

PERSISTENCE OF THE RITUAL OF CALLING THE KHWAN OF THE RICE GODDESS IN DON PHO VILLAGE, TAMBON CHAINA, SENA DISTRICT, AYUTTHAYA PROVINCE¹

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Abstract

One might estimate that in Central Thailand, especially in Ayutthaya, there would not be rituals in the process of growing rice anymore because Ayutthaya is located near Bangkok and modernization may have effected the persistence of the traditional culture. Data from my fieldwork, however, indicates that some parts of Ayutthaya such as at Don Pho village, Tambon Chaina, Amphoe Sena still retain rituals concerning rice.

This paper explores and explains the persistence of and changes in the ritual of calling the khwan of the Rice Goddess. Information about the ritual's

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practitioners, the chanting text and objects used in the ritual particularly at Don Pho Village, Tambon Chaina, Amphoe Sena, Ayutthaya will be analyzed in the contemporary context of central Thailand.

This paper argues that the ritual of calling the khwan of the Rice Goddess still persists because of three important factors; the existence of ritual practitioners, the persistence of the belief in the Rice Goddess and the location of the village.

Introduction

Thai rice growers perform many rituals because of their traditional belief that every living thing has *khwan*/ขวัญ. *Khwan* is the life force that exists both in living things, for example, the *khwan khwai*/ขวัญคาว (khwai='buffalo'), *khwan wua*/ขวัญวัว (wua='cow') or *khwan khao*/ขวัญข้าว (khao='rice'), or in lifeless entities, such as *khwan rual*/ขวัญเรือ (rua='boat') and *khwan saol*/ขวัญเสา (sao='pillar') (Sathienkoset 1963: 3).

Focusing on beliefs related to rice held by the people of central Thailand, there is a belief in the Rice Goddess named *Mae Phosop*/แม่โพสพ 'Mother Phosop.' The Rice Goddess protects rice plants from all harm allowing them to be healthy and prosperous. The persistence of the rituals concerning rice is a result of the traditional belief in spirits and the Rice Goddess in particular. Specific rituals are performed at certain stages of rice-growing. For instance, the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess is performed when the rice plants begin to produce grain; the first harvest ritual is performed when the rice is fully ripe and ready for harvest; after the rice is harvested and threshed, a ritual is

carried out inviting the Rice Goddess to the rice barn. All of these rituals are performed in the belief that the rice will grow well and provide abundant produce if the Rice Goddess continues to be well respected.

Until now, Ayutthaya has been one of the provinces with a large rice yield. As the province is located near Bangkok, modernization has been easily transferred to Ayutthaya, and this has had an impact on its agriculture, with advanced technology and tools being utilized throughout the province. Therefore, the use of modern technology in the farming of rice has certainly had an impact on the persistence of the beliefs and rituals concerning rice today and has had a noticeable impact on the performance of rituals concerning rice in Ayutthaya.

However, this research found that certain remote districts in Ayutthaya still perform the beliefs and rituals in the process of growing rice. I chose to conduct my research at Don Pho Village, Tambon Chaina, Amphoe Sena, Ayutthaya, because the belief and the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess is still maintained in that village. Most of the villagers still grow rice in their fields and a large number of households still perform rice-growing rituals at Don Pho village. Out of 127 households, 75 grow rice and 45 out of these 75 households still perform the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess.³

Therefore, it is interesting to study how the changing and modernized way of rice cultivation today in central Thailand,

³ Interview, Thongpliw Tharamat, 30th June 2008

especially in Ayutthaya, has impacted upon the persistence in the belief and ritual of calling the *khwan* of the rice in rice-growing.

Previous research has focused on the process and the economic aspects of rice growing communities in Ayutthaya (Ngampit Satsanguang 2002) or have provided an overview of all rituals concerning rice production in Thailand (Iam Thongdee 1994). This paper will focus, rather, on the analysis of the persistence and change in the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess in Don Pho Village. The research examines and identifies in what ways the rituals have persisted or changed and what factors have contributed to this persistence or change of the ritual. Field research was conducted during 2008–2009 at Don Pho Village. The qualitative research method was conducted using in-dept interviews of ritual practitioners and participant observation of the rituals.

Persistence of the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess

Rituals concerning rice are important in rice-growing. In the past, Don Pho villagers performed many rituals concerned with rice, such as for the first casting, the first ploughing, the first transplanting, the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess, the first harvest, and so on. However, as time has passed and modern technology has replaced human labor, rice growers no longer have to depend on nature as much as they did before. Consequently, rituals concerning rice have become fewer. However, from field research in central Thailand, it was found that rice-growing rituals, especially the ritual of calling the

khwan of the Rice Goddess, are still performed by the villagers.

The ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess refers to the ritual performed to call back the *khwan* of the rice, to thank the Rice Goddess (*Mae Phosop*). This ritual was normally performed at each stage of rice-growing, for instance when the rice plants begin to produce grain, when the rice is brought to the threshing place and when the rice is brought to the barn. Today, the only ritual that is still performed by the people of the Don Pho community is when the rice plants begin to produce grain, therefore, only this ritual was analyzed.

The ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess refers to the ritual performed when the rice plants begin to produce grain. Rice growers regularly check their fields to see if there is a swelling around the middle part of the rice stalk, called *khao klat hang plathu* / ข้าวกลัดหางปลา. Then, on the following Friday, the day of the Rice Goddess, rice growers prepare offerings consisting of a variety of sweets, fruit and other articles. The ritual can be carried out either in the morning or in the evening. It is performed in the belief that at the start of grain production rice plants undergo a change figuratively known as 'being pregnant.' During the pregnant stage, the goddess of rice may leave the rice plants. Thus, the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess is performed to bring back the spirit of the rice, as well as to please the Rice Goddess, in the hope that once the Rice Goddess is pleased, she will bestow prosperity on the rice plants.



Figure 1: Rice plants that have begun to produce grain

There are six elements in the analysis of the persistence of the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess: the occasion to perform the ritual, the ritual practitioner, the ritual offerings, the procedure of the ritual, the ritual text and taboos and beliefs concerning the ritual.

Occasion to perform the ritual

Don Pho villagers perform the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice goddess in their rice fields only on Friday. In the past, villagers carried out the ritual in the evening at around 3–5 p.m., but recently they have changed the time and now perform the ritual in the morning or before noon, at around 8–11 a.m., as they believe that the Goddess can only receive offerings before midday. The change in the performing time is one of the important revisions that have been made to the ritual.

Ritual practitioner

The ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess is a family ritual not a ritual of the community. Thus, each family carries out the ritual by itself, with a family member acting as the ritual practitioner. Within a family, the practitioner of the ritual of one generation will pass on the

knowledge of performing the ritual to those of later generations through observation; there are no formal lessons or teaching.

From interview, it was learned that the ritual practitioner can only be female. The villagers believe that a man cannot perform the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess. According to the villagers, on one occasion in the past, when a man performed the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess, he abused the Goddess. Consequently, the Goddess got angry and she forbade men to perform the ritual ever after.⁴ The age of the ritual practitioner is not restricted as long as she can recite the ritual text. At the time of the research, it was found that the youngest practitioner was 29 years of age. The ritual practitioner is the field's owner; however, in certain families where the owner does not know how to perform the ritual, the mother of the owner can be the ritual practitioner instead.

Ritual offerings

The articles of offerings are the important element of the worship. The offerings contain food and objects as follows:



Figure 2: Articles of offering

- 1) five or nine joss sticks;
- 2) one *chaleo*/ເຄືອງ (a figure made of small strips of bamboo interlaced in such a way as to form a certain pattern, usually a six-pointed figure having open spaces between the slats) and a wooden stick to tie the *chaleo* and *chalom*/ໜູ່ລອມ (a kind of coarse, open-meshed bamboo basket tied at the neck)
- 3) one *chalom* for the articles of the offering, tied with a *chaleo* and a wooden stick. Popular offerings are sour fruit, including star gooseberry, garcinia, mango, pineapple, as well as bananas and coconut, which cannot be omitted. Seasonal fruits that can also be used in the offering include apples, rose apples, strawberries, sugar cane and oranges. Some ritual practitioners may use pickled fruits, such as pickled monkey apple, or pickled mango. Some practitioners also offer desserts, such as doughnuts, jelly and Thai desserts, a boiled egg, betel nut, betel, tobacco and charcoal
- 4) three, five or nine flags attached to the *chaleo*
- 5) clothes for the Rice Goddess consisting of lace items, a lacework blouse or a ready-made silk dress. Other cosmetic

⁴ Interview, Boonchaay Koetmontree, 2nd October, 2008

objects, such as face powder, a mirror, hair coat, perfume, body lotion and Vaseline gel, may be offered as well.

To sum up, the offerings in the ritual can be classified into two groups: 'food offerings' and 'object offerings.' The food offerings in the ritual are any of a variety of fruit, as well as bananas and coconut. The object offerings in the ritual are betel, tobacco, clothes, and cosmetic objects.

Most of the articles in the offering used in the ritual such as sour fruit and pickled fruits, are considered to be related to pregnant women, since during pregnancy, a woman often has strange appetites, with sour and pickled fruits being especially craved. In addition, some women with morning sickness may also crave things that they do not normally eat, such as charcoal. The villagers compare the rice plants beginning to produce grain to a pregnant woman, so they take care of the rice plants as if they were pregnant women. They think of themselves as pregnant women and observe how they would feel or what they would like to eat. Then they offer all the foods craved by a pregnant woman to the Rice Goddess. Since they also believe that the Rice Goddess likes to dress beautifully when she is pregnant, they offer her beautiful clothes, perfume and beauty cream, spraying or smearing the ointment on the leaves of the rice plants. Furthermore, since pregnant women often have morning sickness and feel dizzy, some villagers also bring balm and medicine to offer to the Rice Goddess in the ritual. They believe that by doing so they will please the Rice Goddess and, in turn, the Rice Goddess will be happy and bestow prosperity on the rice plants.

The ritual offerings are things people use in everyday life, so they may change according to each period. In the past, people used oranges, mango and tamarind, but now they use many kinds of fruit, such as strawberries and apples. For garments, in the past, they offered two pieces of cloth—one to be used as a nether garment for the lower part of the body and another as a scarf for wrapping the upper part, but today they use ready-made dresses. In addition, many other articles of offering have changed too. For instance, white clay and Thai perfume have now been substituted by baby lotion and trendy body creams. The villagers even add doughnuts and jelly as offerings to the Rice Goddess. This shows that the traditional ritual objects and foods offered to the Rice Goddess have been replaced by contemporary, modern merchandise.



Figure 3: A contemporary offering

Procedure of the ritual

There are five stages of the ritual procedure as follows:

- 1) Selection of the area for conducting the ritual. The ritual practitioner, typically, will choose a ridge of a field where rice grows well.

2) Preparation of the offerings. The ritual practitioner will lay a mat or fabric at the chosen area and then arrange the articles of offerings on the mat.

3) Invitation to the Rice Goddess to take the offerings. At this stage, the practitioner will recite the chanting text with the joss sticks to invite the Rice Goddess to take the offerings.

4) Worshipping the Rice Goddess. The ritual practitioner will put the offerings into a *chalom* and then tie it with a wooden stick and a *chaleo*.

5) Dressing the Rice Goddess and asking for her blessing. Substituting the rice plants for the Rice Goddess, the ritual practitioner will 'dress' the Rice Goddess by applying face powder and perfume to the rice plants, comb the rice three times, show a mirror to the Goddess, and lay clothes next to the rice. While dressing the Goddess, the ritual practitioner will also ask for prosperity and an abundant yield.

Ritual text

The ritual text used for this analysis consists of four oral versions collected from four ritual practitioners who are rice growers, namely:

- 1) Mrs. Boonchay Koetmontree, 78 years old⁵
- 2) Mrs. Prasit Roekkamon, 72 years old⁶
- 3) Mrs. Wandee Othata, 36 years old⁷

⁵ Interview, Boonchay Koetmontree, 2nd October, 2008

⁶ Interview, Prasit Roekkamon, 4th March, 2008

- 4) Mrs. Phayoong Phinyathai, 29 years old⁸

The analysis reveals that the four ritual texts contain both auspicious words in Thai asking the Rice Goddess to bestow prosperity on the rice plants and chanting lines in Pali. The four ritual texts have the following structure:

Starting the ritual text

1) Mrs. Boonchay Koetmontree begins her ritual with a chant to request praying, followed by chants to worship the gods and the Triple Gems.

2) Mrs. Prasit Roekkamon begins her ritual with a chant to worship the Triple Gems.

3) Mrs. Wandee Othata begins her ritual with a chant to worship the Triple Gems.

4) Mrs. Phayoong Phinyathai does not use an opening text. She starts her ritual by inviting the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess.

As can be seen from these four ritual texts, the opening of the ritual is up to the ritual practitioner. However, if a starting text is included in the ritual, the chant to worship the Triple Gems is an obligatory part; while other chants, such as a chant to request praying and a chant to worship the gods, may be recited as well.

The reason the ritual practitioners start the ritual with a chant to worship the Triple Gems is that the villagers regard the Lord

⁷ Interview, Wandee Othata, 29th February, 2008

⁸ Interview, Phayoong Phinyathai, 25th December 2008

Buddha as the most sacred and the highest entity. Thus, they first offer their worship to the Lord Buddha for good fortune and success in the ritual. The reason Mrs. Boonchaury chants more prayers than the others, Mrs. Prasit and Mrs. Wandee, may be due to the fact that she observes the religious precepts and always recites her prayers. She, therefore, knows many different prayers and has incorporated them into her ritual. At twenty-nine years of age, Mrs. Phayoong, the youngest practitioner, does not know many prayers nor can she recite the ritual chants by heart. She has to depend on her grandmother to tell her the ritual chants, while she writes them down as a reminder. As a result, she skips the opening and goes right into the part inviting the Rice Goddess.

Inviting the Rice Goddess

1) Mrs. Boonchaury Koetmontree

With respect to inviting the Rice Goddess, Mrs. Boonchaury wanted to teach her daughter how to perform the ritual so she uses two texts for the invitation—one to be performed by her daughter and the other to be carried out by Mrs. Boonchaury herself. The texts are as follows:

O! Mae Phosee, Mae Phosop, Mae Nopdara, Mae Chanthewee, Mae Soyseesuwana, Mae Phansuda, wherever you are, please come and receive food and offerings; sour, sweet, salty food that I am offering, please receive food and offerings for good health, no pain, no fever, no disease, please be pleasant and happy, please have a full ear of

*grain, a large ear and big and heavy grains, please provide a grain per pot, a clump of rice per cart.*⁹

*O! Mae Phosee, Mae Phosop, Mae Nopdara, please come and receive our special offerings. Today is a good day, Mae Seechampa, please come down and take the offerings, please give happiness and progress to us, Mae Seephosop, Mae Nopphara, please give an ear of rice per pot, a clump of rice per cart, please be happy and progress.*¹⁰

2) Mrs. Prasit Roekkamon

*O! Mae Keanchan, Mae Khwanmueang, Mae Lueangkhamin, wherever you are, in a paddy in the north, in the south, in the near and neighboring fields, please stay with us forever, O! Khwan, please come, please flow over us, with no disease, no harm, please give a plant per pot, a clump of rice per cart, please have a heavy weight like a stone.*¹¹

⁹ ขอเชิญแม่โพสพ แม่โพสพ แม่พันพารา แม่จันทร์เทวี แม่สร้อยศรีสุวรรณ แม่พรหมศุดา อยู่ที่ไหนก็ดี เชิญมารับอาหาร เป็ร็ยหวาน มัน เต็ม ที่ลูกได้นะมาถวาย ขอให้แม่มารับเครื่องสังเวทเพื่อสุขภาพที่ดี ไม่เจ็บ ไม่ไข้ ไม่มีโรคภัย ขอให้แม่อยู่เย็นเป็นสุข มีเมืดเต็มรวง รวงใหญ่เมืดหนัก ขอให้ได้เมืดละหม้อ กอละเกวียนเถิด

¹⁰ สาธุ เชิญแม่มา แม่โพสพ แม่โพสพ แม่พันพารา เชิญแม่ลงมาสวยเครื่องทิพย์สังเวท วันนี้เป็นวันดี แม่ศรีจำปา ขอให้แม่เสด็จลงมาสวยของที่ลูกนำมาถวาย ขอให้ลูกมีความสุขความเจริญ แม่ศรีโพสพ แม่พันพารา ให้ได้รวงละหม้อ ให้ได้กอละเกวียน ให้แม่มีความสุข มีความเจริญ

¹¹ แม่แก่นจันทร์ แม่ขวัญเมือง แม่เหลืองขมิ้น สถิตอยู่ที่ไหนก็ตาม ทั้งเส้นเหนือเส้นใต้ นาใกล้นาเคียง ขอให้มาอยู่กับลูกกับเต้า

3) Mrs. Wandee Othata

O! Mae Phosee, Mae Phosop, Mae Nopdara, Mae Chanthewee, Mae Soyseesuwana, Mae Phansuda, I bring a beautiful cluster of bananas, young coconut, fruit, desserts for you, please come and receive our offerings for your health, with no pain, no fever, no disease, please be pleasant and happy, please give us a full ear of grain, a large ear and big grains, please provide a grain per pot, a clump of rice per cart.¹²

4) Mrs. Phayoong Phinyathai

O! Mae See Phra Phosop, Mae Nopdara, Mae Chanthewee, Mae See Suchada, please come and stay with us.

Achatchaya Phutthasahi Mama Mama Wirathayo Wirakhonayang Wirahingsa Wirathasee Wiraitthiyo Phutthaya Manee Mana Phutthasa Sawahom, the spirit of land, the spirit of the field

Please give us a good yield this year, please provide an ear per pot, a clump of rice per cart. Please come and stay with the ear of rice,

with no pain, no harm to disturb you. Please give us rice that has a good weight.¹³

The substance of the text of the invitation of the Rice Goddess is to invite her to receive the offerings. If she accepts and is pleased with the offerings, villagers expect that the Goddess will give healthy ears of rice and protect them from insects.

Dressing the Goddess

The part regarding the dressing of the Goddess consists of words to invite the Goddess to dress. To do that, the ritual practitioner must inform the Goddess what clothing objects have been brought to offer to her. While they are inviting the Goddess, they will perform the act of dressing her until the ritual is finished.

The ritual text is composed of both Pali and Thai words. The Thai text is composed of beautiful words with auspicious meanings that the practitioner can recall at the moment when she is performing the ritual. The beautiful words involve the calling of the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess, inviting her to receive the offerings and granting a wish of prosperity in return. After informing the Goddess what articles of clothing they are offering to her, the practitioner will invite the Goddess to dress. Throughout the ritual, the ritual practitioner will recite the same words repeatedly. Such repetition reflects the people's hope and determination to ask

ให้ตลอดรอดฝั่ง มิ่งมาขวัญมา ให้ไหลมาเทมา อย่าให้เป็นโรคเป็นภัย ให้ดินละหม้อกอละเกียน ให้น้ำหนักเม่ออย่างกับหิน

¹² ขอเชิญแม่โพสดี แม่โสพ แม่้นพดารา แม่จันทรเทวี แม่สร้อยศรีสุพรรณ แม่พรรณสุดา กล้วยหวีงาม มะพร้าวอ่อน ผลไม้ ขนมหวานที่ลูกนำมาถวาย ขอให้แม่มารับเครื่องสังเวช เพื่อสุขภาพที่ดี อย่าได้เจ็บได้ไข้ ไม่มีโรคภัย ขอให้แม่อยู่เย็นเป็นสุข มีเมล็ดเต็มรวง รวงใหญ่เมล็ดหนัก ขอให้ได้มีดละหม้อ กอละเกียนด้วยเถิด

¹³ แม่ศรีพระโพสพ แม่้นพดารา แม่จันเทวี แม่ศรีสุชดา ขอเชิญแม่มาอยู่กับลูก อาคัจฉาชะ พุทธสาหิ มามะ มามา วีระทะโย วีระโคณายัง วีระหิงสา วีระทาสี วีระอติโย พุทธาชะ มานีมานะ พุทธัสสะ สวาโหม พระภูมินา พระธรรมโหรา ขอให้ปิ่นข้าวได้ดี ขอให้ได้รวงละหม้อ กอละเกียน ขอให้แม่โพสพมาอยู่กับรวง ขออย่าให้มีโรคมีภัยมารบกวน ขอให้ได้น้ำหนักดีด้วยเถิด

for healthy ears of rice and abundant paddy yields from the Goddess. It was observed that the ritual text tends to be shorter these days, as some of the ritual practitioners cannot remember the full version of the text, while others need to read from prepared notes.

Taboos and beliefs related to the ritual

The ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess is performed to ensure good productivity and is considered a sacred ritual. Therefore, there are many taboos and beliefs related to the ritual.

First, as previously mentioned, men are prohibited from performing the ritual. Second, the ritual practitioner is forbidden from turning back to see the place where the ritual is being performed. If she does so, the Goddess will not come to receive the offerings. Third, the ritual is mostly performed on Fridays because the Thai word for Friday, *wan suk* วันศุกร์, has the same pronunciation as happiness, *suk* สุข, and also has an auspicious meaning. The villagers, therefore, choose to perform this ritual on Friday because of the auspicious undertaking and Friday is the day of the Rice Goddess.¹⁴ And finally, they believe that the *chaleo* used in the ritual can ward off and protect the rice plants from insects and malevolent powers.

The above-mentioned taboos and beliefs in Don Pho Village are consistent with taboos and beliefs in other rice-growing villages in central Thailand as recorded by Sathienkoset (1988).

Today, the occasions on which the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess is performed have decreased and it is gradually disappearing due to the changing practice of rice-growing in Don Pho Village. That is, new technology has been brought into farming allowing people to cultivate more off-season than in-season paddy fields, so that these days they can grow rice three times a year. In some families, they hold this ritual every time they grow rice but in many other families they hold this ritual only once a year during the first planting.

Factors contributing to the persistence of the ritual

The analysis of the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess in Don Pho Village reveals that there are three factors that have contributed to the persistence of the ritual. These include the belief in the existence of the Rice Goddess, the transmission of the ritual practitioner and the location of the village.

Persistence of the belief in the Rice Goddess

Not only the ritual practitioners but also rice growers in Don Pho village still believe in the existence of the Rice Goddess. Most of the villagers of Don Pho still maintain their beliefs and they continue to pay respect to the spirits with regard to rice-growing, especially the Rice Goddess, *Mae Phosop*. 45 out of 75 households still perform the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess because they have a strong belief in the Rice Goddess.

In spite of the limited knowledge of the villagers regarding *Mae Phosop*, the data collected from them can be classified into

¹⁴ Interview, Boonchaury Koetmontree, 2nd October, 2008

two categories: the characteristics and duty of *Mae Phosop* and myths and other stories about *Mae Phosop*.

Characteristics and important duties of Mae Phosop

The perception of the villagers regarding *Mae Phosop* is that the Goddess stays with the rice plants to protect them. Some villagers think that *Mae Phosop* is the rice while others think she is merely the *khwan* of the rice (Interview, Prasit 2008); still others think that she is a sacred thing that they cannot see.¹⁵ The important duty and role of *Mae Phosop* with respect to rice-growing is to protect the rice plants, as well as to control and guard the rice field from insects and other afflictions.

There is very little evidence to describe the characteristics of *Mae Phosop* clearly. According to Sathienkoset (1988)'s description of *Mae Phosop*, she is a local female Goddess of Thai society. The Goddess has shoulder-length hair and wears forehead ornaments and earpieces. She squats and wears jewelry on her body. *Mae Phosop* has five sisters who are also Rice Goddesses: *Mae Phosi*, *Mae Phosop*, *Mae Nopdara*, *Mae Chanthewee* and *Mae Srisuchada*. *Mae Phosop* has been manifested in a statue that people have built to be worshipped. In that statue, *Mae Phosop* has the appearance of a young woman sitting, legs folded back to one side, with a rice paddy in her hand.



Figure 4: *Mae Phosop*

In the perception of the villagers of Don Pho, *Mae Phosop* is real. Nevertheless, they have only a vague idea of who the Goddess is, what she looks like or what her background is. Most of the villagers said that they did not know the characteristics of *Mae Phosop* and they had never seen her. The villagers respect *Mae Phosop* because their grandparents communicated the belief in the Goddess to them. They have never explored or questioned who *Mae Phosop* is or her origins. Today, they still believe that *Mae Phosop* can protect their rice plants, so they pay respect to her.

In the interviews, the villagers gave three characteristics of *Mae Phosop*. First, *Mae Phosop* is a beautiful young woman wearing a green sarong, green breast cloth and a headdress. Second, she wears a loincloth with a certain pattern and a lace top and is holding some rice plants in her hand. The interviewee did not specify whether she is young or old. Third, she is an old woman wearing a farmer's hat with a crooked back and is walking.

¹⁵ Interview, Boonchaay Koetmontree, 2nd October, 2008

Myths and other stories about Mae Phosop

There are many stories concerning the Rice Goddess narrated in Don Pho Village. I will give examples of only three stories, namely, a story describing why rice growers have to harvest rice paddy; a story explaining why the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess has to be performed by a woman; and a story about *Mae Phosop* coming from Suphanburi province.

“Why rice growers have to harvest rice paddy?”

In the past, rice grains had wings. When the rice was ready to be harvested, the rice grains would fly to the barn. Rice growers only built the barn to wait for the rice grains. There was one rice grower who did not build a barn. As the grains were flying, they could not get inside the barn, so they dropped to the ground. The rice grower hit the rice grains until they were spread out on the ground. The Rice Goddess got angry with the rice grower. She said that the grains would not fly to the barn anymore. Since then, rice growers have to grow and harvest rice themselves.¹⁶

“Why the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess has to be performed by a woman?”

¹⁶ Interview, Nipha Srichumphon, 17th January, 2009

In the past, it was men who performed the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess. One day while a man was performing the ritual, he saw a beautiful young woman at the ritual ground. He seduced the young woman. That young woman was the Rice Goddess. The Rice Goddess got angry. Since then, men have been prohibited from performing the ritual and it has to be a woman to perform the ritual. (Interview, Boonchaay 2008).

“*Mae Phosop* coming from Suphanburi Province”

Mae Phosop took a bus from Suphanburi to Ayutthaya. She got off the bus at the entrance to Don Pho Village and disappeared into the rice fields. One night a woman in the village had a dream about the rice goddess. The goddess said that she had come to Don Pho Village because she had not received any offerings from the villagers in Suphanburi. She knew that many Don Pho villagers had performed the ritual and had given offerings to her, so since that time Don Pho villagers have been granted success and prosperity in their rice growing.¹⁷

The story explaining why the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess has to be performed by a woman is known to most villagers, although there are many versions of the story. This story has obviously had an influence on the

¹⁷ Interview, Thaem Koetmontree, 29th February, 2008

performance of the ritual, in that only women are allowed to perform the ritual.

The fact that there are many stories concerning the Rice Goddess indicates that the villagers are still bound to the Goddess and respect her. These stories continue to be transmitted to the younger generation as is evident in the fact that Don Pho villagers still perform the ritual and the ritual practitioners are always women.

Beliefs concerning the Rice Goddess

In addition to the beliefs mentioned previously, there are other beliefs concerning the Rice Goddess. They are as follows:

- The Rice Goddess exists in reality and is visible, so people can see her.
- People should not criticize or condemn the Rice Goddess otherwise they will not be affluent.
- One should not to make pipes from rice stubble left after the harvest because this action will frighten the Rice Goddess.
- One should not to dig a canal or make a new road in an area where rice is grown because one will not have prosperity in life.

The beliefs concerning the Rice Goddess observed at Don Pho Village reveal that the people there are closely tied with the Rice Goddess. This may be because the growing of rice is their life and soul, so rice is very important to them and something they must respect. Since the rice growers believe that the Rice Goddess protects the rice plants, they pay respect to

the rice plants and treat them with gratitude.

Many rice growers have statues or pictures of the Rice Goddess to worship at home. The villagers say that since they are rice growers, they should have statues or pictures of the Rice Goddess. In some families, people place the ears of rice on their shelves instead of on the statues and pictures. Some put the ears of rice in a plastic bag or bowl and leave it on a shelf with an image of the Buddha. Others arrange ears of rice in the shape of a nicely dressed woman and place it on a shelf with a Buddha image. Importantly, most of the Don Pho villagers know the stories of the Rice Goddess and the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess and have kept performing the ritual up to the present.

The practitioners who conduct the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess in Don Pho Village are, naturally, those who still believe in the Rice Goddess. They believe that the ritual can generate courage and confidence among rice growers so that they will achieve a good yield after the ritual. They also believe that the Rice Goddess will protect both the rice plants and the growers. During each rice-growing season, growers encounter natural disasters, such as flooding after heavy rain or other uncontrollable phenomena, like pests. The growers want to get a sufficient rice yield to compensate for their investment, both physically and financially. Accordingly, some rice-growers boost their self-confidence by conducting the ritual, in the hope that the Rice Goddess will protect the rice and help them get a good rice yield.

Transmission of the ritual practitioner

Data from fieldwork shows that ritual practitioners at Don Pho Village are of different ages.

Table 1: Indicating range of age distribution of ritual practitioners at Don Pho Village

Range of age	Number of ritual practitioners
21–30	1
31–40	7
41–50	8
51–60	9
61–70	12
71–80	2
81–90	1

At the time of the field study in 2008, the youngest ritual practitioner was 29 years old. Most of the practitioners fall into an age range between 61–70 years old and the fewest practitioners were between 21–30 years old and 81–90 years old.

From our observations, families that perform the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess tend to continue doing so, transmitting the ritual from generation to generation. It was also discovered that people in the same family generally have the same beliefs about the ritual and that the most important thing for them is to teach or to pass the ritual on to their successors; otherwise, they feel that the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess will disappear.

Thus, the fact that there are still ritual practitioners and that they continue to pass on their knowledge of performing the ritual is one of the factors explaining why

the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess has persisted.

Location of the village

Don Pho is a village in Tambon Chai Na, Amphoe Sena, Ayutthaya. Don Pho is located about 15 kilometers from Amphoe Sena and 40 kilometers from Amphoe Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya. When compared to the villages that are located closer to main roads and Amphoe Sena, Don Pho Village conducts the ritual more often. So, it is likely that one of the factors influencing the persistence of the ritual in Don Pho is the fact that this village is located farther from the more developed areas.

Conclusion

Data from the fieldwork leads to the conclusion that the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess is still conducted because rice growers at Don Pho Village believe that there is a Rice Goddess of rice plants. This ritual demonstrates the gratitude of villagers to the Rice Goddess and their respect for her. When the rice growers conduct the ritual, they feel comfortable and confident that productivity in the rice field will provide for a good return. The ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess is a way for the rice growers to express their belief in the Rice Goddess.

Many other rituals relating to rice are being performed less and less. These include the ritual of the first casting, the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess to the threshing grounds and the ritual of opening–closing the barn. The reason these rituals are being performed less often is that the rice growers currently

use more machinery and technology in their fields.

The ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess is still conducted because the ritual is performed when the rice plants begin to produce grains, a period in which no technology is needed to enhance production. At this stage, the rice grains depend mostly on nature, which is beyond human control and the rice plants are prone to ruin and damage from disasters such as drought, flood or insects, which will prevent the rice growers from reaping the harvest on time. When they lack confidence they have to depend on supernatural powers and since the basic belief of the rice growers has long been bound to beliefs about the Rice Goddess, they still perform the ritual to boost their confidence.

The persistence of the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice goddess in contemporary central Thai society is dynamic. Thai rice growers have conducted this ritual since a long ago until now. As time has past and social conditions have changed, the rice growers have adjusted the ritual offering in each period. The aspect of this ritual that we can see clearly is the articles for the offering. Most rice growers offer objects they use in their daily life, such as powder, perfumes and sweets. Some items widely used in the past, such as areca nut, betel and tobacco, are rarely used today, since most rice growers no longer use these items. They have also modified some clothing items to suit a certain period. For instance, brocade has been replaced by ready-made sarongs.

The continuing performance of the ritual by the Don Pho villagers confirms the beliefs of the society of rice-growers in

central Thailand. Even though the world is moving forward with modern equipment and high technology and chemicals can control and overcome insects, the ritual of calling the *khwan* of the Rice Goddess has not been forgotten. Rice-growers rely on the ritual to generate confidence because rice growing is faced with many risks that the growers cannot predict, such as natural catastrophes or unanticipated pests. Consequently, in order to succeed in rice-growing, the ritual plays an important role in providing confidence to the rice-growers.

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