

From Dream to Folklore in Northeast Thailand

By

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The following account was collected in Northeast Thailand, District Nong Han, Udonthani Province, in March 1961 at the close of a meeting of Mango Village sitting in common council. Ideally, each household of the community sends a representative, usually but not always male, to these village meetings to hear government announcements and discuss the administration of village affairs. After the business of the meeting was finished, Mr. Sing, the headman, prepared us to hear a "true" story of a man who had met spirits in the neighboring district (then sub-district) of the province. One of the villagers was sent to get the man who would actually tell the story as he had heard it directly from the lips of the man who had met the spirits. While we waited, the headman told my assistant and me about a spirit (*phii*)¹ in Nongkhai Province who had moved a temple (*bood*, or

1. The transcription of Thai words followed in this paper is basically that developed by Mary Haas (Thai-English Student's Dictionary, 1964 Stanford University Press, xi), with several alterations of symbols not found on a standard typewriter keyboard. Doubled vowels indicate length, which is phonemic. (The transcription in this paper does *not* indicate tone, which is phonemic.)

The consonant phonemes are

i, iii, i, aia	y, yy, ya	u, uu, ua
e, ee [ej, eej]	ə, əə [er, eer]	o, oo
ɛ, ɛɛ [e, ae]	a, aa	ɔ, ɔɔ [Q, QQ]

The consonant phonemes are

b	d	-g	
p-	t-	k-	
ph-	th-	kh-	
f-	s-		h-
w		j	
m	n	ng	
	l-		
	r-		

uposatha hall) to another place further south on the Mekong. When Mr. Kaew had climbed up the ladder of the headman's house, joining the rest of us sitting gathered around the flickering light of two small kerosene "candle-lamps" under a dark and moonless sky, he took his place at the center of the circle of listeners which had hardly diminished at all following the completion of the meeting. The event he related, said Mr. Kaew, had occurred 10 years earlier and that he himself had gone to meet the man quite deliberately to hear from his own lips how he had been taken away to the land of the spirits.

Because I did not then understand enough Thai to follow the story, Mr. Kaew paused every now and then to let my student-assistant translate what had been said. While this resulted in the loss of nuances, both the story-teller and the translator were very concerned that I understand the story properly; and I was able to clarify obscure points through questioning, either during or after the narration. The narrative follows, as it was taken down by candle-light on the porch of the headman's house.

When Mr. Khamtha was a primary-schoolboy, he dreamt that a ghost-girl (*phii phuu saw*) was in love with him. He asked his parents why he had this dream. They were not sure what had happened to cause it or what it meant, so they sent him to the *wat* (monastery) to become a novice in the Buddhist Brotherhood. They felt that the experience would teach him enough holy things to give him protection and to prevent the ghost-girl from taking him away in death. Khamtha remained a novice for six years, and then, as a young man (*phuu baaw*) he left the Brotherhood. He subsequently married and in the following six years had two children. At the end of these six years of happy married life, Khamtha became ill, and in his illness dreamt again that the same ghost-girl wanted to make love to him.

That November day, his mother's younger brother (*naa*) came to tell him to cut the ripened dry rice in the forest (swidden) field. He went and began work harvesting the crop. About mid-day, he wanted to rest in the field-shelter during the heat of the day. He looked and saw a girl already in the shelter. He thought it was a village girl with whom he had been making love all that month and who had become pregnant. He feared that she would report him to the police, so he hurried over to talk to her. When he had climbed the ladder into the shelter, he saw that she was sitting with her back to him so that he could not see her face. He asked her one of the usual village greetings, "Where have you come from?" She turned around then and he saw that it was a different girl after all, one unknown to him. She told him that she had no home and no village, and had come to talk to him. Again he asked where she had come from. She said she had come

with the person who was tending the cattle, not wishing to admit that she was really a ghost. Mr. Khamtha talked to her as a boy talks to a girl, trying without much success to seduce her. A third time he asked her where she had come from. This time, she answered, "from very far away, you wouldn't know the place if I told you." He asked her why she had come, for whom was she looking? She replied that she had come to see a Mr. Khamtha, whom her parents had told her was very handsome. He thought that she had been acting very strangely and not according to custom, and so began watching her more closely. He noted that the base of her fingernails was black rather than white, that she had short red hairs at the hairline, and that her hair was longer than normal at the nape of her neck. He could see that she was really not a girl at all, but a ghost-girl.

So he replied that if she wanted to see Khamtha, she should follow him and he would take her to Khamtha. He added that it would be easy for her to find Mr. Khamtha, for he himself was Khamtha's neighbor. He tried to excuse himself, lying to her that he would lead her to Khamtha after he had taken a bath in the pond to freshen up before going back to the village. She said that he was trying to leave her, but he denied it, saying "No, I am not trying to leave you; I only want to take a bath. After all, it is good luck to meet such a pretty girl". But instead of going to the pond, he started for the forest. "Why don't you go to the pond?" she asked, but he said that there was a well in the forest. (Well water is clear whereas pond water is muddy.) He went behind a "hill", and then ran to find his *naa*, who was tending the cattle grazing in the forest. [This hill, one of the village school-teachers said after the story was over, has a pond on its summit encircled by many trees. In the pond there once were many crocodiles, which people did not kill, because they are believed to belong to Phraya Naga (i.e. Mr. Sisuthoo), the guardian spirit of the old kingdom of Vientiane. A *farang*, (or Westerner) came and killed many of the crocodiles for their skins. Nothing happened, he said, so probably there really aren't any spirits.]

When Khamtha found his uncle (*naa*), this one asked him what had happened, and Khamtha asked "What kind of a girl did you bring to see me?", since she had told Khamtha that she had been brought by the man tending cattle. His *naa* said that he had brought no girl to visit him, and they went back to the shelter to see who was there. But there was no one there.

They walked back to the village and told the people what had happened. Khamtha's parents thought he looked very strange, like a mad man, and so sent for Mr. Khuming, the spirit doctor. Khamtha stayed at the spirit-doctor's house for 8 days of observation, after which

Khamtha was sent home to his family. His relatives all came to see him, and he seemed to be normal. Then, that very day, at noon, while many of his relatives were still visiting, Khamtha said he was sleepy and went inside the house to lie down.

He dreamt again, and in his dream he was visited by 5 men, who asked him if a Mr. Khamtha lived in this house. Dreaming, he answered yes, he is here, and left the room to come out to speak to them. He asked them why they had come. They were four old men and an eighteen year-old youth, who was very handsome. One of the old men said that they had been sent to get Mr. Khamtha and take his back with them. Khamtha asked them where they wanted to take him. They answered that they would take him to Big Phukhawdyng. Phukhawdyng or Mount Dyng is a mesa-like massif in the neighboring province of Loey. The location of Big Phukhawdyng is unknown to everyone. (Since I did not try to get the Thai spelling, I cannot tell if *dyng* is related to a Thai word meaning hard-headed, headstrong; to pull, stretch out or pluck, or is related to a Pali-Sanskrit work *dyngsa*, the numeral thirty.)

When they arrived at Big Phukhawdyng, Khamtha was told, he would be entered in a contest to select the most handsome man from among the contestants. (The villagers who had all heard the story before agreed that it was a contest just like the beauty contests at the provincial winter fair, only with men instead of women.) Khamtha said that he didn't want to go, since it must be far away for he had never heard of Phukhawdyng Jaj, or Big Mount Dyng. The handsome youth told Khamtha that he too was going to enter the contest and tried to encourage Khamtha to join them. But Khamtha still did not want to go. He insisted that they return to the person who had sent them, and tell him to come himself to talk to Khamtha. "If I have to go, I will go only with that man", he said. The old man said that he would tell the person who had sent them to come after Khamtha himself since he would not come with them. They left then, and Khamtha woke up and told everyone about his dream.

They asked him if he were mad, dreaming the same kind of strange dream so often and said that his "nervous system was very strange". His relatives watched him carefully.

Five days later, again at noontime, he again went to sleep and dreamed again. He dreamt that he heard a motor-car approaching the house and went out to see who had come. He saw a round disk-like object with five "things that looked like the heads of horses" projecting out of it at the rim. (The headman broke in to say that they might be *naga* heads.) The whole vehicle, having no wheels, floated only a meter off the ground beside the ladder to the house. Khamtha looked at it and saw a man, looking like a king, leave the machine. Khamtha feared the

man and sat down (in order to place himself on a lower, and hence respectful, level than his guest). The man came up and sat beside him, introducing himself as Mr. Sisutho. Mr. Sisutho looked very big, as big as a *farang* [Westerner]. He told Khamtha that he had come to take him away. Khamtha asked "Where will you go, father?" Mr. Sisutho told him that of all the contestants in the men's beauty contest, only Mr. Khamtha had not yet come to Phukhawdyng Jaj. Khamtha replied that he did not want to go, that he would miss his wife and children, and that anyway he wasn't handsome, but only ordinary (which the story-teller agreed was the truth, having seen Khamtha). Mr. Sisutho replied that he had promised his friends to bring a contestant to match, if not surpass, theirs but that unless Khamtha returned with him, he wouldn't be able to keep his word.

Khamtha asked "If I should go, when would I be able to return home?" and made Mr. Sisutho promise to send him back right after the contest. Mr. Sisutho agreed to send him back quickly, and added that he, Khamtha, would be able to make some money by going. But Khamtha said that he didn't need any money, so long as he would be sent home whenever he wished to return. They both then entered the strange machine and left the yard, floating down the road a little ways, when Mr. Sisutho asked him if he had told his wife and children that he was leaving. Khamtha admitted that he had not; so Mr. Sisutho told him to get out of the machine and go back to tell them. Then he woke up back in the house.

He told everyone of his dream, and they agreed that he was surely mad, for they had seen nothing unusual. Mr. Khuming, the spirit-doctor, asked whether he felt any different than usual, but he felt normal, and replied "Quite well, I only dreamt." His relatives asked him if it was only a dream or was he delirious, as seemed more likely. But he denied it and told them about Mr. Sisutho and his machine. Then they knew that he had only dreamed. After a bit, Khamtha tried to excuse himself, saying he wished to relieve himself. Mr. Khuming volunteered to accompany him to the privy, but Khamtha objected, saying he didn't need the spirit doctor to accompany him. Mr. Khuming then said that if he felt quite well, he probably would not need Khuming to go along, as long as he took his little son in case he became ill. So Khamtha left, accompanied by only his son, to relieve himself behind an isolated clump of bamboo some 80 meters from the house. His son waited in front, about 4 meters away, and after a little while, heard a sound like something heavy being thrown against the bamboo. He called out, "Father, father", and everyone came running to see what had happened, but Khamtha had disappeared. Although there was no cover that would have permitted him to have run away without being

seen, they searched everywhere in and around the village without success. About two hours later, Khamtha reappeared at the same spot behind the thicket of bamboo and told the following story.

When he went around the stand of bamboo, Mr. Sisutho's machine floated up to him. He got in, and they rode to Mr. Sisutho's city where they got out. There was a large crowd of people all around, as at a fair, but Khamtha recognized no one among them. Mr. Sisutho told him to stay close and follow him, and led Khamtha along a white carpet spread on the ground. Before them were three tall houses, one red, one green and one white (the ordinary Thai house is unpainted). They went into the red house, and music began to play. A loud-speaker said, "Mr. Khamtha, son of Mr. Sisutho, is coming now."

They left the red house and entered the green one. Inside there was a throne on which Mr. Sisutho sat, pointing to a chair nearby for Mr. Khamtha. Coffee, tea and cigarettes were brought in for Mr. Khamtha, but he refused them, knowing that if he accepted anything he could not return. He was then told to go to the white house to dress himself, as it was nearly time for the contest. He did. In the white house, there were many kinds of clothing, watches and rings, all by the cabinets-full. Mr. Sisutho said that he would give all of it to Khamtha, and asked him what color he wished to wear. Khamtha said that he had no preference, so Mr. Sisutho told him that green would be best and that he should wear clothes of that color. Having attired himself, he was given a mirror to look in, and he saw that he was indeed very handsome and not at all like himself. Mr. Sisutho, however, decided that the color was not appropriate after all, and instructed him to change to white clothing. He did, and again looked in the mirror, and saw that he was still more beautiful. Mr. Sisutho, satisfied, said that white was the best color for him and gave him a watch and ring with a white jewel. Under Mr. Sisutho's direction, he practised walking and sitting down gracefully for a while.

When they had finished practising, they went out to the stage where the contest was to be held. It looked like a likay [*liikhee*], the itinerant popular theater, corresponding to the Japanese kabuki stage, and in back, had a number of rooms for the contestants. He went into the first room, set aside for Mr. Sisutho's sons, and found that there already were five other handsome young men in it. Khamtha waited there for about five minutes when trumpets began to blow. At the third call, the curtain that formed one wall opened up, and he saw that he was on a stage. He walked to the front of the stage, followed by the other men. Khamtha thought that the second youth behind him was the handsomest of all of them, and would surely win. The six men walked in a circle, sat down in chairs gracefully, and returned behind the curtain.

Mr. Sisutho came back stage and took him to the green house to wait for the announcement of the winner. In a short time, the loud-speaker announced "Mr. Khamtha, son of Mr. Sisutho, is the winner." The youth Khamtha who had thought to be the handsomest of all was the second-place winner. Khamtha said that he did not want any of the prizes Mr. Sisutho offered to give him, a gold and silver trophy cup, a jeweled ring, a watch and a set of clothes. Mr. Sisutho said that he would give him a watch and the ring anyway, but when they reached Khamtha's village, Khamtha tossed them back into the vehicle, saying that he did not want anything. Mr. Sisutho accepted this, but said that nevertheless all Mr. Sisutho owned would one day belong to Khamtha. When Khamtha's children were grown up in about 20 years or so, he would return for Khamtha and take him away to live with Mr. Sisutho, his rightful father. Then he left Khamtha where he had found him.

The people in Khamtha's house heard another sound behind the bamboo thicket, two hours having passed since Khamtha's disappearance, and went to see what it was. It was Khamtha, who had reappeared and was lying senseless and without feeling on the ground. When he was put on the ladder to his house, Khamtha recovered and was quite normal. Now his relatives and family do not want him to tell this story often, for they are afraid he will dream again. His full name is Khamtha Thongsilyang (while several translations of his given name are possible, his whole name could mean Gold-covered Yellow-gold). He lives in Ban Wang Thong, Ban Can Commune, Bandung District, Udonthani Province. In 1961, he was 34 years old, and a farmer.² He described Mr. Sisutho's city, said our story-teller, as being more beautiful

2. Firth (1955:13), discussing the fate of the soul, points out that narrative accounts of encounters with ghosts or of mediumistic seances provide outlets for aesthetic creativity and satisfaction in which intellectual elements are blended. Generalized descriptions based on set interviews often fail to convey the social context and full meaning carried by an oral recital of a vision, dream of the afterworld or ghostly visitation. He suggests the author of such an account as presented in this paper is seeking meaningful personal satisfactions, such as confirmation for personal decisions, standpoints or relationship, or may be projecting the dilemma or solutions of a personal problems.

Unfortunately we lack specific information on the precise social standing of Mr. Khamtha, who narrated his story to Mr. Kaew, my informant. But some clues are suggested by the narration, even at second hand. First Mr. Khamtha was entering early middle age in 1961, but would appear to be still dwelling in his parents' home with his wife and children. This virilocal residence is less common than uxoriocal residence, but is not considered unusual or abnormal. On the other hand, joint residence with parents-in-law or parents is temporary, lasting for an average three or four years until a younger sibling is ready to marry. While

than Udonthani, with big buildings like those in Bangkok, although he has never been either to Udon or to Bangkok. But all in all, the city looked pretty much like a Thai city. I was asked if I wanted to see the man, as it was only 20 baht (\$1.00) for the round trip. Afraid I might have to take half the village if I said yes, I hedged and said, maybe someday. At the time, also, it took from three to six hours to travel by truck from the highway to the district seat alone, some 45 kilometers, with Ban Wan Thong being yet some distance beyond, situated by a large plain annually flooded too rapidly to be farmed, by the Songkhram River, a tributary of the Mekong. So I did not make the trip.

Some four years later, in 1965, I did travel to Bandung District to visit a former student and his wife, who was teaching in the mission school of a largely Catholic village. Transportation had not improved; the trip taking three hours by truck on a very rutted track. We sat on the roof of the cab, since the body of the truck was jammed with people sitting and standing. People were even sitting on the wooden railings of the truck bed. My former student's village was a few miles outside the district seat, so as we walked through the deepening dusk he started to tell me about a bog some 15 kilometers beyond the village where the ground shakes when walked on and there is a special kind of tree, rather like a coconut palm, but with very small fruit and needle-like leaves which he said grows no-where else in Thailand. He had gone there once with fellow-teachers, but they were unable to penetrate to

a married couple reside with the parents of one spouse, usually those of the wife, they are in a subordinate client position in the village. The young husband is expected to support his patron in village meetings and is not expected to have any independent opinions of his own. Not until he becomes head of his own household does he attain full adult status in village affairs. Joint residence, however, may extend considerably beyond the average three or four years in individual cases. Since residence determines inheritance, in that new household will be given a portion of the estate in land which they helped cultivate, it is not always easy for such a young man (whom circumstances require to remain in a subordinate, dependent residency) to obtain recognition as a person of significance and prestige. If he leaves joint residence of his own accord, he may be forfeiting his means of livelihood. His labors benefit his patron as much or more than himself, and while he can join in discussions at village meetings, he has no vote, since each household votes as a unit whenever necessary. While temple service as a monk gives some prestige, with ex-monastics being given titles of respect corresponding to their ecclesiastical status, most men do enter the Brotherhood at least briefly before marriage—although this is perhaps less true now than formerly. It is also apparent that Mr. Khamtha did not progress beyond novice status, despite six years spent in the Brotherhood, and so was entitled to the lowest title of respect only. One possible motive of Mr. Khamtha's visions, therefore, could well be a conscious or unconscious desire for greater personal prestige and recognition by villagers as a person of importance despite his structurally subordinate position.

the center of the bog, where there is a lake containing crocodiles of varying size. The wind in the trees, he went on, makes a peculiar moaning sound. By and large, the bog is an awesome place, and people hereabouts believe it is haunted by spirits, being the home territory of Mr. Sisutho, who is the head of all the spirits (*phii*) in the Northeast. He then began a story, which was believed by Buddhist villagers, about a man from Ban Wang Thong. The man was said to have fallen asleep near the edge of the bog, and to have disappeared for two days, leaving behind his clothing to be discovered, but left undisturbed, by seachers. After two days, he reappeared and told what had happened to him.

Struck with the similarity to the story I had heard four years earlier, I made the mistake of talking instead of listening, and told the story related above asking if it was the same. It was the same account at least in outline, but I had missed the opportunity to hear a variant version of what had happened in the land of Mr. Sisutho. The rest of the journey was taken up by a mutually interesting but largely irrelevant discussion of credulity and the will to believe. Once in the village other events intervened to push the story out of mind, particularly as I had not deliberately set out to collect folklore, but to investigate kinship and social organization.

Subsequently, I was to hear more of Mr. Sisutho. Mr. Kaew, the man who had originally told us Khamtha's story, told me in 1966 that Mr. Sisutho is more properly called Phaja Nag Sisutho, and was the guardian-spirit of the old city-state of Wieng Chan (Vientiane), to which the old city-state of Nong Han was subject until incorporated into Thailand. Phaja Nag, he said, still lives in the Menam Khoong (Mekong), and in the old days the *caw myang* (lord of the city) of Wieng Chan could summon the Naga spirit to defend the city by beating a large drum (kong) kept in the city for the purpose. When the Thai defeated Vientiane in war—undoubtedly when Caw Anu rebelled in 1827—, the Thai were able to defeat the city only because they had first stolen the drum so that the Naga could not be summoned. Many villagers attributed the heavy flooding of late 1965 to the annoyance of Phaja Nag Sisutho caused by work on a proposed dam across the Mekong at a spot he is believed to frequent.

Heinrich Zimmer (1962:62) identifies the "king and ancestor of all the snakes that crawl the earth" as Shesha (lit. the Residue) or Ananta (lit. the Endless), who represents what was left over of the cosmic waters of the abyss after the earth and the upper and lower infernal regions had been shaped. Earlier (1962:60-61) he analyzed a relief of Vishnu lying on the coils of Ananta floating on water as symbolizing the "triune manifestations of the single, divine, imperishable, cosmic substance, the energy underlying and inhabiting all the forms of life". As

a class nagas are water-spirits, or genii, superior to men living in underwater heavens and guardians of the life-energy stored in the waters of the earth. Zimmer points out also that "Hindu and Buddhist representations of such popular divinities do not differ from each other, either essentially or in detail" (1962:63) since both the art and the doctrine were in India basically the same. I suggest that Phaja Nag Sisutho, the head of all the spirits of Isan (Northeast Thailand), is to be identified with Shesha, the king and ancestor of all serpents, as well as the Serpent-King Muchalinda, who sheltered the Buddha from a rain-storm during the third week of his experience of enlightenment. Zimmer sees this popular legend and the images it has produced in Cambodia and Thailand as perfectly reconciling two antagonistic forces, the life-force that binds men to the cycle of rebirth, and the savior who severs bonds and points beyond to the transcendental. (1946:66-68).

It is particularly appropriate, then, that at Vessantara (Bun Phra Wejdsandon) or Bun Mahachad (Feast of the Great Life), an *upakhuud* or shrine to the Naga king is erected in the temple compound and *thung corakhej*, or crocodile flags, are flown. Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1967: 169) notes the crocodile is to be identified with the naga, which was called the "crocodile-snake" (*nguak ngu*). *Nguak* is the old Thai word for *corakhej*, but now refers to mermen or mermaid.

It is also appropriate that the villagers of Pig Wallow Village, a recently settled community in a forested area with copious ground water resources that seep through the soil in many spots, should have obtained its ancestor-spirits for the village shrine from those spirits that regularly traverse the forest between *Kham Chanood*, (the bog, belonging to Mr. Sisutho, mentioned earlier) and the area east of the town of Nong Han, in which is located Mango Village. As symbolic of the life-force and of Shesha, the Residue of Creation, the Naga is ancestral to all life, and is justly identified with the *phiiputa*, the spirit of the father's father and the mother's father, who are the guardians and disciplinarians of the traditional Isan village. Although the villagers are not theologians nor particularly concerned with analyzing the symbology of their beliefs, it had bothered me that they would blithely identify the grandfather spirits with the *upakhud*, with the *lak myang*, or city post, originally a Shiva-linga erected by Khmer kings in outlying cities as symbolic of the divine royal presence and power, or with the *saen caw*, the shrine to the guardian spirit lord of a town or village. Except in functional terms, I could not see the logic of the equation, particularly when the obligation to venerate the grandfather spirits was not related to actual descent but was determined simply by territoriality, i.e. residence in the village. If, however, we see the ancestor spirits less as genetic ancestors and more as simply the origins or source of causation, it is easy to see this is the common

element for the different types of spirit shrines venerated in present-day Isan. They all honor a mythological or quasi-historical being or beings regarded as analogous to genealogical ancestors in being responsible for currently existing entities.

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