

## THE CEREMONY OF THAM KHWAN OF A MONTH OLD CHILD

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It has been a custom among the Siamese in the past, and to a certain extent it is still, for a month-old baby to go through a domestic ceremony of *tham khwañ* which literally means the making of the *khwañ*. *Khwañ* originally meant the soul, but through a development, the *khwañ* has now a vague meaning as something mysteriously abiding in the body which gives health and prosperity to its owner.\* The *khwañ* has a fickle nature; if frightened it will leave its residence in the body. The person whose *khwañ* is not with him will be ill, and if the *khwañ* does not come back, the person will die. Hence in every stage of a person's life, a ceremony of *tham khwañ* is usually performed. Here we will concern ourselves only with the ceremony of *tham khwañ* of a child.

Among the common people the baby will receive its customary first shaving a month after its birth. This shaving is peculiar to the Siamese of Central Siam. An offering in the form of food with candles, joss sticks and flowers is made to the guardian spirit of the place on a tray made of banana stems. The guardian spirit has his residence in a small shrine perched on a single post which may be frequently seen in the compounds of Siamese houses. During the first shaving the head is not completely shaved, for the hair on the crown of the head is left in order to protect its tender part during childhood. No doubt this tender spot on the head is to the primitive mind the spot through which the *khwañ* or soul goes out. In India this tender spot in the crown of the head is called *brahmarandhara* which is an aperture through which the soul is supposed to escape. During childhood this hair is allowed to grow while the hair on other parts of the head is cleanly shaven thus allowing the hair to grow long and form a top-knot. This top-knot

\* It has been rather aptly called an *esprit vital* by Mme E. Porée-Maspéro in her article on a similar belief in Cambodia BEFEO XLV, 1, pp. 145-184  
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is ceremoniously cut when its owner reaches the supposed age of puberty, between 11 and 13 years.

The hair, after having been shaved off, is placed in a cup made of leaf, which is again placed either on a lotus or a caladium leaf. Sometimes flowers are also placed in the leaf cup, and in some cases the lotus or caladium leaf with the leaf cup is placed respectfully on a metal tray. The shaven hair is floated away along a running stream. While releasing it, a wish is expressed in such terms as the following: "May you be as cool and happy as the water" or, literally, "like the Mother Gangā." One can compare the ceremony to that of the Indian domestic rite to be found in the Indian treatise of *Grihya Sutra*.

The baby is washed after its shaving if possible with lustral water, as a purification and a ceremony of *binding the khwañi* is performed by the relatives of the family. A piece of sacred thread such as one often sees monks holding while making certain recitations, is bound to each wrist and ankle of the baby by all the relatives present. Each one will pronounce a blessing upon the child.

Thus ends the ceremony as it is geneally performed by the common people; but it is otherwise with the well-to-do or the upper class. Here professsional astrologers and native brahmins are sought to conduct the ceremony of *tham khwañi* on a grand and elaborate scale. Such a rite is combined with a Buddhist ceremony in which monks are invited to recite certain auspicious passages from the sacred texts. Thus animism, Brabmanism and Buddhism find their way into the life of the people, influencing one another to a certain degree.

In some cases the placenta or after-birth of a baby, which is kept in a receptacle, is placed in an appropriate place within the ceremonial ground. There are also silver and gold coconuts. These precious looking coconuts are simply ordinary ones with silver or gold leaf pasted on them. There are certain rules to be observed when burying the placenta. After the placenta has been buried, the

coconuts are also planted on the spot. In certain cases the child is given its name during this ceremony. The rule to be observed in connection with the burying of the placenta is to be found, if I remember rightly, among the Malays and other races of Oceania. In short, the ceremony of *tham khwañ* in relation to the baby after it is one month old is obviously a traditional ceremony of receiving the child into the family and is observed in different forms among the various races. A baby of less than a month is not yet considered as a member of the family for it may easily die during the time of its birth or after. When it is one month old, it becomes a *he* or a *she* when a ceremony of confirmation can be assuredly performed.

After the afore-said ceremony the child is placed in a cradle for the first time. Before that it lies in a loosely made mattress placed in a wide, flat, shallow, bamboo basket within a small tent or wigwam. Before placing the child in the cradle, a tom-cat and certain articles are placed in the cradle. The articles consist of a stone roller for pulverizing native medicine, a kind of gourd smeared with white toilet powder, small bags containing paddy, sesame seeds and peas, and sometimes also cotton seeds. These articles including the tom cat also form parts of the paraphernalia of house-warmings and weddings. They are included also in the royal ceremony of the assumption of the royal chamber after the King's coronation. As the cat hates water and does not like to wash itself, it is imperative to wash it before the ceremony. It is then sprinkled with scented water and sometimes adorned with a small gold neck chain and anklets. Sometimes on this occasion, besides the cat and other things already mentioned, if the child is a male, a book and a pencil are also placed in the cradle; or if the child is a female, a needle and sewing thread are placed instead.

When everything, including the cat is placed in the cradle, it is pulled thrice, then the cat and other objects are taken out and the child is placed in it and the cradle is also pulled forwards and backwards thrice. The person pulling gives a customary blessing to the child. Sometimes the name of the child, written on small piece of paper, is placed also in the cradle.

Now the rôle of *Mae Sü* or Purchasing Mother is not confined to a single person. There are a number of *Maë Sü* each with her peculiar position in relation to the baby. There may be a *Mae Sü* peculiar to each day or the week; the *Maë Sü* of heaven, of the sky, of the human world, and some of them reside in the baby's stomach and so on. There is a treatise on these *Mae Sü* to be found in many slabs of stone inscriptions at Wat Phra Jetubon or Wat Po. The story of *Mae Sü* however requires an article by itself.

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