

CHAO LUANG MUAK KHAM
(THE ROYAL MASTER WITH THE GOLDEN CROWN)

Report on the Forest-Spirit of Ban Saliem

by

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Who is the Spirit — Who are his helpers — Who works as go-between — How do the villagers worship the Spirit — Does Buddhism tolerate the worship of the Spirit.

On Wednesday, August 8th, 1962, the eighth day of the waxing moon, a *wan phra*, or holy day, Nai Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda, Mr. Hartland-Swann and the author of this paper went to visit different houses of the village Ban Pa Hung, *Tambon Yap Hua Na, Amphur Sa, Changwat Nan*. We were quite surprised that in all houses visited the villagers were sitting around not doing any work. When we inquired why they did not work, they answered that they were not permitted to work on a *wan phra* the eighth and fifteenth day of the waxing and of the waning moon. We were told that this is an old custom in the district. If anyone should be found working on a *wan phra*, he would have to pay a fine of five ticals. We asked whether this fine was supposed to be given to the temple as the delinquent was found working instead of paying respect to the Buddha. But we were surprised to hear that the fine would be given to the Forest-Spirit *Chao Luang Muak Kham* who did not like people to work on a *wan phra*! Whoever fears the Spirit in the district, and this is practically everybody, would not dare to work on a *wan phra*. One who would not follow the law of the Spirit would be punished severely by the Spirit himself.

When we asked where the Spirit lived we were told that his house was south of the village Ban Saliem Klang, north of Ban Pa Hung on the western bank of the River Sa. We walked up the river along its bank and came after about four kilometres to a forest with old and tall trees. In the middle of this forest there was a house of

about four by six metres, built on wooden poles and covered with thatch. This was the dwelling of the Spirit *Chao Luang Muak Kham* and his three servants, *Chao Fa Haek* (the Split Sky), *Chao Dao Yat* (the Stardrop) and *Phaya Prap* (the Subduing One), all of them bearing titles of nobility (*Chao Luang, Chao Fa, Chao* and *Phaya*).

Villagers directed us to the remains of an old Buddhist brick-temple about five minutes north of the Spirit-house near the bank of the river. We ordered our porters to dig near what we realised to be the foundations of a rectangular *bot*. Three small Buddha images in late Sukhothai style were found during the excavations. Three bricks were also uncovered stamped with the words *Saen Nan* (Prince of Nan) in Sukhothai letters. The temple could thus date back to the Sukhothai period before Nan came under Chiangmai rule. During the Chiangmai period the northern alphabet *tua tham* came into use and was only recently replaced by the Central Thai alphabet. A prince of Nan obviously ordered this temple to be built. Between the temple and the river we found two big brick furnaces all covered by jungle soil and big trees. In the furnaces we found ore which may have come from old mines in the mountains to the west. The knowledge of the furnaces is still preserved among the people of Ban Saliem Klang. Another site with bricks laying around in the jungle was shown to us about two minutes from the Spirit house towards the river. But we found no foundations of a temple. To the north of Ban Saliem Klang there is another village, also on the bank of the river, which is called Ban Saliem Nüa. It is possible that there was formerly a third village south of Ban Saliem Klang, because Klang means middle and Nüa north. This one might have been in the vicinity of the Spirit house and the site where we found the bricks but no foundations. Saliem might have been in former times an important village or rather town, important because of its kilns. The princes of Nan must have had a particular interest in the metal from Saliem. They ordered a temple to be built and it is possible that there is a connection between the name of the Spirit and his helpers on one side and noblemen from Nan protecting the people of Saliem on the other.

The Spirit *Chao Luang Muak Kham* is the master of the whole district of Ban Pa Hung, Ban Saliem Klang and Ban Saliem Nua. His realm stretches north to the border of the district of Chieng Muan, *Amphur Pong*, *Changwat Chiengrai*; east to the hill Doi Lak Lo or Doi Nang Lo; south to the hill Doi Chang and the deserted village Ban Sop Khaeng between Ban Huay Lot and Ban Pa Hung; and west to the hill Doi Pae Muang, at the border between *Changwat Phrae* and *Changwat Nan*.

The Spirit *Chao Luang Muak Kham* has much more power than any other spirits in the surrounding districts. If anyone comes to catch elephants in the realm of *Chao Luang Muak Kham*, he must come and worship the Spirit first. If he catches an elephant he must send somebody to give offerings to the Spirit. If he fails to do so he will be punished. A long time ago there was a prince of the royal family who caught elephants in the forest of Doi Khao Khoeng on the border between Phrae and Nan, just where the highway today passes. But the prince did not pay respect to the Spirit, so the Spirit had to kill the elephants soon afterwards.

The Spirit is in fact a good and just spirit. He does not oppress the people. He does not particularly like meat. He prefers sweet food, e.g. rice mixed with palm sugar or sugar cane. He does not touch raw food at all. Nor does he like liquor too much. But he is very fond of all kinds of sweet smells. Joss sticks and beautiful candles make him happy, especially if decorated with silver and gold leaves.

The ones who make the people suffer are his three servants, *Chao Fa Haek*, *Chao Dao Yat* and *Phaya Prap*. Nobody in the village Ban Pa Hung could tell us where the spirits came from and why they were living in this forest. They have obviously lived there always. They could only tell the story of *Phaya Prap*. He was in ancient times the headman (*Kamnan*) of the district Yap Hua Na. He was in charge of the jungles north of Phrae. One day he went out to hunt wild gaurs. When he saw his animal, he followed it. But the beast turned around and *Phaya Prap* tried to save his life by running around a tree. But the animal gored him and he died in

the forest. Since that time he had to live the life of a spirit. He offered his services to the *Chao Luang Muak Kham* and was accepted.

Together with his two colleagues, fellow-servants of the Spirit, he restlessly walks through woods and jungles. The villagers fear the Spirit's servants more than the Spirit himself. The three attendants like to drink heavily. They want to eat meat and the people have to offer them chickens. If they make the poor farmers suffer too much, a pig or a buffalo can make them rather happy and may calm them down. The people do not mind feeding the great Spirit, but his smaller servants eat only expensive food and if they cannot eat their fill they oppress the people. But everybody has to shoulder this burden. Complaints could only make things worse.

The *Chao Luang Muak Kham* really is the mightiest Spirit. He is so high, that he would not talk to a simple villager. But as they are helping him he ought to help them too. He has to give them advice and to tell them their fortune. He has to predict, whether this year they would harvest enough rice, whether there will be enough rain, whether they will be able to sell their goods at a good price, etc. The Spirit cannot answer questions like this himself. Therefore he must choose go-betweens, a Master of the Spirit (*Khao Cham*) and a Master of Sacrifices (*Mo Ngon*). At the present moment Nai Panya Kasi has the duty of *Khao Cham* and Nai Muen Kasi, his brother, is *Mo Ngon*. Both of them have been in the service of the Spirit for over a year now.

The *Khao Cham* and the *Mo Ngon* are chosen in the following way. A list of applicants is submitted to the Spirit who is sitting in his joss-house. The Spirit must choose his new representatives by approving or discarding one name after the other from the list. The Spirit's answer is obtained by measuring a bamboo stick. The ceremony of measuring the stick is called *Mai Wa* (wooden span). The stick used is about two metres long. The *Khao Cham* stretches his left arm to the left side and holding with his left hand the stick adjacent to the tips of the fingers of his left hand he stretches his right arm as far as possible to the right side. His assistant marks the spot on the stick reached by the foremost finger of his right

hand. Then the *Khao Cham* addresses the Spirit and reads to him the name of the first applicant.

The Spirit answers by shrinking or stretching the bamboo: The right fingertips of the *Khao Cham* reach the mark made previously, The Spirit does not want the applicant whose name was just read. The next name is put forward. The stick is measured again. This time it has shrunk. The fingertips of the *Khao Cham* overpass the mark. The Spirit strongly objects to this particular applicant. Another name is read. The bamboo is measured. The Spirit approves. He stretches the stick. The fingertips do not reach the previous mark. The new *Khao Cham* (or the new *Mo Ngon*) is elected. He will stay in office until the Spirit makes the people understand that he does not want his services any more-or until death.

How does the *Khao Cham* communicate with the Spirit? If one of the villagers wants to know the opinion of the Spirit regarding a very important matter of his life, he comes to the joss-house. There the *Khao Cham* will ask him, what he wants from the Spirit. Normally it is help the villager desires. There are many problems he cannot solve himself. It did not rain for a long time. The new rice-plants do not want to grow. The rice in the fields gets dry and stunted. Parasites are killing the plants. Mice eat bundles of ripe rice, field crabs dig the rice stems up. A problem like this cannot be solved by the spirit of the house of the man's family. Only the *Chao Luang Muak Kham* can help. But he will help only in major matters. To ask him, for instance, whether one should marry this or that woman would only bother him and he would not utter a word for such a trifle. But he is ready to hear the great sorrows of his worshippers. They go to the joss-house in the forest and bargain with the Spirit: If the Spirit helps his humble servant to overcome his problems, then he in return will give the Spirit food. Here is an example: On Sunday August 5th, 1962, one of the buffaloes of Lung Joy of Ban Pa Hung was slain by a tiger on the path between Ban Pa Hung and Ban Saliem Klang. Now Lung Joy wants the Spirit to guard the remaining buffaloes. The Spirit should drive the tiger

far away! The *Khao Cham* measures the stick by holding it along his outstretched arms. The mark is made. Then the *Khao Cham* asks the Spirit: Will you help this poor man and protect his buffaloes? If you do, you shall get a reward. Lung Joy has consented to present you with a string of chickens after two month's time if by then nothing has happened to his buffaloes. But if one more of the buffaloes dies, you shall get nothing! If you will help, please stretch the bamboo! After that the *Khao Cham* takes up the stick again, holds it along his outstretched arm and his fingers do not reach the spot marked before. The stick has grown. Lung Joy is out of trouble. The Spirit has promised to help.

The *Khao Cham* is the one who gets into direct communication with the Spirit by measuring the bamboo. The first duty of the *Mo Ngon* is to kill the animals which are offered to the Spirit and his three servants as reward for their assistance or as advance presents to persuade them to help or to stop them from being angry. The *Mo Ngon* beats the animal with a wooden stick on the back of its head; that is why he is called *Mo Ngon*, Doctor Occiput. Then he has to skin or pluck the animal and to slice the meat. When the meat is properly cut, he gives it to the *Khao Cham* who prepares the meal and presents it to the Spirit. After this offering ceremony the Spirit can eat what he likes. The food is then taken away from the joss-house and shared by the *Khao Cham*, the *Mo Ngon* and the villager who has offered it.

The *Khao Cham* and the *Mo Ngon* thus live partly from offerings to the Spirit. They are also allowed to work the field which belongs to the Spirit, about three rai (5000 m²). The *Khao Cham* and the *Mo Ngon* divide this field in two parts. One fifth of the rice from their field belongs to the Spirit. This rice is sold to buy utensils like plates and pots for the preparation of food during the offering ceremonies. The Spirit's utensils are kept in the joss-house and he guards them well. He would not let a thief escape. Besides kitchen utensils the Spirit also has cloth, cushions, betelnut boxes and the like. These things are kept in the house of the *Khao Cham*

The *Khao Cham* and the *Mo Ngon* with their families subsist on the offerings and the rice from the Spirit's field. Besides that all the deer in the woods, wild pigs, oxen, buffaloes and bears are reserved for the Spirit. If somebody shoots or catches a wild animal he has to share it with the *Khao Cham* and the *Mo Ngon*. Both of them will get each one piece and there are two more pieces sliced off, one for the spirit of the house of the successful hunter and one for the *Chao Luang Muak Kham*. A fifth piece is given to the village headman. The hunter may keep the rest of the meat as well as head and skin of the animal. If the hunt was a battue, the hunter who has killed the animal gets two pieces besides head and skin. The other participants of the battue get one piece each, all of these pieces being equal portions, including the portions for the spirits and the go-betweens.

Sometimes the villages celebrate great ceremonies in front of the joss-house. The inhabitants of the three villages in the district of the Spirit collect money to buy animals and other offerings they want to present to the Spirit. In general they collect chickens and liquor which are either given by the respective villager or bought from the money he contributes instead. There is a tradition about how much each family in the village has to give for these festivals.

1. The owner of a house who has fields and cattle must sacrifice one chicken and one beer-bottle full of local liquor.
2. The owner of a house who has fields or cattle must contribute one chicken and half a bottle of liquor.
3. The owner of a house who has neither fields nor cattle must give one chicken only.

There are at least two yearly festivals. The first one takes place in June when the work in the fields begins. The farmers ask the Spirit to protect their fields so that their harvest may be plentiful. The second yearly festival is celebrated in December. Now it is time to thank the Spirit for his help during the season. Because of his protection the villagers now have lots of rice to eat and to share with the Spirit. After he has had sufficient time to eat

from the offerings, the *Khao Cham* puts before his seat, the people in the congregation are allowed to eat and drink the remains of their offerings themselves. Therefore the yearly celebrations are always joyful and full of fun for the participants.

Besides these yearly festivals the communities of the villages only congregate at the joss-house if something happened to the whole village or district. All the rice in the fields might have been eaten by swarms of sparrows, the cattle might suffer from a deadly epidemic, etc. If something like this happens, a special ceremony must take place immediately and the villagers might even sacrifice a water-buffalo if the danger is great.

When we inquired about the Forest-Spirit we also asked questions on the relations of the villagers of Ban Pa Hung to Buddhism. In the village there is one temple built on wooden poles and covered with thatch. This temple is not much larger than the joss-house of the Spirit in the forest. One priest is living there. He has been in charge of the temple for three years. His knowledge is about what one can learn in four years of primary education. One novice is assisting the priest. We asked the villagers, whether the priest does not forbid them to worship the Spirit. They answered that the Buddhist religion helps a man to get merits. It teaches us to behave well and to hold the five commandments. We may not do evil. Hearing the teaching of the Buddha and giving food to the teacher brings personal merit. So we might pass away to a better life.

But in this life there is only the Spirit who can help the poor man. How could Buddhism help to fight rats eating the rice on the stem? How can Buddhism drive wild pigs away when they come to devastate the fields? The matters of the Spirit are the business of the Spirit and the matters of the temple are the business of the temple. One does not contradict nor oppose the other.