The ancient Chinese call it *she* or *gonshe*, the non-Buddhist Tai call it *phi muang* on the level of the principality (*muang*), *phi ban* on the village level (*ban*), and *phi na* ("spirit of the rice field") on the level of the family. It coexists with another deity, whose protective power is associated exclusively with agnatic filiation. The Chinese call it *sishe*, the Tai call it *lak seua* or *lak muang* when referring to the ruling dynasty, *phi seua* for the other lineages, and *phi hian* for the more restricted level of the household; *phi seua* and *phi hian* are identified with the ancestors either of the lineage or of the domestic unit.

If one considers the most inclusive level, that of the principality, the *lak* and the *phi muang* assume distinct and complementary functions. Through mythological references, each joins the heavens to the earth in its own manner. Hence, the *phi muang*, repre-

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sented by a tree planted on the outskirts of the community, corresponds to the civilizing hero that the celestial supreme god sent to earth to teach men the arts of subsistence. On the other hand the *lak muang*, represented by a post (*lak*) or a grove of trees, and which is likewise situated outside the living space, symbolizes the bond of filiation uniting the supreme celestial god to the Tai chief, called *tao fa* ("Lord (son) of the heavens").

Another difference between the two deities is seen in the nature of their influence. While the *lak muang* is strictly related to an aristocratic line and the political stratification of its leaders, the jurisdiction of the *phi muang* covers the entire land exploited by the local population. On the other hand, while the chiefs and the *lak muang* associated with them have the role of maintaining social order and civil peace, the *phi muang* is responsible for harmonizing the relationships between nature and man in order to ensure man's health and prosperity. In short, while the *phi muang* gives rise to a public and immutable cult, since as long as the local community exists it worships it no matter the socio-political changes it must confront, the worship of the *lak muang* is private and temporal. Indeed, with each change of dynasty, the new chief knocks down the post symbolizing the authority of his predecessors in order to replace it with a new one, just as in ancient China the new sovereign would neutralize the earth god by walling up the mound of the one he had replaced.

The Cosmology of the Buddhist Tai

Under the influence of Theravada Buddhism, the cosmology of the Tai evolved significantly, first of all, with the emergence of an underworld situated in the bowels of the earth. Similarly, while the *postmortem* fate of the non-Buddhist Tai had been a function of the hereditary status of the deceased, in the Buddhist context this fate became interpreted first and foremost in relation to the moral value of the acts accomplished, in keeping with the doctrine of karma.

Virtue affects status, but, more importantly, virtue establishes status. If, for example, the Laotian or Siamese king places himself at the top of the social hierarchy, it is because he is more

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advanced than other men in the path that leads to illumination; ideally he is both a *boddhisattva* (a future Buddha) and the *cakkravartin*, that is, he who turns the wheel of Dharmic law in favor of universal harmony. The filial relationship that once tied the king to the celestial supreme god henceforth became replaced by a spiritual tie to the Buddha, and it is this relationship that is believed to legitimize his power.

In the extension of these ideas, the souls of the dead no longer are divided among the heavens and the earth, but henceforth reflect an alternating assignation among the different levels of the universe. Indeed, only the most highly moral people are thought to migrate toward the celestial paradise where their souls live radiantly before being reborn to a higher existence. As for the other deceased, either they descend to expiate their faults in the suffering and overwhelming heat of hell, leaving their descendants with the onus of favoring their rebirth through the accumulation of religious merits; or, in the case of the victims of violent death, they take the form of the *phi* that evolve on earth without hope of reincarnation, as they did in former times, in a typically Buddhist interpretation of their fate, since it is said that their sins are responsible for their premature deaths.

The changes that the Buddhist ideology brought about in terms of the representation of death are found in the more general framework of a redefinition of the relationships to the beyond. Indeed, while men previously had privileged communication with celestial entities, in the Buddhist context the infernal bowels of the earth become the site upon which human imperfection becomes projected, thereby acquiring an importance it never had beforehand. Such a reorientation was reinforced by the phasing out of the *phi then* and the *mae bao* in favor of celestial divinities of Indian origin – the *devata* (*thevada* in Siamese and lao languages) – which Buddhist mythology casts as the auxiliaries or protectors of the works of the Enlightened One.

The *devata* are, as we know, dominated by the distant figure of Brahma and by the more popular one of Indra, their chief, who sits enthroned on the heights of Mount Meru. Like the *phi then*, they are indefinite in number and form a hierarchy. Nevertheless, for the Buddhist Tai, this hierarchy is not a true reflection of that

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of man, and the belief in the *devata* makes obsolete the ancient idea that the body and the souls of the individual were fashioned by celestial entities and remained under their control for the rest of their lives. Certainly, the fear of celestial mothers is still noticeable in the birth rites of certain Tai Buddhists. But this fear stems from a confusion between the ancient idea of the *mae bao*, that of planetary divinities (*matrka*), originating in Indian astrology, and the properly Buddhist belief relative to the *pho mae kamneut*, that is, the parents from the former life.

For the Buddhist Tai, no longer believing that the *phi then* and the *mae bao* act upon individuals through the intervention of a celestial double, and with the heavens becoming almost inaccessible as a destination for the dead, shamanism, which formerly resolved the problem of the dispersion of the souls of the living and ensured the transfer of some of the souls of the dead to the heavens, will decline, if not disappear, in certain cases, while the search for wayward souls or their reinforcement in the person henceforth will proceed from the collective invocation of the *devata*.

While, to conclude our discussion of the celestial divinities, the belief in Phi Then Luang survives in the Buddhist context, its power on the village level is limited to the mastering of natural elements, and it is no longer invoked except during agrarian rites, when the object is to provoke abundant rainfalls. Buddhism not only profoundly modified the Tai concepts of celestial deities; it also had significant effects on other aspects of their pantheon, as seen in the importance henceforth placed on the subterranean dimension of the universe and reflected in the many functions recognized in Nang Thorani or the *naga*.

Nang Thorani and the Naga

The combination of earth and water upon which the Tai rice growers' subsistence depends will endow the ritual Buddhist context with a very particular nature. Popular Buddhism develops, as we saw, the idea according to which the souls of the majority of dead people migrate underground to expiate their sins. On the other hand, it makes the transfer of merits to ancestors a highly valued

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act of compassion and faith. In order to concretize this transfer, the Tai will adopt, under the influence of Indian mythology, the very ancient custom in Indochina that consists of pouring alcohol on the earth as an offering to subterranean deities and ancestors, with the nuance that the alcohol becomes replaced by lustral water.

It thus appears that the union between earth and water determines not only the existence of the living, but also the rebirth of the dead inasmuch as it serves as the conductor to virtue in its fight against demonic forces. It is in this role of fecundity and auxiliary to dharma that two figures of Buddhist mythology will become personified as, on the one hand, Dharani (Nang Thorani in Siamese and lao languages) and, on the other, the *naga*, ophidian deities that will merge with the *nguok* from the ancient system of Tai beliefs.

Dharani is one of the feminine divinities personifying the earth in Vedic India. According to legend, Buddha took her as witness to his past merits when Mara contested his authority. Dharani is said to have recalled the time when the Enlightened One poured water over her long hair as a sign of the realization of his meritorious acts. Joining gesture with speech, she allegedly wrung out her hair, producing drops of water that miraculously swelled, becoming transformed into an immense ocean and drowning Mara. It is this mythological episode that the adepts of Theravada Buddhism reenact when they pour water on the earth and take Nang Thorani as witness to the merits addressed to the ancestors. The power to conduct the wicked to hell was, moreover, recognized in this divinity whom the peasants identified with the earth, but who generates anthromorphic representations as well, notably in urban environments. In such cases she is imagined as a young woman, dressed in the manner of princesses of the past and squeezing her long hair, gathered into a single mass, in order to extract the water.

Beside her moral function, Nang Thorani symbolizes the fecundating power of the earth, and her assistance in this respect is invoked by some Buddhist Tai during the main phases of the cycle of rice production. The Laotian farmers, for example, make offerings to her on the occasion of the first workings of the field; they next ask her to help the plants to grow at the time of transplant-

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ing; and then they solicit her authorization to proceed in the threshing once the harvest is completed.

Like Nang Thorani, the *naga* reflect material and spiritual concerns. Indeed, they symbolize fertility in a particular guise even as they serve as auxiliaries to Buddha. In this regard, let us recall first of all that Mucalinda, the prince of the *naga*, is said to have protected the Enlightened One from the rain and floods during his meditations in Bodh-gaya by making him a lofty seat out of the coiled rings of his snake body and sheltering him with the hood of his seven heads. On the other hand, through reference to a non-literary tradition known throughout India as well as Southeast Asia, certain Buddhist Tai confer the title of "lord of the *naga*" to another legendary figure, Upagutta. Considered the natural son of Buddha and the fish goddess, Matsa, he is said to have left his retreat at the bottom of the ocean where he lived as a reclusive monk in order to subjugate the Evil One, Mara, who threatened the meritorious works of the famous emperor Asoka.

Similar to Nang Thorani in their roles and the link they create between Buddhism and agrarian cults, the *naga* nonetheless differ from her on several points. First of all, while Nang Thorani personifies the earth, they symbolize fire inasmuch as it is associated with water in a fecundating duality. As in the cosmology of the Chinese or the non-Buddhist Tai, these ophidians live in the underworld upon which the earth rests and which flows out of it in the form of rivers and oceans. On the other hand, while Nang Thorani is a female deity, the Tai conceive of *naga* as masculine beings, since the figure of the *nagini*, popular in Hinduism or Tibetan Buddhism, is not found here.

Theravada Buddhism, moreover, eternalizes an idea already found in the ancient system of Tai beliefs, which casts these ophidians as symbols of virility, the fire they represent being an internal fire, that of male sexuality. Hence the candidates for ordination who have not yet made vows of chastity are qualified as *naga* by the Siamese and Lao, in reference to the legendary episode of Mahavagga according to which a *naga* assumed a human form and had himself ordained bonze at the time of Buddha. His aggressive behavior, however, betrayed his identity and he was defrocked, while as compensation he obtained the

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promise that candidates for ordination would henceforth be identified with him.

This being so, the cult of the *naga* bears witness to a pronounced ambivalence in their regard. Indeed, in the rites people do not seek their protection as is the case with Nang Thorani, but seek not to awaken their destructive power, or to control their fecundity. Hence, in Laos, during the ritual associated with the first ploughing of the earth, their position is assessed by astrological means. Afterward, the peasants work the fields in the direction of the snake's scales, in order not to wound it and thereby bring on catastrophes. On the other hand, at the time of the rite that calls for rain in the sixth lunisolar month, the Lao peasants explicitly invoke the help of celestial divinities, and during the same rituals they shoot decorated snake-shaped rockets into the sky. The rockets' explosion allegorically signifies the fiery passion of a phallus drawing the vital feminine element of water toward it. Conversely, as harvest time draws near, the same peasants, by means of races in pirogues that here again are *naga*-shaped, enact another coupling that is designed, this time, to attract the waters of the rice fields toward the rivers.

The fear the Tai peasants experience toward the *naga* can be related to the untamed virility these spirits incarnate. This virility is expressed in mythology of Indian origin, but it stems as well from the religious beliefs of the non-Buddhist Tai since, as we mentioned above, the *nguok*, the equivalent of the *naga*, were once thought to have the ability to take on human form in order to seduce and/or devour young girls' hearts. This very ancient theme lives on in residual form, moreover, in Buddhist populations of long standing. R.B. Davis notes that the Khon Muang, the Buddhist Tai in the north of Thailand, distinguish the *naga* from the *ngeuak*, with the latter feared for their ability to devour the souls of humans and the female spirits who inhabit the wood of boats. Elsewhere, the Lao legend that tells of the origins of the rocket festival (*bun bang fai*), associates this institution with the wishes of a king to marry his daughter to the suitor who has made the most powerful rocket (which is to say, implicitly, the one who has proved the most virile). On the outskirts of the competition, one of the sons of the lord of the *naga* was a suitor. Not having

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been able to get the princess by means of the competition, he tried to seduce her by assuming the form of a squirrel. The plan succeeded to the point that the princess wanted at all costs to possess this squirrel, and a hunter killed it to satisfy her. This provoked the wrath of the lord of the *naga*, and the capital of the kingdom became engulfed in a great cataclysm, while the upheaval of earth of the king's regalia (ring, crown) brought about the creation of ponds and swamps.

Confronted with the ambivalent forces of nature that the *naga* represent to the fullest extent, as is well illustrated by this legend, the Tai developed their cultural project of taming such forces. This project was conceived of as such in the mythology of the ancient Chinese. According to this mythology, the supreme god of the heavens makes the earth liveable and sends celestial heroes there; after a bitter struggle they convert the destructive energy of the master of the earth, the monstrous Gong-gong with horned head and snake's body, into life-giving power. This life-giving power is then held by the earth spirits who are identified with the victorious heroes or the descendants of the vanquished monster.

We have seen that among the Black, White, or Red Tai the role of organizer of the earth and protective divinity of the principality is directly linked to the celestial heroes, while the figure of the monstrous ophidian does not appear here. Nonetheless, Tai mythology bears witness to a stricter influence of the Chinese cosmological model in certain cases, such as in the ancient Indianized kingdom of Luang Phrabang where, as among the ancient Chinese, subjugated ophidian spirits are granted the status of occult protectors of the kingdom along with, it is true, an ensemble of other divinities.

Phi or lak muang?

While the issues of violent death were little affected by the introduction of Buddhism among the spirits that evolve in the invisible dimension of the human world, the changes were much more significant in terms of the protective spirits. The tutelary spirit of the chief's lineage (*lak muang*) and the protective spirit of the commu-

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nity (*phi muang*) will, in fact, most often become fused into a divinity called indiscriminately *phi* or *lak muang*.

It is in the northernmost Tai states on the Indochinese peninsula, more specifically in Luang Phrabang and Chiang Mai, that the old ideas have been the best preserved. In these two cases, the cults of the *lak muang* and the *phi muang* still refer to two distinct bodies of legends. Nonetheless, those relating to the *lak muang* now legitimize the public and unchanging cult of a spirit dissociated from the reigning dynasty. Hence in Luang Phrabang, the *lak muang* is thought either to have been created by two hermits who traced the foundation of the city and assigned the role of protecting it to the *naga*, or to have originally been a sandalwood tree trunk drifting in the water which was fished out by an old woman when she recognized it as a deity. Whatever the legend, however, the *lak muang* no longer personifies, for Luang Phrabang, the filial bond that once linked the chief to the celestial god, and the same is true in Chiang Mai. In the former capital of the kingdom of Lan Na, in fact, the post marking the principality is thought to have been a gift from Indra in order to protect a city that conceived of itself from the outset as a great Buddhist center. From that time on, the *lak muang* served as a palladium for a prominent figure in the Brahmanic pantheon – Indra – whom Buddhism appropriated and who, in the Tai conception, tends to be substituted for the Phi Then Luang, just as the *devata* he directs replaced the *phi then*. As for the *phi muang*, it was subjected to a Buddhist reinterpretation of the ancient schema, including, moreover, a reference to tutelary spirits associated with a population that settled there at a more ancient date. Hence a buffalo is sacrificed each year to the Lawa (Austro-Asiatic) masters of the earth, who are no longer subjugated by the supreme celestial god, but by Buddha.

While in the northernmost kingdoms the difference between *phi* and *lak muang* resisted Buddhist acculturation, in other places the *lak muang*, the post marking the city, personifies the existence of a tutelary spirit identified with the *phi muang*, just as on a lesser level the post marking the village will henceforth serve as a resting place for a collective tutelary spirit.

In this context, the power of the protective spirit is not interpreted through a reference to the deeds of a celestial hero, but

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refers rather to the action of characters situated on the terrestial plane. In certain, quite rare, cases, there is also mention of fantastic animals. For example, in Meng Long, a former Tai Lü principality of the kingdom of Sip Song Phan Na in Yunnan, a fleeing princess is said to have become miraculously pregnant by drinking water from a footprint left by two Laotian lions. The twin brothers to whom she gave birth then reigned in turn over the locally created principality, while the two lions, whose effigy still sits enthroned in the center of the village, became the tutelary spirits.

Aside from this unusual case, the appropriation of supernatural powers for cultural reasons can sometimes be the result of the workings of bonzes. In the Lao villages on the right and left banks of the Mekong, it is thus very common, following a calamity harshly affecting the community, for the local clergy to set up a *lak ban* (a village post), subduing with psalms the powerful spirit considered to live in the tree or rock chosen as object of the cult. This recognized role of the monks is not, however, restricted to the rural areas. The protective posts of certain great cities in Thailand were erected in the same manner. Khon Kaen, for example, which is the main city of the north- east of the country, was endowed with a *lak muang* in 1956, following the initiative of the chief of the bonzes of the province. He had five basalt stones from an archaeological site that once served as the boundaries of a very ancient temple brought in, and in this way they sheltered the *devata* protecting the pagoda in different directions. One of the stones was placed at the center of Khon Kaen to become the *lak muang*, and the others were placed at the four corners of the city.

In a radically different vein, the *lak muang* is at times identified by the Buddhist Tai with a *phi* created quite simply through the intermediary of a human sacrifice. Indeed, the founding myths of many towns are elaborations on the theme of a violent death that the political power imposes on an individual, or which he imposes on himself. The benevolence of the spirit that issues from this violent end is brought about through the public cult devoted to him from generation to generation. E. Seidenfaden finds these human sacrifices documented in the oral tradition of the Shan of Burma. They are likewise at the center of the founding myths of capitals such as Bangkok, Vientiane, or Luang Phrabang. The sac-

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rificed are often pregnant women because, they say, the spirits engendered by their deaths are particularly dangerous.

Voluntary sacrifices usually manifest themselves after a dream. One of the founding myths of Luang Phrabang mentions in particular a young pregnant woman who was inspired to marry the spirit personified in the post of the city that was to be planted in the earth and who, decked out in red flowers, threw herself into the hole to share the fate of her husband. As for involuntary sacrifices, they are most often designated through divination. For example, the oral tradition of the ancient *muang* of Roi Et, in the north-east of Thailand, traces the institution of the protective post of the principality to a soothsayer's choice of two men from a list of those subject to forced labor. On the order of the nobleman who had just founded the city, the two men were impaled by means of a post that was to materialize their power, a post taken from a "candle tree" (*hopea odorata*), whose abundant secretions of resin already in themselves manifest a supernatural presence.

One can't conclude this panorama of themes dominating the foundation myths of the Buddhist Tai principalities without mentioning the most recurrent theme among them, which conceives of the *muang* tutelary spirit as a human, identified with the local history and whose power is revealed during his lifetime through the acquisition of a higher status. This character is at times a hero of renown in the region, whose protective power is appropriated by many localities at the same time. Let us take, for example, the ancient principality of Nong Bua Lamphu in the current province of Udon (north-east of Thailand). Here they make tutelary deities out of Pha Daeng and Nang Hai, two of the principal actors of the creation myth of *bun bang fai*, the rocket festival, which is the most important rain-invocation ritual celebrated by the Lao. Like the inhabitants of many other localities of the North-East, the inhabitants of the Nong Bua Lamphu justify the cult they devote to pseudo-historic celebrities by asserting that they were born there. These same inhabitants likewise appropriated another regional hero in the figure of Phu Lup. Phu Lup is said to have been an officer in the army of the Vientiane king, Chao Anu (1805-1827), who very early on demonstrated supernatural powers. Chao Anu dismissed him, seeing in him a *phi phop*, which is to say a particu-

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larly dangerous devourer of souls. After this slight, Phu Lup took refuge in a forest today adjoining a district near the Nong Bua Lamphu. There he confirmed his reputation as *phi phop* even further by causing the death of his wife, his daughters, and other women. The *devata* reacted by causing an earthquake that buried Phu Lup. After his death, the inhabitants of Nong Bua Lamphu, and especially men seeking virility, tamed his fearful power by making him *phi muang* beside Pha Daeng and Nang Hai.

The guardian spirits associated with the preceding cases are all in all less numerous in comparison to others derived from people more closely tied to the creation of a city, a village, or even a monastic community. In Thailand, as in Laos, many are the princes, generals or great monks who were identified after their deaths as the tutelary spirit of the collectivity they founded and successfully ran; the same phenomenon recurs frequently in rural villages. We should note that the spirits formed in this way are often considered communal ancestors. The Lao of the north-east of Thailand thus qualify the *phi-lak muang* as *chao pho* ("lord-father") to indicate their ancendancy over human activity and a more or less extensive ensemble of secondary protective deities. As for village tutelary spirits, they are called, in the same sense, *ta pu ban*, that is, "maternal or paternal village grandfather."

In the few cases of *muang* in which it is possible to reconstruct the process of ancestralization, we note that it operates in two time periods. The lord first imposes on his subjects the idea that the principality he has founded is protected on the occult level by his *pho mae kamneut*, his father and mother from a former life, using the popular Buddhist beliefs on the subject to his advantage. Then, at a later point corresponding to his death, he is identified with his karmic parents.

It is certainly very interesting to examine what happens to the public worship of such deities during a change of command. Does the new sovereign continue the worship of his predecessors or does he substitute an analogous cult based on his own *pho mae kamneut*? Based on the study undertaken by Ch. Archaimbault (1959) on the Lao kingdoms of Luang Phrabang and Xieng Khuang, it would appear that the idea of plurality is preferable to substitution and that the official cult always preserves a preemi-

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nent place in the dynasty that founded the principality or kingdom. In Luang Phrabang, the *phi muang* is made up of a group of spirits dominated by the figure of the Phu Nieu Nia Nieu, the founding celestial heroes, who were later assimilated into the *devata*. At the heart of this assembly one finds the monarchs who were thought to be the descendants of Then Luang, through reference to the ancient Tai mythology. One of them is none other than Suvanna Khampong, the grandfather of Fa Ngum who condemned his grandson to exile in 1353 to prevent him from dethroning him. Fa Ngum was himself deified after his death, like his son, Sam Sen Tai, who overthrew him in 1373. As for Xieng Khuang, where the *lak* and *phi muang* are confused, more than thirty princes and monarchs are honored there simultaneously as protective ancestors. In both cases, the distribution of offerings and other aspects of the rites express a hierarchy that favors precedence, status, and fame, while placing the deified monarch above the chthonian spirits and subjugated ophidians.

The process of ancestralization we have just examined is quite similar to the comparable concept of the *lak muang* among the non-Buddhist Tai, since in both cases the power of the protective spirit depends on a filial relationship. However, there is a major difference on the level of the ideas underlying each form of worship. Except for the special case in Luang Phrabang between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the lord is no longer considered to rule because he is of divine ancestry, but the fact that he governs attests to virtuous ancestors, capable of patronizing the kingdom. In other words, the *lak muang* does not legitimize the power of the lord, it prolongs it. It is no longer the mark of an exclusive filial relationship with the supreme celestial god, but merely expresses a fate and a superior capacity that can be shared with others (from which comes perhaps the facility to accumulate tutelary spirits in certain kingdoms or principalities). Similarly, the *lak muang* is no longer traced back to the feats of a divine hero, but to those of an historical or pseudo-historical personage. In short, let us remember that it no longer reflects a private and temporal cult, but a public and immutable one.

While the *phi* and *lak muang* merged under the influence of Buddhism to the point that one can describe them as *phi-lak*

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muang, and while the beliefs concerning their origins have become modified and diversified, the great universal religion did not, however, weaken popular faith in the protective powers that were once recognized in the tutelary spirits of the principalities or villages, and this is what allowed them to maintain a strict link between these spirits and the holders of political power. Very indicative of the importance they still hold is the fact that Bangkok today has two *phi-lak muang*, placed side by side, because the great king Mongkut (1851-1868), though known for his modern spirit and Buddhist faith, learned from a diviner that the one instituted by his grandfather seventy years earlier did not correspond to his horoscope. Let us add that the practice continues in Thailand of instituting *phi-lak muang* in provincial towns that were not endowed with them beforehand. This is often at the initiative of the governors or district chiefs who hope in this way to place their administrations under favorable auspices or to exorcise a series of calamities. They then call upon the monks to transform the untamed spirits into a positive force.

The importance still granted to the cult of tutelary spirits by the governors and the ensemble of the population is explained by the widely held conviction of their omnipotence. They strengthen the power of the authorites first of all by punishing the crimes of trouble-makers and traitors. On these grounds, the king of Thailand, as did his Laotian counterpart, invites them to follow the periodic ceremony during the course of which all the civil servants of the kingdom renew their faith in him. They likewise protect the collectivity from any external threats, be it from malevolent spirits or human aggressors. One gets an idea of the faith they inspire through a popular saying in the north of Thailand, according to which they can transform "assailants into peaceful merchants." If they cease to respond to popular appeal in the area of security, then the very fate of the collectivity is severely threatened. The event related by H. G. Quaritch Wales, based on sources from Burma and tied to the dissolution of the kingdom of Ayuthaya in 1767, is very indicative of this Tai belief. Having failed in all his attempts to break the surrounding of his capital by the Burmese army, the king of Siam ordered that all the inhabitants of Ayuthaya make appropriate offerings to the tutelary spirit of the

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city, who from ancient times was thought to reside in the barrel of a large cannon. This cannon was then hoisted with great ceremony onto the top of the northernmost surrounding wall, across from the enemy camp. It was loaded with ample ammunition, but the lighting of the fuse failed several times. The officers unloaded it, and learned with terror that the powder had been changed into water. They then understood that their situation was hopeless.

Directly involved in the social order and in the defense of the group when confronted by an adversary, guardian spirits are likewise capable of salutary action against the forces of nature and can fend off epidemics or intervene favorably in climatic equilibrium by making rains come in times of drought, or drying up flooded areas. In short, they have the reputation of having as much influence over collective fate as over that of the individual, and are constantly solicited by individuals who thank them with gifts of money or food in return for an answered prayer (healing of a sick person, prosperity regained, successful participation in a competition).

It goes without saying that the different facets of their power vary in importance according to the social scale and context. On the level of the kingdom, the official cult seeks political integrity and prosperity set forth on a large scale. On the village level, on the other hand, agricultural preoccupations take precedence and the collective rites devoted to them correspond to the seasonal changes that govern the productive activity of the peasants.

The punishment of traitors, mentioned earlier, recalls the fundamental ambivalence of these deities, and the history of the most powerful tutelary spirits is marked with people who have died for having neglected or defied them. Placating them implies in fact that people show them respect by using certain forms of salutation, make offerings to them, respect the promises or oaths made in their presence, refrain from spoiling the area of their sanctuary and, lastly, keep them abreast of all the important matters concerning the collectivity or the families that comprise it. As regards this final mark of deference, H. G. Quaritch Wales reports that, up until the year 1910, the king of Siam never failed to send an invitation to the guardian spirit of Bangkok, requesting that he honor with his presence the state ceremonies that were being organized. In certain rural villages, it is still common practice to inform these

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spirits of the celebration of important events such as births, marriages, deaths, or even to ask them to accept newcomers and protect villagers absent for long periods of time.

We have until now dissociated the village guardian spirits from their counterparts on the higher administrative echelons. Nevertheless, in the Tai Buddhist system of representations, like that of the ancient Chinese, the ensemble of spirits forms a hierarchy that reproduces the political hierarchy of the country on a supernatural plane. Hence, although such a pyramidal structure is never perfectly reflected in rituals, the spirits of the villages are suboordinate to those of the district, themselves dominated by the tutelary spirits of the province (formerly the principality), whose power is nonetheless inferior to that of the guardian deities of the kingdom. One of the most poignant examples of this hierarchy is found in Xieng Khuang. In fact, in this ancient Lao kingdom, the sanctuary of the *phi muang* once included twelve altars to the image of Louang Phrabang. According to Ch. Archaimbault, eleven of these altars, smaller than the twelfth, were in fact devoted to the village protective spirits, who served as "lower" chiefs to the kingdom's supreme tutelary spirit.

Let us note, to complete this rapid examination of the occult patronage of Buddhist collectivities, that the various themes defining the origin and power of protective spirits become willingly superimposed on the local level. Thus to the idea of human sacrifice is often added that of the submission of a regional *phi* by the monks or the transformation of the community's founding hero into a tutelary ancestor. The former principality of Roi Et, already mentioned above, well illustrates this phenomenon. The *lak muang* there today includes three active forces, since to the magical properties of the "candle" tree and the souls of the two men buried beneath the post derived from this tree, was later added the spirit of the prince who founded the *muang*. Let us go back to the case of Nong Bua Lamphu where, aside from the tamed ogre Phu Lup and the legendary couple Nang Hai/Pha Daeng, people worship two cousins who founded the principality in 1766, following the disgrace of one of them, Pha Va, who had been minister of the king Ong Bun of Vientiane. Many other examples could be quoted to illustrate a tendency toward a proliferation of tutelary deities.

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While a lack of efficacy among the preexisting spirits can at times reactivate this tendency, this is far from the case most of the time, and to explain the strong recurrence of this phenomenon one might do better to speak of a mixture of fear and eclecticism, with the collectivity employing every means at her disposal in the face of adversaries deemed all-powerful. This frame of mind, furthermore, is found in a very syncretic practice of Buddhism and in the concern the Tai have always had to turn to their own advantage the cult of earth spirits once belonging to people they have conquered.

* * *

I have attempted here to outline the influences that Indianization had on the Tai cosmology and on their conception of earth deities. As we have seen, Buddhism imposed a new way of interpreting fate, which resulted in a redefinition of divine entities, their hierarchy, and their relationships to humanity. The status of the individual was henceforth interpreted in relation to the moral value of his past deeds and no longer on the basis of a differentiated descent supposedly initiated by the deities. The heavens toward which most of the religious practices of the non Buddhist Tai were directed lost importance in favor of the earth and subterranean world. And even if, according to popular Buddhism, the future Buddha sojourns in the higher level of celestial paradise, it is a spiritual link, like that between master and disciple, and not a geneological relationship, between ancestors and descendants, that ties the supreme divine entity to the sovereign.

These changes influenced the ancient Tai belief system by means of the classic phenomena of fusion and substitution. Hence, the convergent symbolism of the *nguok* and the *naga* favored their amalgamation (even if this was only partially the case in certain regions) at the same time that it increased the importance conferred on ophidian spirits. For their part the *devata* became substituted for the *phi then*, the former celestial divinities, just as Indra or Buddha took the place of Phi Then Luang as supreme deity, and each of these permutations corresponds to significant changes in the Tai belief system. Hence, the abandonment of the relationship of procreation according to which individuals or social

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groups derived from a celestial intervention greatly favored the amalgamation of *phi* and *lak muang*.

There was not, however, any sharp break with the former religious concepts, but rather a reciprocal and progressive adaptation, with Buddhist dogma evolving into the popular religion, in correspondence with the material preoccupations of the peasants, while the former concepts became reinterpreted in conformity with the ideology of the Enlightened One. This process of reciprocal integration is still in progress and, in the absence of uniformity, contributes to the great variety of earth divinities to which the Tai devote cults. Many of these deities coexist all the better as they take on complementary roles. For example, the flamboyant and barely tamed virility of the *naga* contrasts with the wise Nang Thorani, vehicle of the merits transferred to the dead and mistress of their destiny, while these two deities in turn are distinguished from the *phi/lak muang* by the fact that they do not represent a particular community and have no political dimension. The *phi* and *lak*, whatever the level on which they are worshipped (whether by family, village, principality, kingdom) manifest, in fact, the property of being tied in an exclusive way to a localized social group. Defined as tutelary ancestors or occult allies of the sovereign, they watch over the security and the prosperity of the group and, in this way, are one of its main identifying characteristics.

Notes

1. The term *t'ai* refers to a family of ethnic languages to be found between the South of China and the various countries of the Indochinese peninsula. The Tai who populate Thailand and Laos are among the best-known belonging to this family. The Black, White, and Red Tai – so called because of the color of the traditional dress preferred by their women – for that matter live in the mountainous regions of North Vietman.

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