



Fig. 1: Lady Mother King
Cobra Shrine. PC: A.A.
Johnson.

Accidents and Agency

Death and Occult Economies in Thailand

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With new economic regimes, new infrastructure, and increased ‘development’ also come new religious movements. Whereas earlier scholars assumed that modernity would disenchant, this has, time and again, proven not to be the case. But why? While one popular explanation—the ‘occult economy’—attributes this increasing (de-centred) religiosity to the vicissitudes of new economic regimes, this essay interprets it as an acknowledgement of a shared world in flux, with humans and nonhumans alike struggling to come to terms with what existing in a changed present might mean.

There are ghosts on the roadside in Bangkok, but not always those of people. A shrine to the spirits of a dead tree marks a place where a ‘Lady Mother’ (*jao mae*) threatens drivers with deadly accidents, but also promises winning lottery numbers (Figure 1). A water dragon (*naga*) dies entombed in a riverbank but reemerges to give job leads to potential migrants (Figure 2). Spectres are haunting Thailand, spectres that speak to issues of causality and accident, human and other-than-human networks, and, above all, the question of agency. For some anthropologists, the occult becomes a frame through which



Fig. 2: *Naga* decoration at Ban Buek. PC: A.A. Johnson.

one can look at the hidden, malevolent, and profitable aspects of increasingly precarious economic conditions—an ‘occult economy’.

In this essay, I critique this concept via three vignettes taken from my fieldwork, moments of change in the (after)lives of migrant workers as well as the spirits with which they interact. Whereas other anthropologists have presented these worlds as either nightmares given birth by new capitalist conditions or functionalist means of ‘dealing with’ such disruptions, instead, I explore these old/new spirits of capitalism by looking at spirits as another entity in a social network that includes human, nonhuman, and what might be termed ‘inhuman’ (Johnson 2020) worlds, and how these spirits help to resolve the excess of agency that chaotic times bring about. I do so via the stories of three interlocutors: Gamrai, Lek, and Mon.

Gamrai

A street vendor, Gamrai, pushes her cart on the margin of a deadly highway in western Bangkok (see Johnson 2016). Here, a flyover funnels cars down to Rama II Road, making a chaotic traffic pattern with a bad reputation for deadly high-speed accidents. Indeed, it was the inordinate amount of traffic deaths that caused people living nearby to try to find a cause—the local neighbourhood hired a medium who, in a trance, related the story of a mother cobra killed during the road’s construction and whose ghost was now furious at the passing cars. The neighbourhood in turn put a shrine up to this spirit, the Lady Mother King Cobra (*jao mae joong ang*).

And here, just where the highway is worst, just by the shrine, is where Gamrai is struck by a passing truck. She awakens in the hospital

and is visited by an apparition: a woman in a dazzling traditional Thai outfit, who smiles at her. At the woman's feet are her children—at least, they are children sometimes. Sometimes, the family are cobras.

Gamrai recognises the woman as the Lady Mother. 'I knew it was her who did this to me,' Gamrai tells me, but then adds: 'She is so kind.' In the following nights, Gamrai becomes the cobra ghost's 'daughter', bringing it nightly offerings and asking in return for success in her business. The violence of the crash has opened a channel where such a connection between spirit and human becomes possible.

Lek

In the yard of a large house on the eastern outskirts of Bangkok, a banana tree produces a flower shaped like a human head. Migrant workers, most of them Lao speakers from Thailand's northeast, come to the yard to ask the flower for lottery numbers, whereupon the owner of the house chops the tree down and flings it into a vacant lot. The lot, in turn acquires a host of ghosts: the tree spirit adopts an abandoned 'Burmese' aborted foetus (*kumanthong*), and the spirits of the *pradu* trees flanking the lot join the community. The crowds, too, grow.

Lek is a factory worker who has moved to Bangkok from the provincial capital of Roi Et. One night, his girlfriend dreams of a woman in green. The next day, as he is driving past the banana tree shrine, Lek crashes his motorcycle and is severely injured. The following night, his partner comes to understand that the crash was the result of the tree spirit's love for Lek—were he to die, his ghost might inhabit the shrine and he would become the spirit's lover. Lek and his partner then go there to offer their apologies—Lek cannot be the banana tree's lover, but he is flattered. Thus, he seeks to change his relationship with the spirit from one of a potential romantic partner—and therefore in danger of being murdered—to, like Gamrai, a

mother and child. In so doing, Lek can count on gifts of luck and fortune from the spirit, instead of possessive romantic love.

Mon

The riverbank behind a fisherman's compound—in fact, just outside of where I am living—collapses. Here is a site where a *naga* has been seen in the past, a sometimes benevolent but potentially violent being that could be asked to provide fish for nets. But as the riverbank crumbles under the weight of new concrete bulwarks built to counter recent dramatic floods which came as a result of Chinese dam projects far upstream, Mon, the fisherman, suspects that the serpent has been crushed in its underground lair. In the wake of the *naga*'s physical destruction, a new, ghostly *naga* emerges, no longer promising fish but instead offering lottery numbers and cash. Here, too, it is very much like the previous ghosts—a physical being destroyed by the expansion of the city into its land, then reemerging as a patron of a different sort. Mon—and I—leave offerings out on the sand to the serpent, asking it for luck in job interviews, travel, and the lottery.

The riverbank occasionally sends dreams as well. One night, I dream that the island across the way has sprung a spring of clear, thick, nearly gelatinous water. I bring the dream to Mon's sister, who has a penchant for interpretation (which she usually uses to play the lottery), and she speculates that something has sent it to me—whether the *naga*, or a heretofore unidentified spirit, she did not know. But, perhaps, did I see any numbers in my dream?

Occult Economies and Their Discontents

Here, then, are three ghosts—the destroyed cobra, the uprooted tree, and the *naga*. They are strikingly similar. Each one comes at a moment

of dislocation and change for the humans around it, when disaster creates a rupture across various worlds: human, nonhuman, and inhuman. This rupture rises from the sources of precarity in the lives of those who come to follow the spirits: a deadly road becomes the medium through which the cobra mother and the banana ghost act; and the Mekong that flows past the *naga*'s lair, a river that has been devastated by Chinese and Lao hydropower projects upstream, gives birth to the ghostly dragon. How might we make some kind of sense of these new spectres, anthropologically speaking? Or is *making sense* not the right term?

In an influential essay from the 1990s, Jean and John Comaroff (1999) introduced the idea of 'occult economies' to try to tease through very similar disruptions and dislocations in South Africa. The Comaroffs describe in a series of vignettes (similar to the ones I introduced above) new fears and monsters that arose in the wake of South African liberation. As promised prosperity did not in fact trickle down to all, for many, the natural conclusion was that it had been stolen by those with special—occult—abilities. Thus the proliferation of phenomena that the Comaroffs (1999, 281) describe—lake monsters, Satanic cults, the creation of zombie workers—'flow from a promiscuous mix of scarcity and deregulation'. The end of apartheid meant the end of barriers, but this also meant the inflow of predatory financial practices from the outside. In this rush, some profited; many did not. And ... this was liberation? Where did the promise that individual Black South Africans would feel liberated in apartheid's wake go?

Via the lens of occult economies, the Comaroffs (1999, 295) call for anthropologists to focus on the '*production ... of compound political, economic, and cultural forms*', to see how these '*create community*', and '*fabricate social realities*'. But questions immediately arise. Here, political economy seems to be the active force: as the Comaroffs write, the economy is the one producing, creating, fabricating. Those following and believing

in the phenomena have little agency—not to mention the question of the 'agency' of the spirits themselves.

But is the present moment that unique? While events such as the end of apartheid or mass labour migration might be new in scale, economic shocks are not. Returning to Thailand, in the wake of Bangkok's early twentieth-century transformation into a modern nation-state with a vast royal bureaucracy and sovereignty defined by borders (see Thongchai 1994; Strate 2015), prophets arose in the Lao-speaking northeast from time to time, promising a radical disruption in the world order (Toem 1987). These 'men of merit' (*phu mi bun*) declared that gravel would turn to gold, that a wind would sweep away anyone not holding lemongrass, that money would turn into excrement, and that animals would turn into demonic mermaids. These proclamations came just as everything else seemed to fall apart—Europeans seized a Laos that had been just a few decades prior destroyed by Bangkok, and local lords were curtailed in favour of direct rule from Bangkok. Many—from local officials down to farmers—slaughtered their animals, planted lemongrass around their house, and stockpiled gravel, awaiting the coming of the new era. It may be easy to see this panic as arising (*produced, created, fabricated*) from a mystification of the very real changes in the political economy of the region or, indeed, as a semi-instrumental exercise of peasants fed up enough and desperate enough to destroy their own livelihoods to spite the state. But these 'occult economies' seem to be engaging in much more than acting out mystifications of, or actively combatting, new economic regimes. Perhaps golden gravel and cannibal mermaids are not just symbols emerging from an incomplete understanding, but ways of understanding in and of themselves.

This is precisely Bruce Kapferer's (2003) point. He critiques the Comaroffs' notion of occult economies as presenting the new ghosts of the new economy as a kind of mystification of the *real* issue, which, for the Comaroffs, is the pervasive expansion of neoliberal capital.

Such a model presents the ghosts of capitalism as dreams and the anthropologist as the psychoanalyst, interpreting a fundamentally meaningless symbolic content in order to discover the ‘real’ source of the woes. Instead, Kapferer argues that social and cultural content matters, as ways of understanding and dealing with such shocks are deeply socially and historically situated. In Kapferer’s work on sorcery, it is sorcery’s dynamism that makes it relevant to modernity as it incorporates foreign symbols, modern tropes, as well as individual improvisations. In addition, sorcery is always concerned with human agency (Kapferer 2003, 105). In the *suniyama*, the anti-sorcery Sri Lankan rite that Kapferer (2003, 119) describes, the victim of sorcery is called to reset him/herself, to reorient and adapt to a changeable and often hostile world. Thus, sorcery appears in moments of shock not because these moments are opaque to a naïve subject, but because it is itself already a tradition that addresses the unexpected shocks of existence. Rites such as the *suniyama* break the individual from the grip of an outside force; they are, in essence, the *opposite* of a Comaroffian occult economy: they provide clarity and agency when it has been taken away.

Here, then, we have a debate: occult economies as pathologies arising from the shocks and disruptions of the market, or occult economies as a means towards resolving these very disruptions. But an element present in the three examples that I provide at the opening of this essay is lacking in both models: the spirits themselves. For the Comaroffs, a witch is identified in the form of a baboon, a lake monster is reported in the papers as a curiosity, investors start a pyramid scheme, and reports of occult organ trades shock local newspapers. The subjectivity of the witch, monster, and organ trader are not investigated. For Kapferer, the sorcerer does not make an appearance. But it is the relationships between agents that are central to Gamrai, Lek, and Mon and the ghosts of new economies.

Here, then, I turn to this notion of ghosts as other agents, and to the question of accident.

Accident

The snake, the tree, and the *naga* each recall questions of accident and agency: traffic accidents signify the presence of the Lady Mother and the banana ghost, but also give rise to them; the *naga* dies owing to an accident but also promises happy accidents to its devotees. And agency is at the heart of the distinction between Kapferer’s and the Comaroffs’ takes on occult economies: are such practices ways to actively engage with, or passive reactions to, economies? Agency and accident are tied together—an accident is an accident because there is no agency. ‘It was an accident’ and ‘I chose to do it’ are separated by a world of difference, but agency and accident are bound together.

Trais Pearson (2020) notes how the term ‘accident’ (*ubatihet*) is a relatively new one in Thai, arriving in dictionaries around the turn of the twentieth century. An accident is a misfortune without a cause, an unhappy confluence of events that leads to tragedy. As Siam’s legal code modernised, it was the state that filled the gap to arbitrate agent-less accidents.

But in Pearson’s account, the intervention of the state is not absolute, nor is it always invoked. When a famous Thai actress kills a police officer in a traffic accident, a number of factors emerge to complicate what might be a simple process where the state determines fault and sets penalties: the officer’s ghost emerges asking that she be forgiven; the officer’s family asks for money directly, out of the realm of the courts. While police point towards an authorless accident, or at least to themselves as the arbiters, social and supernatural forces emerge to complicate the new system.

Accident, then, creates an excess of fault, and, for Kapferer, it is fault—*dosa* in Kapferer’s Sinhala, with the same root as *thos* in Thai—that characterises the occult. Agency and causality move beyond material limits. Here, models that reduce occult economies to purely political economic roots risk missing that excess, and

risk overlooking the paradoxical question of agency that runs throughout—*who is the author of this accident? Who regulates the unregulated?*

Divine Excess

‘Of course,’ the sceptical reader will say, ‘we cannot treat Lady Mother King Cobra as an agent. She is a cultural manifestation. Cobra spirits don’t exist.’ But let us stay with this for a moment: assuming that the economy does a thing and a spirit does not assume a particular kind of evidentiary regime—one invisible hand exists, and the other does not. Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) details the animist qualities of the market—that realm where we can posit something we can never see (‘value’ or an idealised commodity) and then talk about its effects. We claim the dollar is strong or weak today, when the slip of paper remains just as flaccid as it was yesterday. To see ‘the market’ function, we have to point towards its effects—much as we do with ghosts.

Mon reports that ‘people see *naga* all the time’. Here, he means a broader evidentiary regime. He means not only people seeing shapes emerging from the water or on the riverbank, but also dreams—seeing in dreams constitutes a kind of direct experience of a divine being, and certainly so if one’s vision is confirmed by a surprising event (a miraculous recovery, a car accident, a winning lottery ticket).

The excess of agency suggested by accident opens up the space for ghosts, and a broader evidentiary regime allows for these ghosts to emerge. Such ghosts have always been present in Thailand, but they flourish when questions of agency are in flux—during the early 1900s, in the case of the *phu mi bun*, and they flourish now. As Claudio Sopranzetti (2017) shows, the lure of migrant work in Bangkok is not because of the (questionable, rare) economic benefit of such work, but the ‘freedom’ it provides.

Independence, as Sopranzetti points out, is a desired state but also a state of precarity, and it is into this mix that new spirits arrive.

In Vietnam, Philip Taylor (2004) notes how the fickle and often vindictive Ba Chua Xu—the ‘lady of the realm’, her cult booming in popularity since Vietnam’s *doi moi* reforms—is seen not as a hostile manifestation of capitalism, but rather as an agent whom individuals can petition. The Lady gives her devotees a form of ‘insurance’, acting as their advocate in an unfamiliar, dislocating realm (Taylor 2004, 93). Thus, for those in new, volatile professions or, as Sopranzetti (2017) puts it, ‘framed by freedom’, overflowing with their own agency, ghosts absorb some of this potential, becoming patrons for those without.

But Gamrai, Lek, and Mon approach spirits as other beings in the world, and it is vital to be faithful to their perspective. The ghosts I detail here are co-sufferers, not echoes of or cures for the present moment. They, too, have undergone transformations. The snake has died, the banana tree has been cut down, the *naga* has suffocated. In the shared recognition of suffering, there is a link. The truck that hit Gamrai is an echo of the bulldozer that hit the Lady Mother. The withering Mekong reflects the withering of Mekong-region fishermen. Here, ghosts are things of a similar order as humans—both possessing their own agency subject to the same dislocations and disruptions that their devotees face. Indeed, the language used for spirits is that of familiarity: mothers (*mae*), fathers (*pho*), children (*luk*, e.g. the *kumanthong*). And here is where the idea of occult economies falls short in the context of Southeast Asia—while spirits, like strangers, can be hard to understand (Sprenger 2018), they are ultimately fellow agents in the world: full of their own potential and agency, and subject to their own disasters. ■

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