



The Mor Yao Ceremony to Honor the Benevolent Spirits

by Orawan Banchangsilpa

Gratitude is an important Thai value. Thais express their gratitude to others in many ways: by paying respects to them, taking care of them, honoring them, and offering them gifts, for example. Gratitude is expressed not only to people, but also to the host of deities and spirits that inhabit the

fields, forests, mountains and rivers; dwell in animals and trees; live in houses, etc.—each of which has special characteristics and influence.

We find expressions of gratitude in elaborate ceremonies which are hosted for spirits that are regarded with special awe or respect — for example, the Ceremony to Honor the Rice Spirits performed in Pon Swang Village is held because people believe that the Rice Spirits can help them increase their rice yields. So once a year, they call upon the spirits and give them offerings on “Wan

Khuen Sahm Kham Duen Sahm”, or the third day of the waxing moon of the third month in the lunar calendar.

The subject of this paper is the Ceremony to Honor the Benevolent Spirits (“Pitee Liang Phee Mor Yao”) performed by the Mor Yao in Kudsim Kummai Village. This ceremony to honor all benevolent spirits, including the spirits who cure the sick, is important both as an occasion to express gratitude to the spirits and as a social event. The benevolent spirits are believed to guard over the well-being and prosperity of

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the villagers; also honored are the spirits who cure the sick, diagnose the cause of sickness and prevent sickness. The Mor Yao, or spirit doctors, act as mediums for these spirits in healing the sick and are responsible for seeing that the spirits are properly respected and cared for. Thus they will gather together once a year to honor and express gratitude to their spirits by inviting them to eat and drink and make merry. At the same time, the Mor Yao will ask the spirits to bring health and happiness to them, their families, and to all the people participating in the ceremony.

The Requisites

The ceremony takes place every year between March and April when the villagers of Kudsim Kummaj have little work to do in the fields and when the flowers to be used in the ceremony are in bloom. The date and place for the ceremony are decided by the group of Mor Yao at their convenience — however, the ceremony is never held on "wan phra" or Buddhist holy days (which occur about once a week) when Buddhists go to the temples to pray, listen to sermons and observe religious commandments.

The ceremony is attended by most of the Mor Yao of the village, although only seven to eight of them actually perform the ceremony. The Mor Yao who is the most senior and who commands the most respect is invited by the rest to be the leader in performing the ceremony.

The "pa-rum" or shelter, where the ceremony is held, is constructed from straw matting near the Mor Yao's house and resembles a small hut. Open only at the front, it is about two meters wide and four meters long to accommodate

the thirty to forty participants. The ceiling slopes from a height of about four meters at the front to about two meters at the back.

Offerings ("khai") and utensils such as bowls and dishes are prepared and placed at the back of the "pa-rum" for the spirits who cure the sick. Another set of offerings await the more respected spirits upon an altar decorated with coconut fronds that curve from each corner to form an arch above it. The altar is located in front of the "pa-rum"

The offerings on the altar consist of: a dish on which is placed 13 candles (called "khan 5, khan 8"), four sections of a banana tree studded with flowers ("khan ma beng"), a dish of betel nuts, plum leaves and cigarettes, a small straw mat, a small folded mattress and pillow, 4 small pots of flowers, 4 young coconuts, and a small kettle. The Mor Yao believe that the Buddha does not drink whisky like the spirits, and so provide the

coconuts for coconut milk. The kettle is a substitute for a gourd, now difficult to find. The gourd is symbolically significant because the Mor Yao believe that man originally came from a gourd.

Four little jars filled with water are placed beneath the altar, close to each of its four posts. Banana leaves are placed near the edge of the jars. They are used by the Mor Yao during the ceremony. In addition, four big jars filled with water are placed outside the "pa-rum"

Inside the pa-rum, there are a number of cloth-covered trays, equal to the number of Mor Yao, each containing offerings ("khai"). These offerings are for the spirits who help cure the sick and are the same as those used in another ceremony, the "Pitee Yao". The offerings consist of: Khan 5, khan 8, cotton threads ("fai hand san"), red headbands ("fai mad hua"), khan ma beng, a bowl containing uncooked rice,



The Mor Yao performs the dance ritual associated with the ceremony.



The Mor Yao dance around the jar in jubilation, splashing the water on each other.

two eggs, 16 small pairs of candles tied with flowers ("tien suaj"), a pair of incense sticks, a pair of bamboo sticks ("taleew"), a pair of candles which branch out at the top ("tien nga"), a pair of small candles twisted together, "tien lin", 4 small candles decorated with gold and silver paper ("tien aad"), one large stake-shaped candle ("tien lim"), and 4 small umbrellas decorated with gold and silver paper. Next to each tray is placed: a large bowl of scented water, a dish of betel nut and plu leaves, and certain utensils. There are, also, 1 long sword, 4 miniature horses, 4 arrows, 4 lances and 4 halberds made of bamboo, and 4 guns. All of these offerings are placed at the back of the pa-rum.

Hung on the back wall of the pa-rum are pieces of white cloth of about one meter square. Nang Chom Skulpan, the senior Mor Yao, said that they were used by mediums to invite spirits to join in

the ceremony. In addition, white garlands are hung above the cloth, to be placed on the necks of the Mor Yao when the spirits enter their bodies. During the ceremony, the Mor Yao sit at the back of the pa-rum, facing the front.

An Account of the Ceremony

The following account is based on the writer's observation of the Ceremony to Honor the Benevolent Spirits performed by the Mor Yao at Khun Thai Seenam's House in Kudsim Kummai Village in Khao Wong district of Kalasin province on April 1-2, 1984.

The Mor Yao had already constructed the "pa-rum" (shelter), the altar, and prepared the offerings ready for the ceremony. Shortly after sunset, about 30 Mor Yao arrived for the ceremony dressed in black long-sleeved

clothes. The women wear black Phu Thai style "pha thung" (long wrap skirts secured at the waist) with a black (or sometimes white) cloth draped diagonally over the shoulder.

The Music

Music was to be provided by the "kan" (the Laotian reed mouth organ or pan pipes) and "krajabpii" (the Thai four-stringed lute) which play a very important role in the ceremony. Their sound helps the singing of the Mor Yao, who are required to sing throughout the ceremony. The two kan musicians, called "Mor Kan", play loudly, which helps the Mor Yao not to get too tired. The instruments are played simultaneously, each accompanying a different Mor Yao. Because each Mor Yao may sing a different melody, the instruments play different tunes, with different rhythms and ranges, depending on the Mor Yao each is accompanying. The krajabpii accompanies whichever kan the player is sitting closest to. The music of the kan is the medium through which the spirits are able to come to the ceremony. It also helps the spirits to have a good time.

The Mor Yao took their place sitting at the back of the pa-rum in front of the offerings and facing the altar at the front. The senior Mor Yao lit a "tien lim" candle and placed it on top of a bottle of whisky and chanted and prayed. The spirits were thus formally invited and the ceremony begun.

The whisky was then opened and passed to the kan and krajabpii players to drink, after which the Mor Yao tied pieces of cotton ("fai hang chang") to the upper part of each kan to secure the spirits of the kan and kan players and, as the

music started, they tied red headbands and cotton on the heads of the musicians. More candles were lit and the senior Mor Yao paid respects with the "khan 5, khan 8" (dish containing 13 candles) and began to sing to invite the spirits to the ceremony. After a few minutes, she began to move and sway to the sound of the kan as the spirits possessed her body. She drank some water from the bowl and some whisky and then swayed and shook with increasing vigor, blew out the candles and placed the khan 5, khan 8 dish beside her. At this point, all the other Mor Yao began to sway their bodies too and made dance gestures with their hands. The senior Mor Yao took her sword and stirred the bowl of water with it to cleanse and give it the power of the spirits. She again drank from the water, made dance gestures with her hands and clapped her hands to the accompaniment of singing and music from the kan and krajabpii.

As the Mor Yao sang and danced to the music, the spirits began to enter their bodies. This was marked and the spirits secured by the wearing of the white garlands that had been prepared for this purpose. After this, everybody looked away from the offerings; lit candles were then dropped into the water, which was transformed into holy water with cleansing, healing and benign powers, and the families of the Mor Yao were called in to drink of it.

Warding off Evil Spirits

Next came the task of warding off the malevolent spirits who had not been invited to the ceremony. The Mor Yao took up their swords and moved with the musicians to the altar and sang and danced to music around the altar three times, raising one foot slowly, moving it forward and putting it down, then repeating

this with the other foot while the body moved with the rhythm, and the hands — one clutching a sword — moved in gestures as the evil spirits were chased away. At times, they would also jump or clap their hands. In any case, each person danced in his own individual style, just as the music and singing varied with each individual. Whoever felt tired would retire to rest in the pa-rum, and rejoin the dance when he recovered. At this stage of the proceedings, the Mor Yao lit the candles taken from the trays and danced with them around the altar with

animated gestures, then threw the candles into the water jar and continued to dance, clapping their hands and singing all the while. During the third round around the altar, the music rose to a crescendo and its pace quickened.

The performance was carried on until midnight, when the ceremony broke up and everyone retired for the night.

At 9 o'clock on the next day the Mor Yao, kan and krajabpii players gathered at the pa-rum and restarted the music and dancing around the altar. At noon, refreshing sweet

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Left: The boat is fashioned from a banana stalk and contains offerings. Below: the Mor Yao drives evil spirits away by throwing the small boat along with the offerings.

