

"THE SPIRITS AREN'T SO POWERFUL ANY MORE" SPIRIT BELIEF AND IRRIGATION ORGANIZATION IN NORTH THAILAND

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Introduction

Theravada or Mahayana Buddhism is seldom the exclusive religion of its lay devotees, and is usually accompanied by a belief in supernatural beings or spirits. The religious system encompassing this secondary belief system is usually called 'animism' (Spiro 1967 : 3). Spirits of every kind in Thailand are propitiated and venerated to gain their supernatural protection, the granting of favors, and in the past were invoked for national protection. Householders make offering to the spirit known as the 'lord of the place, (*caw thii*; เจ้าที่) who resides in the small spirit house on their property to ward off evil influences in the household compound, and people will make offerings to the powerful *lak myang* (หลักเมือง), or city spirits, and other powerful supernaturals for protection on a journey, protection from harm while on military duty, or other favors. The great King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai proclaimed that he made offerings to a powerful spirit near the capitol city and that if offerings were made to this spirit in the proper way the kingdom would prosper (Griswold and Prasert na Nagara 1971 : 214). In this article I would like to describe and analyze the relationships between the cults of five 'lordly spirits' (*caw phii*; เจ้าผี) and traditional irrigation systems (*myang faaj*; เขื่อนฝาย) in the province of Phrae, North Thailand.

There is a well-established, limited veneration of spirits in connection with the traditional irrigation systems of North Thailand. When the impermanent, wooden irrigation dam of the system is reconstructed each year by the farmers whose fields are irrigated by the system, offerings of pig heads and other foods are made to the spirits that guard the dam (*phii faaj*; ผีฝาย) to ask their protection of the dam in the coming year (see Potter 1976). The invocation of supernatural protection in irrigation affairs has gone far beyond offerings to the spirits of the dam in the case of these irrigation systems in Phrae province. Five 'lordly spirits' in the area have been constituted as a kind of supernatural irrigation committee. Each spirit has specific responsibilities for the protection of the watershed of the rivers that feed the irrigation systems, protection of the canals and dams, and communication with the higher Buddhist deities, the *thewadaa* (เทวดา), concerning the provision of rain, especially in drought years.

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It is a usual custom in the veneration of major spirits in the area of Phrae that they are honored at a yearly offering ceremony. Two years out of three they are given small offerings, typically chickens, rice, whiskey, flowers and other items. Every third year there must be a great offering (*liang jaj*: เลี้ยงใหญ่) where the devotees of the spirit purchase a pig to slaughter, and a more elaborate offering meal is prepared. The irrigation committees that administer the irrigation systems in the area undertook the responsibility of financing and organizing the great offerings to two spirits in the hierarchy of five who are most important in the irrigation affairs of the systems in order to thank them for their protection and for the provision of rain. The water users of the irrigation system chief in the veneration of the spirits were each assessed a set amount of money per rai of land irrigated by the system to purchase a pig and young swamp buffalo and other foods and components of the offerings. The irrigation committees of other systems close by sent contributions for the offerings and representatives to the ceremonies. Another irrigation system nearby has another spirit in the hierarchy of five as its special protector. In great offering years, when the spirits of the dam of this system received a pig as their offering, a separate pig is purchased to offer especially to this spirit. The organization of these great offerings is complex. It requires the collection of money from more than 1000 member households in one irrigation system, and the cooperation of the irrigation administration and government officials.

The grafting of institutional support onto the cults of the major spirits in the Phrae region is unusual in the anthropological literature concerning spirit belief in Thailand. It is impossible to discuss all aspects of the relationship of the spirits to the irrigation systems, and the role that the irrigation system leadership and government officials have played in the support of their veneration here. I shall document the relationships between irrigation administrators, local leadership in the persons of the village headmen of the villages in the area and the *kamnan*, or commune head, and the cults of these spirits which has made possible the support of these great offerings in the past. Within this context I shall also show the changes in power and leadership, as well as changes in the irrigation systems themselves, which have contributed to the erosion of support for the spirit cults. These changes will help illustrate the reason that spirit belief has been applied to such an attenuated degree to irrigation organization in Thailand. This explanation must, of necessity, be cast in the form of a functional argument. Melford Spiro (1967:5) admits to being an "unregenerate functionalist", and uses functional arguments in his explanation of Burmese nat cults or Burmese supernaturalism.

At one level the spirits provided a guarantee of supernatural control over all aspects of irrigation, instead of only protecting the irrigation dam as in other systems. The lordly spirits protected their assigned sections of the canal systems and rivers and directed the dam spirits in protecting the irrigation dam. Offerings were also made to mountain spirits at the distant source of the rivers that fed the system to insure a flow of water. The spirits provided supernatural circumscription of all aspects of the provision of water which is crucial to growing rice, including intercession with the higher Buddhist deities for the guarantee of rainfall. On another level it is my contention that the system of spirit belief, to be presented here, in its connection with the irrigation systems enhanced cooperation between villages within the same irrigation system, and between irrigation systems on the same rivers, in the absence of State control of irrigation in the Yom Valley. Factionalism, the breakdown of patterns of cooperative labor, and particular kinds of inter- and intra-system conflict which has been reported for other areas of North Thailand have been avoided in the Phrae region. There were numerous laws with supernatural sanctions involved with the spirits which were used by local leaders in the past to enforce proper behavior, although these are poorly remembered now. The use of spirit offerings for practical purposes is also not necessarily unconscious in the minds of the actors. Spirit offerings, as will be shown, are used to encourage cooperation between groups and to ask for the sharing of irrigation water in case of drought. Organizing the great offerings also brought irrigation officials, local leaders, and the elders of the spirit cults together for a common purpose where they otherwise might not have met and cooperated. This was true at the time for the great offerings, when at least three irrigation systems sent representatives to plan the offerings in the past.

The spirits involved here are a sort of guardian spirit or forest spirit identified by Rajathon (1954: 155) as "*chao phi*". Each spirit has a name and royal or noble title and a designated area of responsibility in the irrigation systems. A chosen medium (*thii nang*; ทัพอง)¹ whom the spirit possesses at ceremonial occasions, is the voice through whom the spirit speaks. Each spirit also has his own group of devotees (*luuk laan*; ลูกหลาน)² who have been helped by him in the past, and an informal group of elders in

1. Many Thai terms given in this work are transcriptions of the local Northern Thai, or *kham myang*, which is spoken in the area. Another Northern Thai term for 'spirit medium' is *maa khii* (ม้าขี่) or 'horse that is ridden'. This term has been used occasionally in interviews, but that given here is more common in local usage.
2. The term *luuk laan* means literally 'children and grandchildren'. In the relationship between the lordly spirit and his *luuk laan* there is no implied kinship, as for example, between a lineage spirit and a *luuk laan*. For this reason I have chosen to designate a *luuk laan* of the lordly spirits as a 'devotee'.

the cult, called the *kamlang* in the Phrae region (กำล้ง), who lead invocations to the spirit and act as ritual officiants at large ceremonies in the offering house (*หออ; หอ*) dedicated to the spirit, or at curing ceremonies in private houses. With the proper offerings these spirits can supernaturally protect person and property, cure ailments, especially those caused by evil spirits, find lost objects, and perform other kinds of services. The cults of these spirits share elements of the villages regional, and royal spirit cults recorded for Laos (Condonimas 1975), Northeastern Thailand (Tambiah 1970), Nan (Velder 1963), Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces in North Thailand (Kraisri 1967; Turton 1972), and in their connection to irrigation, some aspects of the nat cults of Burma (Spiro 1967).

The offering cycle to spirits in the area is characterized by the phrase *səəngpii haam, saam pii khoj* (สองปีสามสามปีโดย), for which no satisfactory translation from the Northern Thai has been obtained. It refers to the fact that for two years there are small offerings, but in the third year there must be great offerings to the spirits. This is true for the spirits of the dam, the mountain spirits, and other lordly spirits in the area whose great offerings are not supported by irrigation systems. The mediums of the three lordly spirits in the hierarchy of five whose offerings are not paid for by the irrigation systems are invited to attend the great offering ceremonies of the other two spirits. In this way the three lesser spirits can enjoy the offerings prepared and receive the thanks of the irrigation system together with the two honored spirits. The great offerings at their own yearly ceremonies must be paid for by their respective groups of devotees. The importance of the hierarchy of five spirits and its unity is constantly emphasized during ceremonial occasions. One spirit is recognized as the chief of the group and the other four as his subordinates in a strict descending order of seniority. The importance of the five spirits as the heads of the supernatural order in irrigation affairs, and as senior spirits among the supernaturals in the area, is reenforced by the fact that offerings must be made to them at any spirit ceremony. In offerings made at ceremonies for the dam spirits, the mountain spirits, or at a ceremony in honor of any single spirit among the five in small offering years, five offering plates must be prepared and the lordly spirits invited to descend and enjoy the essence of their offerings before the ceremony progresses to honor the spirit or spirits to whom it is dedicated.

The human structure which supports this supernatural system in connection with irrigation affairs is a necessarily fragile one. The water users of the irrigation system must agree to the large levies expected from them to finance the offerings. The village headmen, the *kamnan*, and the irrigation administrators must organize the collection of the money and the purchase of animals and other items for the offerings.

The elders of the spirit cults have a proprietary interest in maintaining the support of offerings to their spirits and promoting their importance, but the practical support of the offerings requires the consensus that supernatural protection is necessary for the irrigation systems. The consensus is beginning to erode. Changes in leadership, and changes in the relationship between the government officials on one hand and the officials of the irrigation systems on the other in the administration of the systems has begun to threaten the support of the great offerings by the irrigation systems. The water users have also begun to question the value of supporting the spirits and question also their ability to protect the irrigation system and to provide rain. In some cases recently the water users have tried to avoid, or have withheld, their assessed contributions to the offerings.

I shall present here in detail the history of a series of events involving one irrigation system and the spirits which will illustrate the relationships between the human organization which supports the great offerings and the spirits, and between the spirits themselves. It will also show the change in recent times which have threatened this special relationship between humans and supernaturals. The scenario is relatively simple. A serious drought occurred in 1979. In desperation the leadership of a large irrigation system in the area consulted the spirits and promised them a special offering of a pig if the much-needed rain fell within a stipulated period of time so that the farmers could begin transplanting rice. The desired rain fell but the pig was not provided in 1980, a small offering year, due to inattention and dragging of feet by the leadership that should have collected money and organized the offering. The matter came to a head in 1981 when the leaders again failed to collect the money by the day of the offering ceremony in honor of the spirit who should have received the pig the previous year—but the offering was finally provided at a special delayed ceremony. The problems involved and the acrimony which occurred in organizing this special ceremony sharply influenced events in the great offering year of 1982. The events within this scenario, which stretch over three years, illustrate and make clear the relationships between the groups which support the spirits and their role in irrigation affairs in the Phrae region.

Geography and Setting

The area covered by the spirit cults is difficult to describe as there is no firm cutoff as to where the devotees of one or another of the spirits come from. An elder of one of the spirit cults commented that devotees of his spirit came from as far off as Bangkok. The focus of veneration of these spirits is a number of villages whose fields

are watered by two irrigation systems involved in support of the great offerings. The villages lie near the northeastern boundary of the city district (*amphəə myang*) of Phrae and in a neighboring *amphəə*. The villages are also split between two tambons, or sub-districts, which for convenience I have called Tambon 1 and Tambon 2, which is also in another *amphəə*. Three irrigation systems are prominent in the support of the great offerings but one is central in organizing and maintaining these ceremonies.

The largest of these irrigation systems I have called Sugar Cane Dam (*faaj wəj; ฝ่ายอ้อย*). It irrigates over 480 hectares of land and has more than 1,000 member households in the eight villages. It is fed by two rivers, the *Tyk* and the *Thang*, which flow into the area from mountains to the northeast. There is an irrigation system upstream of Sugar Cane Dam on both of these rivers. The administration of these systems also contributed to the cost of the great offerings in the past. The rivers conjoin upstream of the irrigation dam of Sugar Cane Dam and two lateral canals branch off below the dam which provide water to the eight villages in the system. The drainage from the system and the overflow of the dam forms the *Məə Laaj* River, which is a tributary of the Yom River, for which the valley in which Phrae is located is named.

The Spirits

The five lordly spirits cannot be described as combining in a single cult, except in their connection to irrigation affairs. Each spirit has his own group of devotees, a medium, and *kamlang* elders. During the small offering years each spirit is the single object of veneration at his offering ceremony. *Kamlang* elders of one spirit do not act as officiants for another of the five spirits and do not, characteristically, attend the ceremonies in honor of the other spirits, even as spectators, except when the mediums of all five spirits are present for a great offering. It is also not possible to make a distinction between "village" and regional spirit cults as in the Northeast of Thailand (Tambiah 1970 : 280), except perhaps in the case of the spirit known as Lord of the Golden House. The offering houses, residences of the important *kamlang* elders and mediums, and the houses where the spirits' ritual equipment is kept of four of the five spirits are all in or around Village C, but the devotees of these spirits are spread throughout the area of Sugar Cane Dam and beyond. Nor is there a situation as described in the North of Thailand where local people venerated their lineage spirits and the Cult of Golden King and other spirits were offered to by a distant prince (Turton 1972 : 251-252). There is no major difference in the conduct of ceremonies in honor of one or another of the lordly spirits.

The spirits do constitute a single, acknowledged hierarchy. Each spirit has individual responsibilities in relation to the irrigation systems. The set order of seniority is reflected in the order in which the mediums are seated at a great offering ceremony, the order in which offerings are presented, invocations delivered, etc. At a great offering ceremony where all five are present, each spirit reaffirms his place in the hierarchy. All four of the junior spirits make obeisance to the most senior spirit as they possess their mediums in turn and address this spirit as "father" (*caw phoo*; เจ้าพ่อ) when speaking to him.

There is no single mythos which binds the five together and only sketchy details are remembered of the stories which account for how each spirit came to the area and came to be venerated by the inhabitants. Some stories have all five arriving at the same time, and others describe individual origins of the spirits. The spirits will be introduced in order of seniority and their responsibilities to the irrigation systems described.

Great Mountain Lord: เจ้าเขาหลวง

Great Mountain Lord is the acknowledged head of the hierarchy. Most accounts agree that he came to Phrae from *Myang Lii*, a district in the province of Nan. It is uncertain if he came as a person or a spirit. One elder said that he built a city in the Yom Valley near Phrae. Another said that he was not well cared for by his devotees in *Myang Lii* and came across the mountains to the area of Sugar Cane Dam where people acknowledged him and offered to him as was his due. He was invited to become the chief protector of the irrigation systems in the area. The lesser status of the other four spirits is shown by calling them his "sons" or "sons-in-law" (cf. Tambiah 1970 : 281). His importance is best expressed in the words of one of the elders :

Of all of the spirits Great Mountain Lord is the most powerful. When the spirits possess their mediums if Great Mountain Lord says something, the other spirits must agree with him. If he thinks something is good, the people must think it is good too. If he doesn't agree with something then no one may do it.

Great Mountain Lord and one of his subordinates are responsible for the rivers that feed Sugar Cane Dam. He is directly responsible for the *Thang* River and a tributary of the *Tyk*, as well as overseeing the activities of the other spirits in connection with irrigation affairs.

One sign of his importance is the fact that Great Mountain Lord has an attendant spirit who attends him in the spirit world, and possesses his medium before Great Mountain Lord himself comes down in order to make sure that all is in order in the ceremony and that the sacrificial animals have been properly prepared.

Victorious Warrior Lord--Lord of the Bloody Sword : พระยาชัยสงคราม เจ้าอาชญาดา

Victorious Warrior Lord is an equivocal spirit. He is second in the hierarchy to Great Mountain Lord, and more than one elder has agreed that he is Great Mountain Lord's son-in-law as well. His prestige is less than that of his younger brother, however. He is responsible for the *Mee Khampong* and *Mee Khammii* Rivers, which do not provide water to Sugar Cane Dam, and principle in his veneration is the Khampong irrigation system that irrigates fields in some of the villages included in Sugar Cane Dam. The water users of this system provide him with a special offering of a pig in the great offering years at the ceremony to the dam spirits of their irrigation system. The great offerings at his offering house are not financed by any irrigation system. Despite this separation he is honored at all offerings where the hierarchy of five spirits is invoked and his medium attends all great offering ceremonies where the offerings of the irrigation systems are sacrificed.

The accounts state that Victorious Warrior Lord was a lord of Phrae, or a great warrior, and led his armies to victory and fought with them at the city walls until his sword was covered with blood. After he became a spirit he was associated with the temple of the reclining Buddha in the city of Phrae, but came to the area of the irrigation systems north of the city to become a guardian of the rivers and canals.

Lord of 100,000 Elephants : เจ้าแสนช้าง

Lord of 100,000 Elephants is third in the hierarchy but is qualitatively second in importance and prestige. His cult is the largest and most active of all of the cults of the five lordly spirits. His offering house is on the edge of the property of a large tobacco curing plant in Village D which contributes generously to his offerings each year. He and Great Mountain Lord are the two spirits who receive the offerings of Sugar Cane Dam during the great offering year.

There are many conflicting stories concerning Lord of 100,000 Elephants' origins and associations with the irrigation systems in the area. One account says he came from Lopburi. Another states that he was an inhabitant of the local area. He floated in a golden boat from a point just below the irrigation dam of Sugar Cane Dam on the *Mee Laaj River* to Village D where his boat overturned and he drowned. His spirit lingered in the area where his boat overturned and people gave him offerings and came to venerate him as a lordly spirit. His boat journey delineates his irrigation responsibilities. He is responsible for the *Mee Laaj River* from the main irrigation dam of Sugar Cane Dam to the point where the river joins the Yom River, and for the main canal system of Sugar Cane Dam. His offering house is located at the point on the river where his boat overturned and he drowned.

Another reason for the importance of the cult of Lord of 100,000 Elephants is an attendant or client spirit of his that is able to possess his medium. His name is Great Chariot Lord (*caw mahaa rod*; เจ้าพารรถ). Although he is a subordinate of Lord of 100,000 Elephants and technically less important than the hierarchy of five spirits, his attributes and responsibilities in the spirit world make him singularly important to the irrigation systems. Great Chariot Lord is a spirit of the upper air, solely responsible for communicating with the Buddhist deities, the *thewadaa*, concerning the provision of rain. When the administration of the irrigation system makes a request for rain Great Mountain Lord must be consulted, but the request is usually directed to Lord of 100,000 Elephants and Great Chariot Lord.

Lord of the Golden House : เจ้าทองคำ

Lord of the Golden House is the only spirit in the hierarchy of five that can properly be called a village spirit (see Tambiah 1970; Sripraphai 1980). He is the guardian spirit of Village G and is responsible for the houses and wat in the village, as well as for the irrigation dam of Sugar Cane Dam. He is fourth in seniority among the five spirits and is provided with offerings at all ceremonial occasions associated with the irrigation systems. Elders of his cult recall little of his origins but insist he was influential in getting people to settle in the area, and that his power was crucial in keeping the upright stakes of the first wooden irrigation dam of Sugar Cane Dam in place. When the wooden irrigation dam was rebuilt in the past the medium of Lord of the Golden House was taken to the site of the dam, the spirit invoked, and his blessing of the dam was asked.

Lord of the Iron Wrist : เจ้าข้อมือเหล็ก

Lord of the Iron Wrist is the most junior of the five lordly spirits. He is said to come from *Amphæ* Chiang Daw, north of Chiang Mai. Accounts state that he was strong enough to bend iron bars with his hands, which is the source of his name. In irrigation affairs he is a direct subordinate of Great Mountain Lord. He is responsible for the *Tyk* River; one of the rivers that provides water to Sugar Cane Dam.

The Request for Rain and the Tardy Pig

Before describing the problems between the spirits and the irrigation system in the last three years it is necessary to provide some background information. The lordly spirits of Phrae share a trait common to other classes of spirits in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. A petitioner may make a specific request for assistance, protection from harm, cure for an ailment, or other services from the spirit and in turn

will promise a suitable offering if the request is granted. The vow (*bon*, บุญ) can be made in private or, in the case of the lordly spirits, when they are possessing their mediums at the yearly offering ceremonies. Some sticks of incense, flowers, and a few baht coins are placed on an offering tray and presented to the spirit/medium. The petitioner then makes a request for the spirit's assistance and promises a suitable offering. Repayment of the vow (*kek bon*; คุ้มบุญ) is usually made at the yearly offering ceremony. Such a request is quite business-like. If the request is granted the petitioner must provide the promised offering, usually within one year, but if the spirit fails nothing is required.

The year B.E. 2522 (1979 A.D.) was a serious drought-year in North Thailand. In the tenth lunar month (July) the village headmen of the villages that received water from Sugar Cane Dam, the *kamnan* of Tambon 1, the irrigation leadership, and the *kamlang* elders of the spirit cults held a small ceremony to which all five of the spirit mediums were invited. After the suitable offerings and invocations had been made Great Mountain Lord possessed his medium. He³ listened to the request of the irrigation committee and informed them that the rain was there, but that the committee had to make a vow to the spirits and then repay the vow with a suitable offering when the rain had fallen. Great Mountain Lord suggested that the *bon* should be made to Lord of 100,000 Elephants and his son, Great Chariot Lord, as they had the greatest influence over rainfall. Since Great Mountain Lord was present Lord of 100,000 Elephants was quickly invoked and descended to possess his medium. The irrigation committee explained the problem. They promised Lord of 100,000 Elephants and Great Chariot Lord a pig, to be offered as a *kek bon* in one year, if the rain would begin falling in seven days so that the farmers could transplant their rice. Lord of 100,000 Elephants left and Great Chariot Lord possessed his father's medium so the offering could be explained to him. The rain began falling within seven days as the spirits promised. Difficulties arose the next year when it came time for the irrigation committee to offer the promised pig.

The yearly offering ceremonies of the lordly spirits occur within a four day period on prescribed days in the ninth lunar month. The ceremony in honor of Great Mountain Lord is held on the third day of the waxing moon, and the ceremony for Lord of 100,000 Elephants is on the fifth day of the waxing moon. The ceremony in

3. Throughout this narrative I shall refer to the spirits with the third person, male pronoun despite the fact that at present all of the mediums are women. When a spirit possesses the medium it is, for all intents and purposes, Great Mountain Lord or another spirit speaking. The medium changes clothes, drinks whiskey and ingests pig's blood, acts aggressive, and speaks in a different voice. The medium, when possessed, also uses the masculine, first person pronoun when speaking.

honor of Lord of 100,000 Elephants in B.E. 2523 (1980 A.D.) is when the promised pig should have been offered. In the organization of Sugar Cane Dam the *kamnan* and village headmen are responsible for setting a special levy for such purposes, dispatching the ditch runners of the system to collect the money from the water users, and purchasing the offering animal and other foods to provide at the ceremony.

Despite the urging of the elders of the spirit cults and others the *kamnan* was lax in organizing the collection of the special levy and villagers at the downstream end of the irrigation system were recalcitrant in providing their assessed share of the price of the offering. The day of the ceremony came and went with no pig as had been promised. In anger the spirits demanded that the irrigation committee should provide two pigs at the offering ceremony in B.E. 2524 (1981 A.D.) as a fine for failing to repay the *bon* at the proper time. The narration of events begins with the annual offering ceremony to Great Mountain Lord in B.E. 2524.

3rd Day of the Waxing Moon, 9th Lunar Month B.E. 2524 (June 5, 1981)

This year was a minor offering year and only the medium of Great Mountain Lord was in attendance. The ceremony began at noon and became the occasion of much consternation and apprehension. After repeated invocations neither the attendant spirit Very Brave Lord (*caw sɛɛn haan*; เจ้าแสนหาญ) nor Great Mountain Lord had descended to possess the medium. Finally Very Brave Lord possessed the medium. He told the devotees that his father was very angry and if the people did not support the old customs Great Mountain Lord would return to *Myang Lii*. This was in reference to the fact that the officials had not collected the money for the *kɛɛ bon* offering to Lord of 100,000 Elephants and Great Chariot Lord, and their ceremony was only two days away. The newly installed *kamnan* of Tambon 1, the village headmen of some of the villages in the irrigation system, the newly appointed irrigation headman (chairman) of Sugar Cane Dam, and other officials arrived led by a well-respected retired *kamnan* of Tambon 1, who is also a retired irrigation headman of Sugar Cane Dam, almost an hour after Very Brave Lord had possessed the medium and had been attending to personal problems of the devotees.

The Retired Kamnan moved to a place near the spirit's seat and the rest of the group sat further away. Very Brave Lord complained that when he had come down there were no officials present. He commented that it was necessary to support the old customs, to which the Retired Kamnan agreed. Very Brave Lord announced that he would leave the medium as his "father" was coming down soon.

Great Mountain Lord possessed his medium after the completion of the song of invocation by the musicians and prayerful invitations to descend from the *kamlang*

elders. The Retired Kamnan prepared an offering tray of candles and flowers while Great Mountain Lord went through the series of ritual actions he performs immediately after possessing his medium. He accepted the tray and elevated it with reverence to the *thewadaa* asking for rain for Sugar Cane Dam. He then turned to speak to the Retired Kamnan.

Great Mountain Lord complained that the *kamnan* and other officials had not maintained the customs in regard to the spirits, as had past officials. When the time had come to offer the pig as a *ket bon* offering in the preceding year, there had been no offering. The Retired Kamnan replied that the farmers felt that Great Mountain Lord should not be annoyed about this. The *Kamnan* and the irrigation headman were both newly installed in their offices and did not know all of their responsibilities to the spirits, especially in relation to the spirits and concerning this particular offering. After all, he said, the *kamnan* who had made the vow had resigned from office before it was time to prepare the *ketbon* offering. Great Mountain Lord complained that there had been no officials present when Very Brave Lord had come down. The Retired Kamnan replied that the entire group of officials had been delayed by an official meeting in the city. He said he hoped that the spirit would understand that the former *kamnan* had been lax in his responsibilities to the spirits. Besides, he (the Retired Kamnan) was only an old man with no official duties in this matter—there was nothing he could do. He had only come to introduce the new *kamnan* to the spirit.

The new *kamnan* had shown little interest in the conversation but was duly introduced to Great Mountain Lord. He told the new *kamnan* that in the past, when the established customs had been followed, people had to cover their heads with anything at hand by the time they left his offering house because it was raining heavily. To emphasize his point Great Mountain Lord threw a cloth on his head. He added that in the past the irrigation officials, *kamnan* and village headmen, and the *kamlang* elders convened a small ceremony before the day of his yearly offering ceremony to discuss the matter of rain for the coming agricultural year.

The new *kamnan* replied that if Great Mountain Lord would cause the rain to fall regularly and not allow a drought to occur, *then* the people would continue to respect him and offer to him as in the past. The Retired Kamnan interrupted this impasse to enquire if the offering of two pigs would be made at Lord of 100,000 Elephants' ceremony in two days time. The new *kamnan* replied that they were trying to get the money together and were not sure if the total amount could be collected or not, would a delayed offering be acceptable? Great Mountain Lord said definitely that according to custom the offering should be made on the proper day, in two days' time. A delayed offering would be unacceptable. The officials did not answer directly to this but the

new *kamnan* reiterated that if the spirits caused the rains to fall on time, then the farmers would support the old customs. The officials ended the interview and returned to town pleading another official meeting.

5th Day of the Waxing Moon, 9th Lunar Month, B.E. 2524 (June 7, 1981)

Preparations for the annual offering ceremony in honor of Lord of 100,000 Elephants are made at the *rong chaj* (โรงช้าง), the private house of one of the elders of his cult where the ceremonial equipment and other property of the spirit are stored. At 10:00 A.M. the leader of the *kamlang* elders was annoyed and worried. The ceremony was due to begin in two hours and they still had not had word as to whether the pigs would be offered or not. He complained that if the pigs were to be offered he would have to call the mediums of all the other spirits and the ritual slaughterer for the ceremony, and time was short. In his opinion a delayed ceremony would be suitable. It could be held on the fifth day of the waxing moon, just so it was on a fifth day in the ninth lunar month. If the officials waited till the tenth lunar month the spirit would not accept the offering. No word came and the party of elders and the medium left for the offering house an hour before the ceremony.

The ceremony began at noon and by 2:00 P.M. the spirit had possessed his medium. When the spirit had finished the ritual actions performed after possession he indicated he was ready to hear the requests of his devotees. The ritual officiant said pointedly that since no *kamnan*, village headman, or other officials were present the devotees could approach the spirit. One of the *kamlang* elders noted privately that it seemed that only the Retired Kamnan was interested in prodding the official group to collect the money from the water users. The ceremony ended at 4:15 P.M. and the new *kamnan* and other officials were observed in a car on their way to the spirit's offering house ten minutes after that.

12th Day of the Waxing Moon, Ninth Lunar Month, B.E. 2524 (June 14, 1981)

Compared to the annual offering ceremonies to the lordly spirits the ceremony in honor of the dam spirits of Sugar Cane Dam is a small affair. At the large ceremonies as many as 100 devotees may attend, while only the village headman from each village in the irrigation system, sometimes accompanied by an elder from his village knowledgeable in spirit offerings, the *kamnan*, and the irrigation headman are required to attend the dam spirit's ceremony. The village headmen are responsible for collecting and bringing their villages' share of chickens and other items for the offering. An elder of the cult of Lord of 100,000 Elephants acted as ritual officiant. The chickens were slaughtered, cooked, and the offerings placed on a small altar and pray-

ers of invocation said. While the small company waited for the spirits to descend and enjoy the essence of their offerings the discussion centered on the ceremonies in honor of the spirits and the difficulties in maintaining them.

An elder noted that for the third year in a row the village headman of Village A had failed to attend the ceremony or send a representative, and he had not sent his village's share of chickens for the offerings. The only other absence was the official party from Village D who were in the mountains celebrating the offerings to the mountain spirits who look after the source of the rivers that feed Sugar Cane Dam. An older village headman commented it was discouraging to try and collect money for the offering, even the small amount required for the dam spirits' offering. Some villagers resented the extra expense as their surplus cash had been spent to make Buddhist merit in supporting the building funds of the village wats. Other villagers claimed hereditary exemption from contributing because of duties their families performed at the offering ceremonies, which they no longer performed, and others said simply that the rain would continue to fall and the irrigation dam abide with, or without, the spirits. Another person present commented that when the spirits were invited to come down and enjoy their offerings, how could one be sure if they came down, or not.

The big news of the afternoon, however, was the fact that the money for the *kεεbon* offering had been collected and the ceremony would take place on the fifth day of the waxing moon. The pigs and other necessary items for the ceremony had cost Baht 10,000 and the final costs might be as high as Baht 15,000. The ritual officiant emphasized the need to continue these ceremonies as they obtained the blessing and attention of the spirits for the dam and the irrigation system for the good of all the water users.

5th Day of the Waxing Moon, 9th Lunar Month, B.E. 2525 (June 22, 1981)

The morning of the special *k33bon* ceremony the chief elder of the *kamlang* of Lord of 100,000 Elephants commented that after the offering had been made no one could blame the problems of rainfall in the area on the spirits, or on the officials. Some people had blamed the late rains in B.E. 2523 (1980), which had seriously delayed transplanting, on the fact that the *bon* to the spirits had not been repaid on time.

The ceremony was delayed because the *kamlang* elders and medium of Victorious Warrior Lord had not shown up. Finally the group appeared after invocations had already begun. The offerings to the five spirits were prepared and all was in readiness. Lord of 100,000 Elephants possessed his medium first as the ceremony was in his honor, followed by Great Mountain Lord. Great Mountain Lord was informed that there was a provincial training course in the city which required the presence of

all of the government officials, thus only the irrigation headman of Sugar Cane Dam was present to pay homage to the spirits. As the last three spirits possessed their mediums in descending order of seniority the irrigation headman elevated their plates of invocation (*khan chään*; ขันเชิญ), a tray with betel and other offering materials, and offered it to them with reverence.

While the spirits were possessing their mediums and preparing themselves the ritual slaughterer had dispatched the pigs and begun the preparation of the various kinds of offering foods for the spirits. Great Mountain Lord ordered the Retired Kamnan to have the offering meals prepared from the two pigs brought separately. The first was to pay back the *bon* for the rain and the second was the 'fine' the spirits had imposed for the late ceremony. The meal was offered and Lord of 100,000 Elephants left his medium so Great Chariot Lord could come down and enjoy the offerings. At major ceremonies such as this the spirits, in the person of their mediums, eat the offering meals personally by spooning up parts of the meal with their swords, rather than enjoying only the essence of their offerings as in lesser ceremonies. After the offering meal the spirits circulated among the devotees offering some a spoonful of raw pig blood followed by a cup of whiskey. Great Mountain Lord offered some to the retired Kamnan. He said that he hoped the officials of the irrigation system and the government officials would not forget the offerings in the future, as they had in this case. The Retired Kamnan gratefully accepted a cup of whiskey after downing the pig blood and replied that the *kamnan* and village headmen did not really understand the ceremony nor the importance of the spirit offerings. Great Mountain Lord asked if the irrigation systems hadn't depended upon the spirits in the past, and the Retired Kamnan agreed.

The second offering meal was given and the spirits consumed it in the same way. The musicians began a song asking for sufficient rainfall and asking the spirits to let no drought occur. Lord of the Iron Wrist called out that he had come down to have fun with his devotees, and said by way of blessing that water should enter the fields and fish should get into them in great number also. An offering tray was elevated to the *thewadaa* by Great Chariot Lord, who communes with them directly concerning rainfall. The devotees ate some of the food, the spirits danced, and all was packed up at the end of the ceremony.

It is interesting to note that there had been only sporadic rainfall in the area throughout June and the other ceremony days had been clear. Immediately after the ceremony a torrential downpour ensued and rain continued into the night and throughout the next day.

3rd Day of the Waxing Moon, Ninth Lunar Month, B.E. 2525 (May 25, 1982)

2525 was to have been the year of the great offerings in honor of Great Mountain Lord and Lord of 100,000 Elephants. The ceremony in honor of Great Mountain Lord began at noon. There was no evidence of the young swamp buffalo that was his expected offering--the ritual slaughterer was busy preparing an offering meal from a pig. An elder of the *kamlang* said that they had heard nothing from the irrigation committee concerning the great offerings, so the devotees had collected money among themselves at the last minute to purchase the pig so at least Great Mountain Lord would have a 'large animal' as his offering. Great Mountain Lord possessed his medium at 2:00 P.M. and began to see to the personal requests of his devotees. No mention was made of the missing offerings.

At 2:25 P.M. the Retired Kamnan appeared with the *kamnan* of Tambon 1 and the irrigation headman of Sugar Cane Dam. The Retired Kamnan prepared the offering plate of flowers and candles on behalf of Sugar Cane Dam which Great Mountain Lord accepted and elevated toward the rail of the offering house, calling on the *thewadaa* to accept the offering and provide rain in the coming year. After the offering Great Mountain Lord complained to the Retired Kamnan that there was no buffalo as was his due this year. The Retired Kamnan repeated the excuse from the previous year, that the *kamnan* and irrigation headman were new to their offices and did not understand their responsibilities to the spirits. He motioned to the new *kamnan* to approach the spirit, which the *kamnan* refused to do.

Great Mountain Lord said that the great offerings were an old custom which should be continued and supported by the officials. When you first made the dam, he said to the *kamlang* and others around him, you knew who protected it and took care of it. Now, he said, no one asks for my protection. The Retired Kamnan began to repeat the explanation that the officials were new to their offices but Great Mountain Lord cut him off. He observed that the "new" *kamnan* had been in office more than two years and the irrigation headman more than a year--shouldn't they know their duties and responsibilities by now, he asked? The Retired Kamnan had meanwhile prepared a second offering plate which Great Mountain Lord duly elevated to the *thewadaa* asking for rain and fish in the fields. He said in a loud voice to his devotees that they knew about the old customs, that these customs should be kept and followed. The Retired Kamnan said, somewhat defensively, that he was at the ceremony every year. Great Mountain Lord replied that Lord of 100,000 Elephants should not be forgotten; he pointed at the Retired Kamnan and said that he had retired as *kamnan* but he should not retire as a devotee who offered to Lord of 100,000 Elephants. The *kamlang* elders nearby defended the Retired Kamnan as a faithful devotee of the

spirits, to which the spirit agreed. The Retired Kamnan commented that the spirits had always protected Sugar Cane Dam in the past. Great Mountain Lord turned to the irrigation headman of Sugar Cane Dam and said that this year he should have gotten a young buffalo from the water users and Lord of 100,000 Elephants should have gotten a pig. He dismissed the irrigation headman by saying that if the rains were poor this year they shouldn't blame him and the other spirits, and turned to attend to his devotees' requests. The irrigation headman muttered that he had just been a village headman before this position and didn't know about such things. The Retired Kamnan wrote out the offering schedule and suggested that perhaps the buffalo and pig could be offered next year, instead of this year.

At the ceremony in honor of Lord of 100,000 Elephants two days later an 80 kg pig was provided for the spirit by the owners of the tobacco curing plant near his offering house and another pig was being sacrificed as a *kεεbon* offering from a devotee. Great Mountain Lord alone of the other lordly spirits was invited to "share the respect" of the owner's family--a departure from the usual conduct of the ceremony in great offering years. A *kamlang* elder commented that no one from the irrigation system had "run around to collect the money" to purchase the pig that should have been Lord of 100,000 Elephants' offering. This was their responsibility, he said, not his and dismissed the matter. Neither the Retired Kamnan nor any of the officials of the irrigation system attended the ceremony and no public mention was made of the missing offering,

Spirits, Irrigation, Officialdom, and Change

As this narration has shown the staging of a major offering, in this case the *kεεbon* ceremony, requires the cooperation of three groups--the spirits, their devotees, and *kamlang* elders, the irrigation officials and water users, and the village headmen and *kamnan*. The maintenance of the offering system involving the irrigation systems requires the continuance of this cooperation, and as events in 1982 have shown it is at the point of collapse. The human and supernatural systems can probably function independently of each other. The lordly spirits will continue to fulfill those services they have always performed for their devotees and receive their offerings in turn. Most of the mediums and *kamlang* are middle-aged or elderly, but the devotees of the spirits include younger people and the spirits will, no doubt, continue to be venerated. Victorious Warrior Lord and a lesser lordly spirit in the area both chose new mediums in 1980-1981. All of the lordly spirits, except Great Mountain Lord and Lord of 100,000 Elephants, have received their great offerings for generations without the benefit of support from the irrigation systems. The irrigation systems are also viable social concerns which have existed in their present form, more or less, for over 200 years.

They have weathered changes in form, administration, and shifts of power between the irrigation officials and the government officials involved in their administration, but continue to deliver water to the fields each year.

It is this special relationship between the irrigation systems and the cults of the lordly spirits, and especially support of the great offerings that is threatened. In the past the ceremony and preparation of the offerings described here would have been a matter of course. The *kamnan* and the village headmen would have directed the collection of the money and purchased the offering animals and other required items as a normal part of their duties to the irrigation systems. The water users would have contributed willingly for the demonstrated protection of the dam and the provision of rain by the spirits, and the spirits would have demonstrated their unerring control over the natural elements. During his tenure as *kamnan* the Retired Kamnan felt it a matter of good administration to call a yearly conference in the dry season of the village headmen, irrigation officials, and elders knowledgeable about the spirits to arrange all of the practical matters concerning the irrigation system and the spirits for the coming year—support for the dam spirits' ceremony and special levies in great offering years, and the organization of the offerings. Times, the elements, and people have changed and the entire structure is threatened.

The description of the *keebon* ceremony presented here has shown how some facets of the system work, and the present instabilities. It is necessary to examine the social organization of these traditional Northern Thai irrigation systems, and the role played by local government officials in their administration, to understand the role of humans in support of the spirits in this special relationship, and the instabilities modern times have brought. The role of the spirits, in the supernatural realm as well as in the more mundane concerns of human affairs, becomes clearer as a result.

The Irrigation Systems

The traditional irrigation systems of the intermontane valleys of North Thailand have a long history, but their true antiquity is unknown. A set of laws was promulgated in the reign of the Lanna Thai King Mengrai concerning the governance of various aspects of irrigation in the Chiang Mai Valley in 1292 (Potter 1976: 81). A large trunk canal which brought an area of several thousands of hectare of rice land under irrigation was constructed under the patronage of the same king during his reign (Ishii 1978: 21). The systems operate the same but vary in size and complexity. A diversion weir or dam (*faaj*; ฟ้าง) is built of bamboo stakes, filling, and ballast across a river or stream. The dam backs water up into the system of canals (*myang*; เหมือง) which

finds its way into the rice fields through the secondary and tertiary canals of the system. These systems range in size from small ones which irrigate a few hectare to one in the Chiang Mai region which irrigates 2250 hectare (Kaida 1978 : 209).

The social organization of irrigation is also relatively simple. The water users of the system are expected to participate in a yearly dredging out and cleaning of the irrigation canals and to provide cut stakes and other raw materials for the yearly rebuilding of the irrigation dam, which is usually destroyed when the river is at flood stage, and to work on the rebuilding effort. The amount of labor and goods the water user owes to the system is usually directly proportional to the amount of land he farms that is irrigated by the system.

This is only one part of the "stable human organization" (Kaida 1978 : 209) that is required for the operation and maintenance of an irrigation system. There must be an official body which has decision-making authority in the allocation of water, power to resolve conflict over water, and authority to enforce participation in cooperative labor on the system, as well as effective sanctions to back up their decisions. The size of this official body and the variety of their duties varies with the size of the system. Sugar Cane Dan has an irrigation headman, who is head of the entire system, an assistant irrigation headman in each of the villages, and a messenger or ditch runner who transmits the decisions concerning labor and water allocation to the households in the villages. The much smaller Khampong irrigation system has only an irrigation headman and two assistants.

The governing body, or irrigation committee, usually has a set of fines and other punishments it can impose on water users for water theft, shirking cooperative labor, and other offences. The authority behind these sanctions has varied in North Thailand, especially in the degree of inclusion of government officials in irrigation affairs and administration. This has ranged from systems reported to be under community control to those where the *kamnan* and village headmen had a voice in choosing the irrigation headman (see Wijeyewardene 1965 : 88; Moerman 1968 : 154; Potter 1976 : 89).

The administration of Sugar Cane Dam has undergone a radical shift in the past 15 years. Until about ten years ago the water users of Sugar Cane Dam elected the irrigation headman at a public meeting. He then appointed the other irrigation officials with public approval. The village headmen of the villages in the system, and the *kamnan* of Tambon 1 have been included as members of the irrigation committee at least since the reign of Rama V. In the normal operation of the irrigation system they had no direct role in the past—they provided official power to the sanctions at the command of the irrigation committee. Their only official duty was to organize and

collect the contributions from the water users for the yearly offerings to the dam and mountain spirits, and the great offerings to the lordly spirits every three years. The *kamnan* supervised the village headmen in keeping records and setting the amount to be collected from each household in their villages, and the messengers of the system did the actual collecting of money.

Changes in the officials and authority within the irrigation system, and in the system itself have caused shifts of power between the irrigation committee and the government officials. This has resulted in greater power over irrigation affairs for the *kamnan* and village headmen because of their connections to the *amphā* administration.

In 1965 the irrigation committee of Sugar Cane Dam proposed the construction of a concrete dam to the water users. The farmers were levied to provide some of the capital for the project and cooperative labor was organized for the construction. The resources of the system were insufficient to purchase enough cement and other building materials. The *kamnan* and village headmen applied to the *amphā* government for financial assistance for the project and received it. After this their importance as the liaison between the irrigation system and the government in obtaining financial assistance increased their importance in the irrigation committee. The concrete dam was damaged by floods in 1971 and again the officials obtained government assistance for the rebuilding.

As the importance of the government officials in the irrigation committee increased, the prestige and power of the office of irrigation headman has decreased. Incumbents in the office have remained in office for many years, until the last 10 years. The Retired Kamnan, who figured prominently in the description of the *kεεbon* ceremony was irrigation headman for 20 years before becoming *kamnan* of Tambon 1. His successor lasted eight years in office and the next incumbent only 18 months. Irregularities in his election and criticism of his conduct in office forced him to resign. The office remained vacant until the *kamnan* appointed a replacement in 1980.

The problem in this increased importance of the role of the *kamnan* and village headman in irrigation affairs is the fact that holders of these offices do not usually remain in office 20 years, as did the irrigation headman in the past. Moerman (1976: 255) notes that the office of headman in Northern Thailand villages is not eagerly sought after, and the opposite is true. In his Chiang Kham village qualified candidates for the office lobbied with their kinsmen *not* to vote for them. At a recent village headman election in Village F the first three candidates who were nominated fled the polling place and the fourth was unanimously elected before he could flee also. Most of the six village headmen in Tambon 1 also refused to become *kamnan*, and the present incumbent, who does not support the offerings to the spirits, became *kamnan* almost by default.

The *kamnan* and village headmen have thus assumed increased importance in the irrigation committee, but they do not tend to remain in their offices for as long as established irrigation officials did in the past. Every few years a new incumbent has come to the irrigation committee not knowing the total range of responsibilities the control of the system entails, including the old customs concerned with the spirits. The present *kamnan* inherited the problem of the late offering from his predecessor's *bon*, and the statements of the present irrigation headman at the 1982 offerings illustrate the problem.

Building the concrete dam removed one of the most onerous tasks required of the water users, gathering wood and bamboo and rebuilding the irrigation dam each year. Organizing this task and supervising the effort was one of the major responsibilities of the irrigation headman. During the year that there was no irrigation headman of Sugar Cane Dam the *kamnan* took the unprecedented step of using tambon assistance funds to pay people to dredge and dig out the canal system—a task usually accomplished with cooperative labor. Such funds were again used in 1981 to pay labor to effect minor repairs to the dam and to dredge the canals. For two years the water users of the system did not have to participate in any of the cooperative tasks which, in the past, have brought together the inhabitants of eight villages. Potter (1967: 97) sees such tasks that bring kinsmen and owners of adjacent field together as reenforcing feelings of solidarity.

It is interesting to note that being paid for tasks that had been accomplished by cooperative labor in the past for two years did nothing to diminish the strength of the cooperative labor system. In May of 1981 heavy rains and floods undermined the ten year old concrete dam and caused cracks in the face. A call went out for the water users to report for work and to bring stakes and wood filler as in the old days of building the wooden dam. People reported for work in such numbers and with such a large amount of raw materials it was possible to build a temporary wooden dam across the face of the concrete one to improve its ability to hold water until repairs could be carried out in the dry season of 1982. The cleaning and dredging of the canal system also proceeded smoothly using cooperative labor in 1982.

The Spirits and Irrigation

In light of these changes in the administration of Sugar Cane Dam, it is necessary to assess the role the spirits took in the system in the past. The veneration of the spirits did not serve to bring large numbers of people together at public ceremonies. Two years out of three only the individual devotees of the lordly spirits attend their ceremonies. Attendance at the special *kεεbon* ceremony, similar to a great offering cere-

mony, was even lighter than at the minor offering ceremonies in 1981. An elder complained that too often in the past when a large animal was sacrificed a large number of people showed up at the ceremony only at the time the offering food was distributed to those attending, and they mostly came with empty bowls. The main participation the individual water user had in supernatural affairs concerning irrigation was the financing of the offerings.

In one sense the lordly spirits provided a unity to the supernatural protection invoked for the irrigation systems under their protection. The distant forest and mountain spirits that protected the river source, the spirits of the dam, and the four junior lordly spirits were all under the direct control of Great Mountain Lord. He was something like the irrigation headman of the supernatural irrigation committee. He was metaphorically referred to in exactly this way by an assistant irrigation headman explaining his job in relation to that of the irrigation headman, and the position of Victorious Warrior Lord in relation to Great Mountain Lord. The supernatural order mirrors the human one in the control of irrigation.

One important consequence of the veneration of the lordly spirits was that it kept the administrators of several irrigation systems in contact with each other for a common purpose. Irrigation administrators and officials in the Phrae area have reported no inter-village conflict over water allocation within the same system, inter-system conflict, nor the breakdown of patterns of cooperative labor within the system that are found in reports on traditional irrigation systems in other parts of North Thailand. Michael Moerman (1968 : 54-55) reported that the cooperation between villages in the irrigation system in which his village participated, and the patterns of cooperative labor were breaking down at the time of his research in 1959-1960.

The arguments of Jack Potter (1976) concerning the role of the State in irrigation affairs, and the conflict he reports in the irrigation system he studied in Saraphi district, Chiang Mai, are interesting in light of the present work. The irrigation system had two maximal canals which split off below the irrigation dam and irrigated fields in two separate tambons. There were also two irrigation dam spirits. One was offered to by the villagers of the tambon on one side of the dam and the other was propitiated by the villagers of the second tambon on the other side of the dam. Potter (1976 : 101) noted "There is no one deity which symbolizes the unity of the entire system". He reports frequent inter-village conflict over water allocation within the system he studied, and also between that system and an upstream system that planned to build a concrete dam. The people of Potter's system feared a concrete dam would inhibit flow of water to their system during times of water scarcity and threatened to destroy any but a traditional dam. The district officer and government irrigation officer had to mediate the disagreement. Potter (1976 : 101) concludes :

Irrigation systems like X and Y would inevitably come into open conflict in times of water scarcity if the traditional Chiang Mai state had not existed to organize and govern the irrigation systems on a valley-wide scale. Since the downfall of the Chiangmai kingdom, the Thai government has had to furnish this necessary central authority.

The parallels and differences between Sugar Cane Dam and the Saraphi district system are interesting considering Potter's statements. The Chiang Mai system irrigates fields in 14 separate administrative villages. Sugar Cane Dam is similarly a large irrigation system that irrigates fields in eight villages situated in two separate tambons, which are also located in two different *amphae*. Unlike the Chiang Mai system Sugar Cane Dam has an organized supernatural hierarchy to symbolize the entire system. Such conflict as Potter reports, and terms "inevitable", appears to have been avoided by the irrigation systems on the *Tyk-Thang* river drainage. It is not certain to what degree, if any, the petty state of Phrae involved itself in irrigation affairs in the Yom Valley, but it is unlikely that there was anything like the irrigation laws of the Chiang Mai state. In the absence of the state to mitigate conflict and control matters, the spirits may have acted as supernatural policemen to promote cooperation, and proper conduct towards the irrigation system by the water users.

Customs relating to law and punishment in connection with the lordly spirits are poorly remembered. It is certain that various classes of spirits in Thailand exercise supernatural control over certain kinds of behavior, ranging from proper courting behavior to private encroachment of common village lands, through supernatural sanctions (cf. Velder 1963; Turton 1972; Sriphaporn 1980). Turton (1972: 218) quotes an informant as saying that before the existence of officials and the law, the lineage spirits of the area had been the law. The lordly spirits did have similar roles in the past. A *kamlang* elder of Lord of 100,000 Elephants said that in the past if a girl were discovered to be pregnant and could not name the father she had to pay a fine and admit her guilt at the offering house of the spirit in order to expiate her sin. The spirits also had control in agricultural matters. In the past farmers would not put out seedbeds until after the annual offering cycle to the spirits, concluding with that to the dam spirits. Offenders incurred the wrath of the spirits and had to pay a fine to the irrigation system.

Through the influence of the spirits, or not, the irrigation systems in the area have avoided problems which are reported for other irrigation systems in the North, and show a higher degree of cooperation. Water allocation within the system, especially in times of water scarcity, proceeds in a strict village-by-village order agreed upon by the irrigation committee. Conflict over water allocation is usually between farmers

with nearby fields feuding over personal water theft. All of the irrigation systems in the area have changed to concrete dams without the problems reported by Potter (1976 : 101). The irrigation system upstream of Sugar Cane Dam on the *Thang* River voluntarily built a bypass gate into their dam to let more water down to Sugar Cane Dam in drought years. In 1979 the irrigation committee of Sugar Cane Dam went to confer with that of the upstream system concerning the serious drought. The irrigation headman at that time said that there was hardly enough water for their fields and it would have been pointless to insist on letting more water through the bypass gate of the dam down to Sugar Cane Dam. This consensus was reached without the intervention of the *kamnan* or other government officials. Also, when the construction of concrete dams was proposed to the water users of both Sugar Cane Dam and the Khampong irrigation system they readily agreed and contributed money and labor to the project. Moerman (1968 : 55) reported the people in his village could not agree on imposing a levy to gather money for a concrete dam proposed by the government, while cooperation for constructing the wooden dam was difficult to maintain. The social institutions necessary for the maintenance of a traditional irrigation system remain strong in the Phrae region, despite changes in both systems.

The practical value of some of the spiritual injunctions is recognized by the people and used for pragmatic ends. One of the most often mentioned laws concerning the spirits is the ban on cutting down trees near the offering houses of the lordly spirits, and near irrigation tanks which have their own complement of resident spirits. It was necessary to ask the permission of Lord of 100,000 Elephants during his ceremony before people would venture to trim branches from trees around his offering house that threatened to fall and destroy the roof. In the area of the irrigation systems under discussion the only remaining stands of large trees are in the riverbottom, near the lateral canals, and around the spirits' offering houses, irrigation tanks, and village cremation grounds. One elder commented that if it hadn't been for the spirits every large tree in the area would have been cut for timber or to fuel the curing ovens of the local tobacco curing plant years ago.

One direct way in which the spirit offerings are used to promote cooperation in irrigation was shown in the dam spirits offering of 1981. There is a large spring-fed tank irrigation system in Village G near the head of Sugar Cane Dam's canal system. Most of the fields in Village G are too high to receive water from Sugar Cane Dam and those that are irrigated by it can use water from this tank system also. During the ceremony in honor of the dam spirits of Sugar Cane Dam in 1981 some of the chickens, rice, and whiskey offered to the lordly spirits and the dam spirits were set aside after the offering. The reserved offerings were taken to the tank irrigation system where the

committee that took care of it were concluding their own spirit offering ceremony. The elders of Sugar Cane Dam re-offered the chickens and rice to the spirits of the tank system and in the invocation to the spirits the ritual officiant said pointedly that he hoped that the spirits would allow the water users of Sugar Cane Dam to take some water from their system for the fields in case of drought. The men of both systems then made a small meal of the chickens and rice and drank whiskey together while discussing the problems of administering irrigation systems.

Conclusion

Within this context the tensions shown in the description of the *kεεbon* ceremony and the great offerings become clearer. In the past the irrigation headman organized such ceremonies. He dealt with the *kamlang* elders of the spirit cults and organized the details. The *kamnan* and village headmen were only obligated to collect the money from the water users and to purchase the animals and offering materials.

The shifts in control and responsibility of the administration of Sugar Cane Dam have put both the decision-making power and the responsibility for the collection of money for the spirit offerings in the hands of the government officials. The irrigation headman is now dependant upon the *kamnan* for his tenure in office, rather than being independently elected by the water users. The incumbents in the offices of *kamnan* and village headman have changed frequently in recent years and the younger men occupying these offices seem less willing to treat the offerings to the spirits as a matter of course in irrigation affairs. Some village headmen commented privately that they felt such ceremonies were a waste of resources-- they were only "old customs" to be maintained to please the generation of elders who believe in and support the spirit cults. The frequent turnover of incumbents in the official positions in recent years has also meant that they are frequently ignorant of the traditions of the spirits and the responsibilities of the irrigation system to the spirits. The Retired Kamnan's defense of the *kamnan* to Great Mountain Lord, that he was new in office and ignorant of the responsibilities of the irrigation system was probably accurate, the first time. At the dam spirit ceremony described here only the ritual officiant, and the anthropologist, could name the spirits and indicate their locations in the irrigation dam.

A more serious problem is the seeming growing inability of the spirits to control the natural elements and protect the irrigation systems. The sanctions of the spirits protect the trees around their offering houses and the irrigation tanks, but deforestation in the mountains, largely from illegal logging, has increased runoff and erosion near the rivers which feed the irrigation systems. Floods occur more frequently and large amounts of silt have been deposited behind the concrete irrigation dams, which has

seriously affected their holding capacity and their ability to divert water into the irrigation systems. Rajathon (1954: 156) noted that outsiders tended to ignore the injunctions against felling timber and killing game in the forests and mountains protected by the "*Chao Phi*". "The folk begin to sense the impotency of the *chao phi* and imitate their modern-minded brothers (in cutting timber) without any knowledge that there is harm in it...". Officials of the irrigation systems lay the blame on illegal loggers and not on the lack of supernatural protection, but the problem remains. Supernatural power is no longer sufficient to protect even a concrete dam. It has been severely damaged by floods twice in ten years, once badly enough to require complete rebuilding. One elder formerly active in the spirit cults commented:

In the past you could trust Great Mountain Lord. He would take care of the rainfall, and the water, and he would take care of the dam—he wouldn't let it be damaged. In the past the people believed like this. Because in the past it was a wooden dam. If we asked him to help us in the right way the dam wasn't damaged. But sometimes we asked and it was damaged anyway and we had to build it many times, sometimes more than once in one year.

The spirits, in their connection to irrigation, are caught in the midst of changing times and institutions. Only in the past ten years has the central government assumed anything near the kind of responsibility in local irrigation affairs that Potter (1976: 101) maintains was necessary at all times for the avoidance of conflict. The spirits have been the law, or assisted human beings in administering in the past in parts of rural Thailand where the power of the traditional kingdoms did not reach. The lack of conflict in the irrigation systems in the area and the maintenance of a high degree of cooperation demonstrates the viability of the traditional social institutions. The viability of the offering system involving the spirits and the irrigation systems is another question. The offerings were not provided in 1982 when they should have been, and the *kamnan* has shown little interest in the spirits and their offerings. Whether the compromise suggested by the Retired Kamnan of offering the great offerings in 1983 will be acceptable or not is questionable. It would put the offering schedule of Great Mountain Lord and Lord of 100,000 Elephants out of order with that of every other lordly spirit in the area and the dam spirits of the other irrigation systems, and those of Khampong and Sugar Cane Dam. In the domain of personal matters the spirits will maintain their powers. Their devotees will continue to seek cure of ailments, exemption from the draft, protection, and other services and repay their *bon* according to tradition. The devotees of Great Mountain Lord managed to provide a great offering on their own in 1982 and Lord of 100,000 Elephants is assured of the support of the tobacco curing plant for his offerings for some time to come.

It is in the domain of control of the natural elements that the spirits are no longer reliable. Great Mountain Lord repeatedly mentioned tradition at the ceremonies, saying that the great offerings were an old custom to be supported and followed, as his reason for why they should be continued. The exchange between the *kamnan* and Great Mountain Lord at his offering ceremony in 1981 shows a fundamental shift in thinking concerning the supernatural. The *kamnan* said the spirits should show their power by providing dependable rain in order to merit their great offerings; not that humans should ask for rain in the proper way from the spirits as in the 1979 *bon*. The mistrust that the spirits cannot control the elements as in the past is best expressed in the words of an elderly man who was once a ritual officiant in the ceremony for the spirits of the dam, and his wife. The wife commented:

If you asked for rain from the spirits, the rain started falling as soon as you went home. The old people told this. In the past it was a certain matter, but now I don't know. People said that in the past they saw the large footprints of the spirits' horses.

Her husband added :

Nowadays belief in the spirits is not as strong as it was in the past. If you made an offering to the spirits and asked for rain--after the offering was over we got rain. But now we can't. It isn't the same as in the past. The spirits aren't so powerful any more.

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